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## REVIEW

# Eidolon

*By Emilie Reed*

Eidolon starts by dropping you in the middle of a vast wilderness, with no guidance, but after fumbling around, I was able to find some simple tools. A compass in the woods. A fishing rod by the lake. Some binoculars on a lookout tower. A bow and arrow. I found a simple hand-drawn map, but had no idea where I was on it. Trying to move about the environment in somewhat of a systematic manner, I picked a direction on the compass and headed that way, to avoid wandering in circles. And then I came across a torn “journal page”. Items in Eidolon take the form of a glowing green cube, hovering on a diagonal axis a few feet off the ground. The flashes of light from these boxes are the gleam on metallic surfaces, the beam of the signal mirror, a hint of civilization that slips in and out of view. Amidst the isolation of the completely depopulated Pacific Northwest, I found myself running in the direction of any glint that caught my eye, like a castaway.

Each of these glowing points produces a document, which could take the form of a zine, pamphlet, journal entry, transcript, or blog post, to name a few possibilities. And each document is tagged, showing which narrative thread it is related to. This is the most straightforward guidance Eidolon offers. There are no quests, no NPCs, no cutscenes, no ending, just about 250 points on a massive map you can visit to acquire these documents. The threads stretching across the landscape range from personal narratives to broader historical perspectives, but none is complete on its own. Combined, they describe an explosion of scientific development in the near future, brought on by genetic engineering and the

discovery of a material that bestows apparent immortality, absolute resistance to illness and an almost grotesque ability to survive and regenerate from injuries on anyone lucky enough to live within its glow. Political leaders and artists oppose the building of beacons, religious cults alternately shun immortality for its lack of afterlife or see it as restoring the longevity of the old testament prophets and embrace it, and children, frustrated by only ever knowing immortality, engage in morbid stunts to test their seemingly infinite physical limits.

Gathering these firsthand accounts of the unexpected chaos that emerges from immortality makes Eidolon's dystopia feel like a concrete ordeal that had deep effects on real people, rather than an abstract conceptual exercise, even though the events described exist only in traces.

Access to the newly discovered sources of immortality quickly becomes a parallel to forms of privilege, specifically those of race and class. "Sennin", people with a genetic disposition to producing their own fields of this immortality-giving light, develop a separatist upper class called the "Ascensionists," whose attitudes on maintaining the purity of the Sennin and their status above primitive "normals," what they call those without the ability to produce light, mirror real-world xenophobia and nationalism. Tensions over the locations of the beacons, in major city centres, where a wildfire of gentrification pushes original inhabitants to the margins where the effects of the light are weaker or non-existent eventually spills over into dissent, religious fanaticism, rebellion, and a massive societal collapse. Prior to this major collapse, a flyer distributed by a political activist proclaims that "Property costs in-city will skyrocket, making it a playground for the ultra-

wealthy and power will only consolidate further," foreshadowing the conflict that soon arrives. Walls are built around the cities to protect those who would want to harm the beacons, the walls come down, and all that's left of them is a faint glow where these immortality giving monuments once stood. You carry with you The LUX, a small device which allows you to access digital images and text, but also information on your physical condition. It perpetually warns: "due to your distance from a beacon, your vitals are subject to extreme changes, including death."

The needs and nature of your body are vague. Unlike many first-person games, there is no player portrait, nor are there any partial models of hands or legs that can cross into the field of vision, no places where you can glimpse a reflection of yourself, and no NPCs to measure yourself against. While you do have to use your tools to gather resources, keep yourself fed, healthy, warm and attend to any wounds, these needs are represented by abstracted LUX icons, and have little effect on your ability to move around the area. If one of your conditions becomes dire enough, you may "die," but you come around in the healing waters of the nearest mangrove swamp. Who takes you there, and where the swamps acquire their healing power is hinted at in some of the more esoteric scraps, but you never encounter any of the few beings that may still be around.

One of the utopic notions of new media, especially videogames, is that it allows us to exceed the physical limitations of a single human body, mirroring the themes of immortality in Eidolon. Through technology, we can be 'embodied' in worlds, situations, contexts, even other identities, which can lead to expanded empathy and experience. This is an ideal, upon which concepts

like virtual reality, realism, and even ‘empathy games’ rely on being at least partially true, but does it have any basis in how technology is actually used and implemented? Very few games even attempt to make you feel like you are taking control of something with a functional body, much less one that I, and the majority of gamers who don’t fit stock character types, feel that I can project myself into and feel that I am embodying, despite the emphasis on this being a reason why videogames are unique or important. And, while this fantasy of immersion is aspired to, particularly in AAA and survival-themed games, *Eidolon* is a survival game that rejects these strategies. It is a survival game where your survival is not that important, and has little effect on your progression.

*Eidolon* doesn’t put any effort into placing you into a believable or simulated body; instead you are simply a schematic set of icons, an abstracted system that approximates, very loosely, a body of some sort that is moving through space. This lack of a body, and eschewal of the aspiration towards “realism” held in so many games also moves away from the tendency to prioritize the exceptionalism of the player within the game’s world. High-gloss production and gameplay systems and mechanics concerned with flow and “immersion” create an experience in which the player is the central actor. Games that attempt to generate empathy by embodying the player in an othered role, also prioritize a selfish form of supposed knowledge similar to mainstream “immersive” experiences. As better technology and production tools come into the grasp of small-scale studios and individual developers, with improved free software, consumer-oriented virtual reality, and motion detecting peripherals, more developers easily buy into the fantasy that we can effectively inhabit someone else’s experience for a short time

and understand them through a process.

Unfortunately, this perspective on building empathy still prioritizes a distinction between a “normal” gamer and an “other.” Worse, it overwhelmingly panders to the existing target demographic of videogames, presuming that it’s more important to hold a cisgender white male’s hands through what it feels like to be female, or another race, or trans, than to allow creators from othered categories to freely express themselves, or make work for their own communities. It prioritizes the supposed need of those lacking empathy to be catered to, over simply listening to the issues of marginalized groups. And it asserts that these empathy experiences need to be made with cutting-edge technology, if they’re going to be most effective.

Just over a year ago, writer Ben Kuchera was rightfully criticized for an essay suggesting that a body-swapping application of virtual reality could be used to generate empathy for women, trans people, and people of colour.<sup>1</sup> In response, developer Mitu Khandaker-Kokoris argued that this use of VR was a simplistic answer to large and complicated problems, and that ‘wider culture better representing and listening to minorities is a far better offering, which works to serve minorities and everyone else alike, rather than experiences which are specifically for people on those relevant axes of privilege.’ However, the issue with this approach to empathy games goes further than just being overly simplistic, and serving an already privileged demographic. When I argue that the simulation and immersion prioritized by certain “empathy games” fosters selfish forms knowledge, I am also arguing that this form of knowledge is antithetical to the type of knowledge that comes from listening and observing, and thus is devalued,

weakened and neglected by such approaches.

Linzi Juliano, in a piece discussing video games as a form of performance in *Theatre Journal* notes that gaming is not “embodied” in the traditional sense described by these disciplines, but the gestural control of the game software serves as “representations of embodiment.” While this can “encourage experiential relations,” there is not an exact equivalent with the idea of embodiment in non-technological works.<sup>2</sup> Beryl Graham also noted in the introductory essay to her exhibition *Serious Games*, that there is a tendency to associate concepts of interaction only with New Media works, including videogames and software, when artists have been creating participatory and communal works long before digital technology became an art world fascination.<sup>3</sup> If the best videogames can achieve is a representation of real-world embodiment, a shadow of the empathy offered from direct engagement with other people that has been in practice for much longer, games that attempt to generate empathy for instances of injustice by putting the player “in the shoes” of the subject of these injustices may actually be a step backwards in exploring the potential of the form.

Just as *Eidolon* does not put you into a “real” simulated body, the game also does not position you as someone inside or outside of the beacons’ glow, but outside of these narratives altogether. In the plodding solitude of *Eidolon*, in which you can wander for several ingame days between points, the player is a passive spectator and interpreter of events

that have already passed. The plot is not delivered through interactions with others characters, instructions, or challenges to overcome. Instead, the player must do the work of interpreting the context of the environment, finding a safe place to light a fire, sit, read, and mentally piece together the fragments found in that area, and then plot a course to the next series of clues. It demands that you take the responsibility to become an active listener for a group of absent actors whose story you have no personal stake in. Despite this, what *Eidolon* fostered in me was a deep care for the characters who were only present through their written artefacts.

One set of journals I followed doggedly concerned two women, one who was doing the writing and one who was accompanying her, fleeing riots in a major city. Outside of the beacons’ healing glow, her friend develops the diabetes her body would have suffered from under normal conditions. When she eventually passes away because they have no means of treating her illness, the writers’ journal ends. I found the fact that she felt no more reason to continue writing after the passing of her sole companion more distressing and frustrating than any of my own deaths in the game. I had very few opportunities or reasons to feel selfish or worry about myself while playing *Eidolon*. Perhaps when I heard the howls of wild dogs or fell into a deathly cold body of water, but only then. After long play sessions I could close my eyes and see myself pressing forward through the low-poly landscape, but always towards a green speck of light.

# Barbetween

*By Edmund Chu*

When I was new to the Internet, like eight or nine years old, I played a lot of Nethack over telnet. Or a browser-based multi-user dungeon, which was written entirely in PHP, a goddamn marvel at the time. Occasionally I wonder if those servers are still up and if I could find them again, if I've left a monk or a tourist somewhere in the Dungeons of Doom. If, maybe, impossibly, one of my ghosts still prowls the gnomish mines and haunts other adventurers to their doom. I think about that MUD character, whom I distinctly remember abandoning in a forest maze, after days of trying to escape. I wonder if there's a computer in a closet somewhere, a spinning hard drive platter, some power plug an admin gets closer to pulling every day.

Is it weird that I get all sorts of melancholy thinking about this? I spent so much time, during some very formative years, with all these old websites and MUDs and public Nethack servers that it feels like they're part of my identity. It seems like a betrayal to let it all go. I like to imagine the old Internet as crumbling architecture. Old blogs crufty with outdated CSS, like abandoned houses choked with cobwebs.

Barbetween, a work of interactive fiction created by Jason McIntosh presented alongside ShuffleComp 2014, seems to occupy the same space in my head. It's available on Andrew Plotkin's Seltani, which is a multiplayer platform for interactive fiction and playable in a web browser; think multi-user dungeon, except with Twine-like hyperlinks instead of a text parser.

The game is simple: in the depths of an underground cavern, the player finds a bar where they can order one of four oddly named beers (for example: “That time I acted entitled.” “My mother’s cancer.” or “The divorce.”). They pay for it by writing down “a memory that hurts you.” Once they do so, the player can settle in to enjoy the beverage. Meanwhile, a guitarist takes the stage to cover Elliott Smith’s “Between the Bars”. And, even though one will never see another player in the bar, there’s a loose multiplayer component: the NPC bartender goes about their work of replacing the label of a beer tap with the player’s own words, as an option for future players to order. Eventually, the song ends, the lights come up, and the bartender and guitarist have disappeared. There’s nowhere else for the player to go but away.

Those beer taps are the crux of the game, acting like a confessional take-a-penny-leave-a-penny, ever shifting, where the only way to leave a mark is to wipe away someone else’s. But it certainly isn’t the first piece of digital media to engage with its own transience. In the early nineties, the science fiction author William Gibson wrote the poem *Agrippa*, in which the narrator describes with some nostalgia the locations and events of their childhood, and distributed it on floppy disk. But after it was read, *Agrippa* corrupted its own programming and rendered the poem unreadable, leaving nothing but a memory in the reader’s mind and a chewed-up floppy in the disk drive. And in 2014, Porpentine released *Everything you swallow will one day come up like a stone*, but warned that she would delete it twenty-four hours later: “This game will not be around forever because the people you fail will not be around forever.” The task of preserving the game, Porpentine made clear, would fall to the Internet at large.

Of course, these days you can visit Gibson’s official website to read the full text of *Agrippa*,<sup>1</sup> and obtaining a copy of the program to run in an emulator is not much harder; you can find somebody hosting *Stone* with a quick Google search. The similarities in distribution are, I hope, obvious. Yet *Agrippa*’s resignation re. its own impermanence, however much it may have resonated in 1992, seems antiquated and implausible in 2015. The same digital technology that *Agrippa* expressed so much doubt in is what keeps it and *Stone* alive today.

*Barbetween* doesn’t comment on its technology so overtly, but it shares the same attitude. It is doomed, maybe in a more concrete way than “being forgotten,” because *Seltani* itself is doomed—active development stopped at the beginning of 2014, several months before *ShuffleComp* was even announced. And unlike *Agrippa* and *Stone*, *Barbetween* is a multiplayer environment; there’s no practical way to archive it as a playable experience. The scope, with hardware requirements, operating system versions, server and database software just spirals out of control. What’s more, the simple mechanism of the rotating beer taps implies a history that can be recorded but not truly saved. And just in case the thought hasn’t fully crystallized in the player’s mind by the end, a booklet appears which includes a count of how times the taps have changed, just to drive the point home.<sup>2</sup> *Barbetween* acts as a medium between players, and any one recounting of its events is missing another side of the story.

As much as it has a preoccupation with impermanence, the game still feels like it has a sort of physical weight, a sense of inhabitable tangibility. Once the lights come up and its denizens disappear, the bar is left in a permanently abandoned state. And while the player can drop



by later and check up on the beer taps that quietly change as future visitors pass through, the player can never repeat the experience. The bartender will never reappear and pour another round; the guitarist won't play an encore. The simple lack of a reset button transforms Barbetween into a static, unchanging artifact of itself. It's no longer an event, but an object that exists only to be looked at. It draws attention to its own end, like how the silence after a firecracker demands respect.<sup>3</sup>

That the game is at odds with itself over what lasts and what doesn't perhaps shouldn't be a surprise. Elliott Smith's song *Between the Bars*, which inspired the game per ShuffleComp rules, is just as ambivalent about its own subject material. The song, composed of a few gentle acoustic guitars and Smith's voice at a near-whisper, is a crushingly melancholic ode to the meager comforts of alcoholism:

*Drink up baby, stay up all night  
With the things you could do  
You won't but you might  
The potential you'll be that you'll never see  
The promises you'll only make*

Yikes.

On its own, it's easy to see the song as narrated by alcohol itself, and that interpretation gains even more steam when viewed in the context of Smith's struggle with depression and addiction. In his design notes for the game, McIntosh writes that he leaned on the double-edged nature of the song to set the tone of Barbetween as a whole.<sup>4</sup>

And indeed, the song is part of the experience. As the player watches the guitarist perform, the lyrics appear automatically, if silently, in the player's

window. But in this context, it's fuzzier as to who's saying what to whom. Barbetween isn't a game about drinking, strictly. Maybe it's just something to add texture to the place.

But I think it can kind of work as a thesis statement to the whole exercise. It might be the only thing that contextualizes the player's role in relation to others. It's one thing to tell your secrets into this system and have it written someplace public; it's another to lend an ear to some stranger's pain. But *Between the Bars* is, despite its dark side, still a song about trying to provide some kind of comfort and consolation.

*Drink up with me now, forget all about  
The pressure of days, do what I say  
And I'll make you okay, drive them away  
The image is stuck in your head*

And I think that's the real thrust of the confessional cycle: not to necessarily share a painful memory, but to shoulder a nugget of some stranger's pain, like playing both sides of Catholic confession. At its most optimistic, Barbetween wants to be a facilitator of this kind of sharing. It's why I still go in and see if the taps have changed. Obviously I can't contact the authors of these little snippets of text, and I can't give them encouraging chucks on the shoulder. But I would hope that they find comfort in knowing that others can read and empathize, even if one might never receive a reply. Despite the cathartic experience of writing down my own little memory, I still find something consoling about reading those of strangers. Even with the silence and loneliness of Barbetween, it feels like a way to at least be lonely with other people.

Of course, the problem is that this assumes everyone's acting in good faith. Emily Short,

in her own critique of Barbetween, points out that one might have (totally valid!) concerns for their anonymity, or just a general inclination for flippancy, and so one might lie or make something up; or maybe any given player just doesn't care enough to really get invested in the whole experience.<sup>5</sup>

Is that okay? Maybe. I'm undecided. Not long ago, I checked if the memory I'd written was still there, and I felt a little pang discovering that it wasn't: did that other player find it affecting? Did they want to know more? Do they know how important it was? How much I felt like that memory was a part of me? How much it hurt?

Well, probably not. What I wrote was shorter than a tweet. How could I ever convey all that, the weight of that memory? They would forget it sooner or later. But then, I wouldn't have written it down if I didn't want it to be forgotten.

*People you've been before  
That you don't want around anymore  
That push and shove and won't bend to your will  
I'll keep them still*

## REVIEW

# Resist

*By Eve Golden Woods*

A man walking, a shadowy figure trudging through a silhouetted landscape against a shifting sky, and as he walks black cubes fall from the sky. I watch them, think them too fat to be rain, and so, in this minimalist game of interpretation, my mind assigns them the label 'snow'. At once the leap is made, and the connection forms: 'the snow falling faintly through the universe and faintly falling, like the descent of their last end, upon the living and the dead.' That line, the last line of *The Dead* by James Joyce, hung over my experience with *Resist*, a short freeware game by Dan Olsen.

*Resist*, Dan Olsen's first game, is a short, free-to-play game. Mechanically, it is simple. The only button the player can press is the right arrow on the keyboard, which moves the character across the screen in a steady lope. If the player stops, the character also stops. The character is square and boxy, seemingly masculine in a letterman jacket with earphones trailing from his ears, but actually he stands as a shadow, an almost featureless puppet. As the player moves him, or refuses to move him, across the screen the background changes, bleeding through a broad gradient of pastel shades, from purple to pink to orange to blue, a simple pattern for the player to fill with all the grandeur of the sky. Near the beginning a white circle passes for the moon across the sky and sets. The sun, if it exists, I have never seen. The player's movements take them past the shadows of picket fences, leafy trees and bushes, lampposts and park benches.

Minimalism has little use as a description of a game like *Resist*. Let us say rather

that *Resist* is suggestive, giving a broadly outlined world that the reader can fill with whatever fragments of memory and sight they feel are most appropriate. This abstraction is emphasized by the game's other mechanic, two bars which rest at the top of the screen. One is entitled ennui, the other entropy. Ennui is empty when you start, and entropy is full. The game itself describes this mechanic on the title screen: 'Walk to resist ennui. Stand still to resist entropy.' If ennui fills up all the way to the top the character vanishes and the game ends with the words 'resist' and then 'inevitability' appearing on the screen.

Given this mechanic, the player's first impulse is to walk. At first, it seems a simple choice, but the further one moves, the more problematic the decision becomes. The world starts to change. Objects begin to shift around the screen, appearing without alignment to the 'ground'. Then, as the character reaches them, these artifacts begin to fall away, dropping from the screen and vanishing. The character becomes a distorting force on the world around them. Bushes flicker, appearing first as a silhouette and then as words 'I AM A BUSH' in broad black letters. The cubic snow returns, multicoloured and shimmering. Walk far enough and the player will walk into a solid wall of artifacts, which overload the browser window. Though the mechanic implies a choice, there is only one way to truly end the game, by letting the ennui bar fill up until the character is excised from the game's reality.

Emotionally, *Resist* is about creating space. The suggestive graphics and the long, sonorous organ music that accompanies exploration offer the player time and space to think about what the mechanics of the game might mean. It seems strange, then, to compare a game whose architecture is about

creating void with a story like *The Dead*, where words are paramount, given in excess to a reader.

*The Dead* presents the reader with a lavish, highly-detailed depiction of middle class life in Dublin at the turn of the twentieth century. The prose is full of specific references that situate the characters in an exact location and moment. Consider this description: 'ever since Kate and Julia, after the death of their brother Pat, had left the house in Stoney Batter and taken Mary Jane, their only niece, to live with them in the dark, gaunt house on Usher's Island, the upper part of which they had rented from Mr. Fulham, the corn-factor on the ground floor.' The use of adjectives, place names and relationships builds up a picture of a detailed and immediate world, one equally as familiar to the characters as it is to the omniscient narrator. Adjectives in particular are crucial to the world that Joyce constructs, as in this sentence: 'Though their life was modest, they believed in eating well; the best of everything: diamond-bone sirloins, three-shilling tea and the best bottled stout.' Each item of food has its own description, its own specific requirements which Lily must remember and adhere to.

By suffusing his world with such specific detail, Joyce builds up a picture of normality. There are patterns and structures in this world, cyclic events, comfortable routines with which all the characters are familiar: 'He saw his wife making her way towards him through the waltzing couples. When she reached him she said into his ear: "Gabriel. Aunt Kate wants to know won't you carve the goose as usual. Miss Daly will carve the ham and I'll do the pudding."' These are people who have long been ingrained into the grooves of their own lives. They have decided opinions and beliefs, and they very rarely change. 'Mrs. Malins lived with

her married daughter in Glasgow and came to Dublin on a visit once a year. She spoke also of the beautiful house her daughter kept in Glasgow, and of all the friends they had there. [...] Mrs. Malins, without adverting to the interruption, went on to tell Gabriel what beautiful places there were in Scotland and beautiful scenery. Her son-in-law brought them every year to the lakes and they used to go fishing.'

We see this world from Gabriel's perspective, and we see his frustration with it. He is a character full of doubt, conflicted about his place in the world. This tension is represented for much of the story by a rather shallow concern about whether or not he has chosen the right quotation for his speech at dinner. It is one of the first insights into his thoughts that the reader is given: 'He was undecided about the lines from Robert Browning, for he feared they would be above the heads of his hearers. Some quotation that they would recognise from Shakespeare or from the Melodies would be better.' It reoccurs later, shifting from doubt, 'Perhaps [Miss Ivors] would not be sorry to see him fail in his speech,' to confidence, to self-criticism at the end of the story, 'He saw himself as a ludicrous figure, acting as a pennyboy for his aunts, a nervous, well-meaning sentimentalist, orating to vulgarians and idealising his own clownish lusts.' His concern for his speech frames all the other everyday concerns that are presented, and contextualizes them as equally shallow and banal. This is ennui at its most potent, a creeping lethargy that devours even the possibility of deeper or more potent thought.

Entropy in *The Dead* is harder to find, a lens through which I might never have considered the story if not for *Resist*. But it is there, present at the end when Gabriel finally looks beyond himself. Entropy is the general condition of the universe,

the rule that states tend towards an equilibrium which cannot be reversed, and that this equilibrium does not allow for life or movement. Death is the result of and a tendency towards total entropy. Or, as Joyce describes it, 'His soul had approached that region where dwell the vast hosts of the dead. He was conscious of, but could not apprehend, their wayward and flickering existence. His own identity was fading out into a grey impalpable world: the solid world itself, which these dead had one time reared and lived in, was dissolving and dwindling.' He comes to recognize that his life, and the lives of those he loves, are impermanent states of matter. The snow, which has fallen throughout the story, comes to his consciousness and ours, a blanket which hides and erases the past, as death does, but which also presents the possibility for new experiences. It is crucial that in his moment of confrontation with death and inevitability, Gabriel finds a new path, a new direction for his life. His decision to go west is a decision to live more fully – to experience places that were precious to his wife, and also to see for himself the place framed by those around him as the 'real' Ireland. By recognizing his own mortality, Gabriel is able to leave behind the ennui that has trapped him.

This, then, is the great power of *The Dead*. Its dense language and saturated images place us so firmly in the mind of its characters that we experience Gabriel's epiphany as he does. Like him, we are confronted with mortality, and like him, it gives way to a narrative space of possibility – the snow falling on the living and the dead. This is the reverse of *Resist*. Where *Resist* gives us space and challenges us to fill it with experiences from our own life, *The Dead* gives us one concrete experience and forces us to really confront it.

There is one more interesting comparison to

be made between *Resist* and *The Dead*. Both are intensely political works, though neither appears to be on a superficial level. *Resist*'s creator, Dan Olsen, was one of Gamergate's harshest critics, and he devoted several episodes of his show, *Folding Ideas*, to critiquing the message and methods of the movement. He also wrote an article highlighting the use of 8chan, Gamergate's home website, in the spreading of child pornography. *Resist*, a game in which there is only one pressable button, a game with no win state and no narrative, is a game that emerges in response to the idea that there are restrictions on what a 'game' is or should be. 'This is not a game' has been one of Gamergate's most tedious and oft-repeated rallying cries, a tiresome argument laid against creations like *Depression Quest*, *Gone Home*, and *Dear Esther*. *Resist* makes a political statement not by expressing an agenda within its narrative but by existing in a climate where what it does challenges conventional or mainstream perceptions.

Similarly, *The Dead* also presents an artistic challenge to the community in which it was created. Published in 1914, two years before the Easter Rising (a revolution that sparked the Irish Nationalist movement and led directly to the War of Independence), *The Dead* was written at a time when the predominant literary movement in Ireland was the Celtic Revival. Started by figures like W.B. Yeats, J.M. Synge and Lady Gregory, the Celtic Revival aimed to recreate Irish literature in English by drawing on Celtic mythology and folklore. Its prose was rich in symbolism and mystique, and there was a strong vein of literalized metaphor. For example, in the play *Cathleen Ní Houlihan*, the titular figure represents Ireland and Irish nationalism. In contrast to the work of the Celtic Revival, which heavily romanticized Irish country life and the country's Celtic history, *The*

*Dead* takes place in modern Dublin, featuring the middle classes. Miss Ivors, in her conversation with Gabriel, is a direct criticism of the Celtic Revival. She churns out all the usual Nationalist clichés in her criticism of Gabriel – that he goes abroad rather than visiting Ireland, that he doesn't speak Irish, even calling him a West Briton (an Irish description of a person who comes from Ireland but imitates English customs). None of these criticisms, however, make any real impact on Gabriel. Indeed, they stand in shallow comparison with the real revelation he has at the end of the story, where he comes to understand his wife. His insights into her life, and his decision to go west to Galway and see a different part of Ireland have nothing to do with Miss Ivors. Miss Ivors sees the west only as an ideological entity, whereas Gabriel, through his understanding of Gretta and her life there, comes to perceive it as a real place.

By representing the Celtic Revival in the person of Miss Ivors, Joyce makes it clear that their mystical, romantic interpretation of the west of Ireland is fundamentally limited and unhelpful. The only figure in the text from the west is Gretta, and her memories of Galway figure it not as a place of magic or mystery, a nationalist heritage waiting to be reclaimed, but as a real place, the seat of experiences and emotions that have stayed with her as vividly as her life in Dublin.

What both *Resist* and *The Dead* suggest, in their exploration of the tensions of humanity, is that existence itself is a political act. It is possible to coast along the surface of life, fighting against ennui or drowning beneath a wave of banal habits and routines, but it is also possible to recognize the mortality of the self, to acknowledge the tide of entropy, and to live more completely in that knowledge.

*'Resist inevitability.'*

'His soul swooned slowly as he heard the snow falling faintly through the universe and faintly falling, like the descent of their last end, upon all the living and the dead.'

Endings very much opposed in their language and intent, and yet with the same central concept. Death is inescapable, oblivion is inevitable, and that is precisely what makes life worth exploring.

REVIEW

# MirrorMoonEP & English Country Tune

By Josh Trevett

Santa Ragione's *MirrorMoon EP* may be a game about traveling between the stars and exploring alien planets, but you don't "beam down" to their surfaces. Instead, you tell your ship you'd like to be standing on the planet by loading a disc into a drive, and your vision goes white. You're not blinded—that light is a material thing, a box surrounding you. It blooms away from you like four shooting stars, revealing the planet behind it. Not for a moment are you disembodied. It's as if the ship simply gives way to the planet so that you can begin exploring.

*The scenery of the world* is a blend of airy 60's futurism and bold, clear forms reminiscent of a Lizzitsky painting. All the mysteries of an alien landscape, streamlined into just a few deftly laid shapes like white dinnerplates on dark tablecloth, with accents of bright yellow triangle toast. The effect is painterly, and stepping into this space is immediately absorbing. With so few shapes on the screen, any action you take changes the composition of the image, so every motion feels big.

With two exceptions, the surface of every planet is procedurally generated, with varying colors and features. But unlike the granddaddy space-exploration game *Noctis* and its spiritual descendent *No Man's Sky*, you won't be discovering mountains and valleys. These worlds have no terrestrial topography at all: they're



small, plain spheres you can circumnavigate in about a minute. You don't even have access to mouselook. Your view is permanently fixed on the sky, the horizon glued to the bottom of your screen, always just a few steps away. It's disorienting. This fixed view lends the game what its developers have called a "consistent cinematography," where nearby things always look imposing, even if they're quite simple. They can dominate the screen with just a few neat lines.

That cinematography makes the structures and scenes you come across feel important, and possessed of gravity. They should feel that way, because they're almost always significant. Every planet represents a short quest the player must explore until they find the goal, represented by a sphere, usually inside a white tower. Each time you arrive on a planet, you go in search of that tower, treating every bit of scenery as a clue. (The game connects to a central server, and if you're the first to reach a planet's goal, you get to name it!)

The most important bit of scenery is the *mirrormoon* itself. A miniature clone of the world you're standing on, it's like a map in the sky. Its placement is very significant – if it's facing the wrong way, it might reveal nothing but a totally blank hemisphere of your planet. If it's hanging over the sky of a deserted area, you might not be able to use it to glean your current position. Certain buildings may exist on the planet, yielding certain tools, all three of which interact with the moon in some way. One (that I've taken to calling the compass) lets you rotate the moon and see it from all sides. Another (the etcher) lets you leave a trail of beacons on both the planet and the moon, useful for drawing clear paths between points of interest. The last tool (the grabber) lets you reposition the moon, even using it to eclipse the

sun and create night. Night is useful: a minimap sort of arrow appears on the moon during night, clearly indicating your position and heading.

The game opens with one planet which was designed by hand: "Side A," an introduction which will deceive newcomers into thinking they're playing the first level of a more traditional puzzle game. It introduces you to the compass, then the etcher, then the grabber, and makes sure you understand their basic utilities. It also has a really cool ending.

*Side A* lives on your ship as an ominously powerful floppy disc, and before you can fly to an actual star you'll need to muddle through the controls. They're all laid out in front of you, delicious pink buttons waiting for you to click on 'em, but none of their functions is immediately clear, and there are enough less-than-essential gizmos to make the task daunting. Press a few wrong buttons and you might accidentally toggle off the game's sound, find yourself in the tutorial again, or quit the game entirely. One button is pretty much just there to nag you if you don't remember to press it at the right time. This scheme makes the game feel more like an impenetrable mystery when you're first starting out, but it allows you to be playful, even expressive, when you've got your bearings.

Once you've figured out the ship, you use it to fly between randomly generated worlds. They use pretty much the same mechanics as Side A, plus a few extra ones you'll pick up along the way. I'll talk more about that word "mechanics" later on, but let's nail down a working definition: mechanics are those things which give a player's actions ludic context. They're the moving parts of each world, some of which are under the player's control. They signal and modify the player's position relative

to the goal. In *MirrorMoon* and in most puzzle games, the player must correctly make use of the mechanics in order to “solve” the puzzle. If they don’t use the mechanics, they’re guessing. Going by this definition of the word, mechanics are what puzzles are made out of.

The three tools the player can find are mechanics. The way the tower sometimes only appears at night, and the way you might need to find another building first, are mechanics. The way a grassy patch usually has a building in its center is a mechanic. Since the worlds bear few natural features, their topography is created by their configuration of mechanics – by the tasks each world asks the player to perform. They create paths, and intersections between paths.

There aren’t a lot of mechanics in *MirrorMoon*, but they’re sufficiently powerful to produce a wide variety of topographies. Sometimes the algorithm produces a satisfying miniature adventure, something that feels like a challenging development of the poke-around-and-see-what-happens experience of Side A. You’ll learn the meanings of some new visuals and some clever new ways to recognize paths across the empty expanses. But just as often, the worlds don’t sit quite right within your expectations for this kind of game. Sometimes the goal is the very first thing you see when you land on a planet, and sometimes you’re given the opportunity to go out of your way just to pick up tools you don’t need.

Others seem cruelly difficult. Your tools aren’t right for the situation at all – maybe you have a grabber but the goal is only available at daytime, on the wrong side of the planet. There’s nothing to do but guess, wandering the blank sphere for what begins to feel like an eternity, hoping the tower

will eventually peek over the horizon.

These kinds of levels might be offputting in other games. Side A sets you up to expect sensible puzzles, but instead what you get is a monkeys-on-typewriters approach to level design. Still, it’s hard to perceive this as accidental. After you clear Side A, the screen goes white to show you a bit of text which sets up for the existence of these mechanically disjointed worlds: “Despite my growing comprehension of her work, every configuration on compatible planets feels like a random model grafted onto a problem that is too complex. I can only hope that things will be different when I reach the anomaly.” The anomaly is what you’re looking for. It’s what turns *MirrorMoon* itself into a puzzle.

## INNER SPACE

Increase’s *English Country Tune* has a surprising amount in common with *MirrorMoon*: spacey ambiance, pastel colors, music which echoes throughout the void and blurs the line between diegetic and non-diegetic, and abstract levels made of simple shapes. They’re distinct because *English Country Tune* is a traditional puzzle game at heart, consisting of logic problems (made out of non-representational cubes floating in a monochromatic void), offering challenges that broaden and deepen their scope as you get further into the game. However, its identity is just as rich as *MirrorMoon*’s. It’s easy to imagine these puzzles as the odd subatomic particles of *MirrorMoon*’s universe. After all, they’re made out of very few parts – move any of them out of place and the puzzle would crack open, leaking its tremendous stores of energy.

It turns out you pilot a “ship” in *English Country Tune*, as well – this one’s a 2D square, somersaulting

from tile to tile and pushing things around. There's a brisk tutorial in which you learn to push balls into translucent boxes – they look like simple shapes but they're called "larvae" and "incubators." The first couple of puzzles are simple 2D Sokoban-style traffic jams, but then a beguiling thing happens: there's a hole in your way. If you maneuver your ship inside of the hole, you'll need to climb down into it, along its bottom, and then back out. It takes three moves rather than the one move you expect, and larvae pushed into this hole are irretrievable, blocking your passage through it. Just like that, you've been introduced to the third dimension.

On the next level, you read the most important bit of tutorial text in the game: "The larvae are weightless. They simulate gravity as a camouflage technique. They will fall relative to how they were pushed." The mechanic this passage describes is hard to explain in all its nuance, but it allows larvae to fall upwards if pushed correctly – or incorrectly. With this in play, the game ceases taking place on flat planes, preferring 3D shapes whose every face must be addressed.

The complexity begins to reveal itself: the larvae still have to reach their incubators without getting in one another's way, but their paths to the incubators are unclear, seemingly impossible. Their subtle characterization as living things is appropriate, and not just because of the strange effect it has on the game's feeling of loneliness. They may behave predictably, but learning to make those predictions is a matter of getting to know them by playing with them.

Many canonized games in this genre treat their puzzles as a magic trick the audience is manipulated into performing themselves. Something must happen which seems impossible, you could

describe exactly why it's impossible, but the game's guiding hand causes something to click together and the pieces sidestep that impossibility, landing right into place. Perhaps by the end of a great puzzle game, a procession of such puzzles has taught you how to "think with portals:" you've internalized an entire vocabulary of spatial logic, and previously vexing tasks now couldn't seem simpler.

*English Country Tune* is at least a bit like that – the larvae are just as unwieldy as those famous portals at first seemed, but the game doesn't go so far out of its way to teach you anything. These are magic tricks you just have to figure out. Sometimes you'll muddle through them, and the solution will happen before your eyes. It takes the wind out of you. How did you just do that? Here's something to try: buy both the PC and mobile versions of this game, and revisit puzzles you've solved on the other device. See how well you've really grasped the solution.

Before you feel completely secure with the larvae, you're introduced to "whales" – plain cubes emitting six shafts of light in straight lines from each side. They must be "freed" from the stage, but they can't be pushed directly, only via the light. There's also "planting," where you need to touch every tile of a 3D shape once but none twice, due to the things sprouting up behind you. "Cutting," the delicate act of punching holes into your ship so that it'll be the right shape to pass obstacles. "Freezers," switches which temporarily turn the larvae into blocks you can traverse – unless they're incubated, naturally. As you get closer to the end of the game, *ECT's* mechanics become less permissive of guessing. Some levels are hard because their sprawl is difficult to process, containing easier puzzles which must be carefully untangled from the overall problem. Others are like impenetrable

monoliths, asking you to do just one thing that doesn't seem possible.

Even moving around can be confusing at times – with no permanent up or down, you can find yourself getting lost when the camera flips around. Sometimes a mechanic is a puzzle before it's even been placed inside a level. Twice, the game introduces a mechanic by asking you to design a level which is possible to solve. These levels ask you to get closer to the perspective of the designer: if solving these puzzles seemed hard, try building them.

The puzzles deserve praise for their inventiveness, and the sinister ways *Increpare* deploys their mechanics. But *English Country Tune* is a great game, not just a good game, because it understands that these puzzles exist in a space. Like the larvae and whales, the stages themselves possess an alien physicality: they undulate slightly rather than being static in space, and strange black specks appear and disappear like quarks in the void around them. The music is sometimes soothing and melodic, sometimes dark and haunting, sometimes nothing but the harsh sound of wind, and it blends with the echoing sound effects – the tap-tap-tap of your ship flipping itself over from tile to tile, the thumps of the whales being pushed, the percussion of a larva falling into place, even the barely-tonal chime that accompanies the austere “AREA COMPLETE” notification.

Between the visuals and the sound and the anthropomorphic names for puzzle pieces, every element works together to create a strong sense of place. Your rational intuition busily works on the logic problems while your aesthetic intuition feasts on the mood, and in time those hemispheres form a meaningful gestalt. You don't feel like you're

solving puzzles as much as you're staring at these bizarre objects, trying to sort out how they work, what they are and what they do. Each puzzle is an object with a very particular shape, one which isn't necessarily understood thoroughly just because you've solved it once. The real pleasure comes from inspecting it carefully, appreciating how every element is placed just so. You can find alternate solutions to some, but there's no achievement or gold star for doing so. To telegraph their existence like that would sabotage the pervasive sense of enigma which helps the game feel mystifying.

*ECT* makes you feel as though you must be pushing your mind's faculty for puzzle solving to its breaking point, but you'll never understand why the game is titled *English Country Tune*. Some mysteries are worth savoring for their opacity. The game has a way of asking you to engage deeply in logical thinking, and then showing you things which resist logical interpretation. You find yourself staring past the puzzle and into the monochrome abyss. The void can teach you things about yourself – you might as well be staring inward.

## INFINITE SPACE

In *MirrorMoon*, your ship uses energy every time you make a jump. Spend more energy and you'll travel faster, but you'll have less left over for another quick journey. Keeping the lights on slows the rate at which your energy recovers. In effect, you're encouraged to fly slowly, turn off the lights and even the sound, tab out of the game for a while and do something else. Or you could just watch the constellations slowly morph. Eventually, you learn to flick just the right switch to briefly light up the display with the countdown to your arrival. The game's shape is unusual, but you can come to comfortably inhabit it.

In 1919, Mikhail Bakhtin wrote this: “A whole is

called 'mechanical' when its constituent elements are united only in space and time by some external connection and are not imbued with the internal unity of meaning. The parts of such a whole are contiguous and touch each other, but in themselves they remain alien to each other." *MirrorMoon* is uniquely aware of this tension: its mechanics do not always touch one another in meaningful ways, unlike in *English Country Tune*'s carefully wrought topographies.

Here's the thing: neither *English Country Tune* nor *MirrorMoon* is mechanical "as a whole." In a way, no game is, as long as a player is willing to do the work of connecting the mechanics to some kind of meaning. For these two games, that's easy: there's so much feeling in the spaces between their mechanics. Feelings of being lost, but not entirely alone. The larvae and whales are here with you, the other players with their inscrutable names for planets are here with you, and the designer is here with you.

If you don't recoil when *MirrorMoon*'s levels stop making sense in the traditional ways, you'll find that it has a lot to teach you. You become an intrepid space explorer, fashioning clever tricks and picking up on subtleties which substitute for the favorable alignments of mechanics.

For instance, the building which houses the compass is a pyramid. If you know the relative position of another place you're trying to reach, but the moon can't help you get the correct heading, the pyramid's eight sides and corners can act as a traditional compass on its own - eliminating the need for a rough guess.

Another cool trick involves the grabber. While moving the moon around the sky, you can watch

the reflection of the sun's light shift and skew around its shape. This is another makeshift compass - it can provide a clear indication of how many degrees you've turned, something which can be difficult to ascertain from an empty view of the ground and sky.

Even the harshest worlds, where there's nothing but you and a goal you can't find, offer obscure hints. A random music track is assigned to every planet, and much of the (wonderfully moody) soundtrack is laden with chaotically rising and falling noise. You sometimes wonder if any of those noises are coming from your instruments. Turns out, the most subtle of those noises is also the most present: a very low-frequency hum, the kind you likely won't hear unless you're wearing headphones. It's actually emitted by the goal, and its volume and direction can guide you in the right direction.

Eventually, the game will reward you for sticking with it. There's a deeper, broader puzzle to uncover: the anomaly. Occasionally you'll glimpse it from the surface of a planet, a single star like any other, but circled as though someone took a pen to the sky and said "this one." Trying to simply pick that star out back on the ship is maddening - your perspective on the galaxy skews between the view from your ship, the view from the planet, and the view on your starmap. The dots form shapes, but they're not the same shapes.

There are many clues leading you to the anomaly, some of which reveal themselves all at once, others of which were always there, waiting for you to recognize them. Maybe you'll never find it. Doesn't matter: it's out there, and that's a reason to keep looking.

*MirrorMoon* is a love story: a game about a space traveler plunging the vastness of a great enigma in hopes that she'll someday find the one place which is perfectly hers – or perhaps her perfect opposite, the mirror that follows her in the sky. At the anomaly, Side A finds its Side B, a non-procedural quest where your world and the mirrormoon become one, and the credits roll. “Dedicated to all space travelers.”

Maybe *MirrorMoon*'s perfect opposite is *English Country Tune*: a world where everything is in perfect order, but the grand design behind it is mysterious and mystical. In their deep use of the puzzle genre, *English Country Tune* and *MirrorMoon EP* bear out what I love most in games: the times they feel like alien worlds, fascinating not only in the sights and sounds they offer, but in the process of exploring their bizarre workings. Equal to the degree to which they're initially confusing, they ultimately create a space unlike any other for your brain to inhabit – a place which feels uniquely yours, since only you have gone through your exact process of learning the game and forming your relationship with it. A bit like how you formed a relationship with that wise friend who talks in riddles.

# How To Be A Great Artist in 10 Seconds

*By Ansh Patel*

In Art, ideas and their execution have been traditionally dissociated, considered as two distinct halves of an ultimately singular process. With the exception of certain schools of thought, artists and their craft have been split in a way that separates a concept from the labour involved in its production. There is a romanticized idea in popular culture of the artist conceptualizing their work, and this mode is distinct from when they actually create it. When you see a writer sitting on a bench in a busy park, staring into space, occasionally jotting things down, they are working in a mode which most would identify as the artist “conceptualizing” their work. When you see the same writer typing rapidly on a computer, most would say this is the artist implementing that idea. The age-old motto of fine arts programs, “Ideas are cheap, execution is everything,” conveys a division between two modes that require different sets of skills. Erving Goffman refers to these modes as distinct frames; we can shift between them, but only one can be active at any point in time.

How to be a Great Artist in 10 Seconds (henceforth abbreviated as “ARTIST”) is based on a simple premise – make a painting that resembles one of history’s many great works of art in 10 seconds. The title and premise suggest that the game isn’t interested in ideas; it only cares about how you imitate a great artist’s work. In “Exam” mode, your blank screen is placed in side-by-side comparison with an existing work of art. The idea has already been thought of by a great artist in the past. You are merely asked to replicate of the idea efficiently, or at least create something that resembles it, in ten seconds.

But algorithmically and visually, the canvas has a voice of its own, which makes it almost impossible for the player to get anywhere close to the original. By taking this post-modern stance, the game asks interesting questions about our obsession with ideas. In an age in which access and connectivity have flooded us with ideas both past and present, “originality” in its romanticized sense is rendered meaningless. ARTIST interrogates our obsession with originality and wonders if even a failed imitation with a low match score of 11.23% for Van Gogh’s “Starry Night” ever worked from ideas of its own, even while attempting imitation. By creating an algorithm that can never fulfil its ostensible imitative purpose, ARTIST suggests that ideas and their implementation are inseparable, and that ideas are ultimately inconsequential.

**II.** The artist must walk across a bridge that connects the abstract concept in their mind with a physical or digital reality. This bridge between concept and its execution has traditionally been associated with an artist’s craft, or mastery of the tools they use to create. Yet, there is even a leap to be made when you have to pause and think about how you are going to make an idea into a work of art. The artist uses expertise to break apart an abstract concept and fit it within the defined space that a tool is capable of creating, whether it’s the semiotics of a language, the limitations of film and camera, or the syntactical restrictions of a programming language.

But when we speak of tools, it’s impossible to extricate them from the politics inherently involved, of their potential exclusion of those who may not have the means to afford them or learn the required skills. The process of creation is already political before an artist has even made anything.

As much as we want to celebrate the democratiza-

tion of game engines and tools, it’s important to remember that every tool we use is inherently political. It’s impossible to separate a tool from the ideologies embedded in its design. Each tool imposes limitations that restrict the range of processes we can potentially apply. Creation is collaboration between the artist and their tool. The artist’s will is always tested against that of the medium they work within. The tool will always shape the artist’s abstract idea. Like any collaboration, the result does not belong exclusively to the artist. The work also belongs to the tool.

ARTIST’s greatest achievement is in how it explores the idea of collaboration between artist and tool, by making its core interaction so confrontational and wilful that it becomes impossible for the player to ignore ARTIST’s underlying processes. Each key press alters the canvas in such a distinct, often jarring, manner that ARTIST forces the player to hesitate and think carefully before interacting. Like the uncertain strums and tunings of a novice guitar player, or the hesitant brush-strokes of a beginning painter, a new player in ARTIST fucks up the canvas with a single key press and is pushed back, made to reconsider the tool they’re working with.

ARTIST pits the player against an opaque tool whose inner machinations become clearer with practice. Becoming familiar with the tool, and understanding ARTIST’s underlying systems, is how you express yourself. Like collaborating with another person, the more you work with them, the more you understand them, and the better you are able to align your own working process with theirs. Practice enables us to tune our thinking processes to work with a creative tool.

**III.** Modern user interface design asserts a strong



philosophy of intuitive interface, an interaction model that takes a pedagogical approach to informing its users of the software's processes. User interface design teaches the user how to operate a tool based on how the designers wanted it to be used. It's a hierarchy that imposes ideas of the software's designer upon its users and guides them to work in a specific way for a specific purpose, which is why many of the popular tools we use are "closed" and unmodifiable.

ARTIST's creators, Andi McClure and Michael Brough describe it as a "creative toy". It's important to understand the connotations that the word "toy" carries here, which suggests that ARTIST was built with the intention of being playful.

However, playfulness is tested from the moment you start the game. All of the player's pre-conceived expectations based on title and premise are shed for something far more confrontational to an average player. ARTIST throws the player head-first into a blank canvas with absolutely no interface or hint of how to actually make things. ARTIST destroys the notion of intuitive interface that so many users have grown up with. Where many games are notorious for hand-holding their players in the opening minutes, ARTIST pushes the player into a space where they are given a task, but without any clear idea how to achieve it. ARTIST places faith in the player to take the first action. ARTIST starts with a cold opening framed as an invisible question, "What are you going to do next?" In the stand-off between interactor and strange toy, the player, armed with keyboard and mouse, must take the first step forward.

With no clear controls, the player randomly presses a key. Any letter key.

And with that, a pact is signed between the player and the program.

There are a number of interesting things that ARTIST expresses by forcing the player to randomly press keys. Trial-and-error is portrayed as an integral part of learning and experimentation, which in many ways reflects on traditional art tools like a brush or guitar. There may be a "right" way to use a brush or guitar, but it doesn't come packaged as instructions with the tool itself. Traditional tools never directly instruct users how they should be using them. It's the artist who tries and learns by failing. Part of ARTIST's success can be attributed to its honesty in refusing to violate the input-output model that we've come to expect from interactive tools and digital games. In other words, a valid key press does something on the screen, an invalid key doesn't do anything. ARTIST rewards players who experiment and explore the different actions across the keyboard.

ARTIST plays against our conventional expectations of input areas on keyboards. By spreading its controls across the keyboard, ARTIST has an immediately disorienting effect on the average user. For instance, paintbrush, the most conventional paint software tool, has four different "actions" associated with it, all of which are mapped to keys that are scattered across the keyboard. Likewise, the keys in ARTIST are mapped in odd ways that throw a cautious, hesitant player off their tracks. Adjacent keys like "D" and "F" perform completely different functions. Often, a key that does very little, like adjust a positioned pixel on a certain part of the screen by a few units, is mapped next to one that shifts the whole canvas horizontally over its previous frame, altering the work significantly.

It is also important that the system underlying

ARTIST responds only to the user's input. Like most tools, it has little agency of its own. According to McClure, the algorithms have almost no random number generators in them, resulting in non-arbitrary behaviour from ARTIST's underlying processes, which rely purely on player input. ARTIST is a game driven by the player. This makes it easier for a new player to learn and experiment by trial-and-error without having to deal with a system's independent responses. ARTIST's system doesn't need randomness because the mind of an artist is an adequate source.

ARTIST has undergone a few iterations during its course on the festival circuit. At the IGF booth during GDC 2015, ARTIST had a custom keyboard made by McClure and Rachel Yonamine. In order to accommodate the short attention-span of the average expo gamer, they tore off all the non-functional keys, leaving behind only those keys that actually make something happen in ARTIST. This might have undermined the learning by trial-and-error approach of vanilla ARTIST, but McClure and Yonamine drew strange glyphs on the keys to show which ones had similar functions. The glyphs supply their own visual language, substituting the layer of interpretation lost with the non-functional keys with another that encourages the player to draw connections between the scattered keys and their functions. In this way, ARTIST manages to transition into a public experience where a player randomly taps the remaining iconized keys while people gather around the booth to witness the creation of an incoherent, but chaotic and visually striking work. By doing so, ARTIST encourages the player to be more adventurous and take orthogonal approaches to creative expression. ARTIST as a creative tool is confrontational and difficult; some may even call it "unintuitive" by traditional user interaction philosophy. But it ultimately succeeds

in putting a patient and persistent player into a mode where they are experimenting and learning more about its processes through trial-and-error.

IV. One doesn't need to read Walter Benjamin to realize that art and its practice have drastically changed in the age of production. "Creative applications" like GarageBand and Pencil flood the App Store and similar marketplaces. The digital arts have picked up many ideas from the field of engineering and technology. Both engineering and art are about creation through implementation, and both have increasingly become about creating within a time-based constraint. Where engineering was always based upon a utilitarian notion, art in the age of production and consumption has become governed by strict deadlines. We see this in varying degrees in different industries, including games. Creative teams have strict deadlines. Their projects often have "milestones" that represent a certain number of expected features. Alpha, beta, gold. You create, then solidify, certain core, fundamental features.

There's nothing inherently wrong with this approach, besides the fact that it serves the hyper-accelerated culture of consumption that the industry is built upon. It has undeniably changed how creative practices are carried out. In the "Exam" mode, when ARTIST places a time restriction of ten seconds and sets a clear target, it encourages the player to explore this idea. It feels like a hyper-exaggerated version of the process that modern game developers put themselves through.

Like many creative applications, ARTIST blurs the lines between the artist and the consumer. However, the average "creative application" is built for profit, marketed on a premise of accessibility that breaks the traditional boundaries between the art-

ist and the consumer, and makes the means of production available to all. The creative application allows the consumer to become the artist without requiring them to learn a set of skills. ARTIST, however, is free and open-source, built by two people for a 48-hour game jam. But more importantly, ARTIST allows the player to be critical of the processes in which they are already implicit as consumer. For once, the player is placed in the shoes of a developer. ARTIST's timed restrictions and obtuse processes capture the tension and desperation of rushing through work. Within ten seconds, ARTIST allows the player to experience a range of emotions and mindsets which many developers go through for extended periods of time.

A clear goal, a foreboding deadline that ominously counts down to zero, the despair of running out of ideas, stealing anxious glances at the time.

The fact that ARTIST is open-source and can be

modified also works counter to the general ideology of the creative applications "closed garden". Instead of merely selling the promise of creativity, ARTIST allows space for critical introspection on the creative processes that many artists engage with today. ARTIST's greatest achievement is its multiplicity. It can be a playful experience in "Practice" mode in which the user becomes the player, simply revelling in the randomness of their own actions. It can be a tool to create art, where the player learns to mold their creative processes and collaborate with the mechanism. It can even be a critical explication of the creative process, of working within impossible constraints in a culture built on consumption. The plurality of contexts within which ARTIST exists and thrives make it an interesting work of art, one that allows different meanings to coexist based on how and how much the participant is willing to interact with this strange, fascinating toy.

# Little Party

*By Gita Jackson*

My parents were protective of me when I was young - I wasn't really allowed to have parties. The ones I did were awkward, stilted affairs where my mother was always hovering just outside the basement, where she entered without knocking, where we couldn't be the edgy teens I thought we were. I stopped having people over.

To this day, when I talk to my mom on the phone, she asks, "Who are you hanging out with? Who are your friends?" and I always name a bunch of people she's never heard of and that I can't explain. Well, mom, I hung out with Pete this weekend, who is sweet and stays up all night dancing and I woke up next to him in a tiny twin sized bed, my throat so dry it felt like it was closing. Well, mom, there was the closing reception at my gallery this weekend and I drank too much Franzia and watched the Birdcage next to one boy who might have been hitting on me, thinking of another boy that I probably won't ever meet.

All my mother wants is to know me. It's the reason why she stood at the bottom of the stairs when I practiced violin, clapping when my bow finished scraping the strings. I feel guilty for hating her applause now. She just wants to see the things I make.

*Little Party*, from Carter Lodwick and Ian Endsley, made me want to call my

mom. You play as the mother of a young woman who is having an all night art party in your house. Your daughter Suzanne is trying to record a solo EP overnight - her various friends (a painter, a game designer, a filmmaker) are attempting to finish their own projects. They're much nicer than my friends were at that age, and certainly more interesting, but probably just as pretentious.

I went to an arts magnet school program when I was in high school. I was in the creative writing program, and my friends were other writers, filmmakers, artists, actors. Some of us took the hour-long bus ride together and if we weren't napping or eating or smoking weed or listening to music we would just talk about what we wanted, what we hoped would happen to us. Moving to New York was a common goal. Starting a band, another. My friend Billy and I both wanted most desperately to buy a house somewhere, and just make art all day. Billy and I don't know each other now, but we often daydreamed about that, sneaking cigarettes in the alley behind the gas station. It would be an old colonial, like most of the houses in the town where we grew up, in the middle of the woods, with a wide porch and real wood floors, narrow stairs, the kind of roof that you could climb up onto at night.

Like Suzanne, most of the work I made at that age I hated. In *Little Party*, after falling asleep reading a tacky romance novel, you follow the sound of your daughter's music out to the lake behind your home. You stand there watching her, waiting for her to finish. She sings yearningly, her back to you. She doesn't know you're there. You tell her that it's beautiful, and she calls it sloppy. She insists that it's not going anywhere. But you can tell that she's wrong. If I could have, I would have applauded for her.

Suzanne's mother, who you learn near the end of the game is named Candice, hovers outside of the world her daughter inhabits, seemingly trying not to bother them too much. You speak to each of her friends only a couple of times over the course of the night, usually only when invited to do so. She has her own work, as well. It's easy to forget that our parents have lived whole lives before having us. Suzanne's painter friend asks of one of Candice's paintings, "Is that Robert Redford?" and she says, "No, that's Suzanne's father. But he did look like Robby Red back in the day."

*Little Party* is both sparse and intricately detailed. Objects are rendered in flat, bright colors, often completely unshaded, but your home is full of details that flesh out the characters - on the wall by the two bedrooms are two framed photos. In one, a younger Candice, flanked by a younger man smoking a cigarette, flips off the camera. In the other, a young Suzanne eats pizza. A Gamecube sits in the corner of the basement. Suzanne's bedroom has posters of women playing guitar and Christmas lights hanging from the ceiling. Little changes in the environment - subtle enough to go unnoticed - indicate where to find your daughter and her friends as time passes. If you check for Suzanne in her room after you wake in the morning, you can see an orange extension cord hanging out the window, leading to the roof.

Whenever you can interact with anything in *Little Party*, blue text appears on screen. As outlined in the Read Me, you can then press spacebar to "get involved." Often, you're just talking to your daughter's friends, observing them or offering your opinions on their work. Sometimes, you get involved by doing things for yourself - making guacamole, checking your email or going to bed.

In the final sequence of *Little Party*, you awake to an empty house. I went to the living room, and saw a series of paintings clearly inspired by the work that Candice had left in her office. I went to the basement, and a short video, called “Candice,” was playing on loop on the tv, just images of Candice, scenes you recognize from the game, the times you talked to the young man with the camera. I went to Suzanne’s bedroom, and one of Candice’s paintings was hanging on the wall. I followed that orange cord up to the roof. Her friends were all seated, and Suzanne was standing at the keyboard. The light sky of dawn swelled up over the trees. Her ponytail swung in the wind. The blue text on screen said, “Be proud.”

Earlier today my mother called to ask how I was, what I was working on. I should probably call her back.

# Way to Go

*By Lana Polansky*

I don't have many fond memories from my childhood, or for that matter of my father, but I do remember the northern lights. I have strong memories of clear, cool nights on the balcony of my parents' house, watching the sky flare green with the electromagnetic pulse, feeling in some inarticulate way like they represented a part of who I was and where I was. These memories upset me because as much as I want them to be innocently symbolic, they'll always be tainted by my other memories of him and the ways he abused my trust. I can't find a sense of home in them, and their wonder is compromised.

*Way to Go*, by Montreal-based Studio AATOAA, is cross-media experiment using real film footage as the basis for a 3D interactive environment. The loading screen tells me all I need to know: W to walk, E to run, spacebar to jump, and left-click is my "action button." I can feel out the controls by using W or E to draw a looping white chalk-line on a painterly, abstract background of deep, royal blue and fluorescent fuchsia. When I hit the spacebar, there's this kinaesthetic bounce from the input as the camera quickly zooms in and out to match the pound of a drumbeat. When the game loads, the scene fades into a monochromatic establishing shot of a wood. It's immediately clear that my avatar is the silent, placidly grinning, box-headed figure Butthat stands before the dirt path with the long chalk-line. Behind me, there is my counterpart, a palette-swapped but otherwise identical version of me. I am white with black contours, he is black with white contours. I take this figure to be my shadow, always following.

But as I observe him, I notice that unlike my avatar, who appears to have been an illustrated asset inserted into the environment after filming, the counterpart looks like an actual person, clad in black and wearing a costume headpiece. He's holding something close to himself. A long stick that extends into the air. I can't tell exactly, but my shadow may be holding a camera, following.

It occurs to me that the mouse camera has captured as much as the film camera had--all the frames which had been captured and cut and placed into the game, constituting the material of the level, the skybox. That explains, perhaps, why I can't see the camera itself. The lens is creating a gaze, and the gaze provides a ground-level perspective that creates an illusion of space.

The inclusion of a 360-degree range of motion in the camera creates a feeling of panoramic expanse that makes me believe I can access the space around that chalk-lined path. Really though, the 3-dimensions are confined to the linear chalk line, and what I'm passing through happens to be the path created by the filmmaker, as if I were walking through the frames at my own pace rather than watching them pass by. As a matter of fact, the loading screen and for that matter most of the promotional material for *Way to Go* makes a point about the game taking anywhere between 6 minutes to play and however long you like.

I think about scope, breadth and constraint as I walk down the path. But that begins to feel too slow and confining in itself, so I begin running. I feel as if I'm blistering past trees and grass. I hit space and I jump and there's a slight visual reverberation and I hear the pounding of a hollow drum. I tilt my mouse up and--suddenly!--my avatar is flying. I fly, because with the way my avatar

looks, I look as though I'm in the space while not quite being of the space. I fly because it liberates at least my heel from the chalk. I feel lighter, less confined although still following this path, indulging in the sublimity of the place and the experience, the twinkling jingles and chimes, while separating myself out of it.

When I touch back down to the soft earth and I feel weight and solidity again, I know I can stop. The scene will change to a short clip of a bird, or a bug, or some other small organism that I would have missed had I kept to flying. I hit the spacebar here and I "blink"--represented as a quick fade into and out of black--and a piano key chimes. I think about scope again but instead of distance and expanse I'm thinking of closeness and granularity. I'm thinking of the small moments that create memory and the small objects that fill space up. They're just video clips, but the key-mapping that cuts in and out of view, and the touch of the blink, makes the nature scenes they depict feel authentically a part of these woods.

Eventually the chalk line ends, and I come up to a riverbank. In a scripted moment, my avatar dives into the water; the shadow figure waits idly by the shore. Soon, it seems to become the river--its enlarged face manifests in the flowing water. Opalescent pigment then takes over, spreading over the surface of the lake bold pinks, blues, yellows. They break up the monochrome, spilling over my avatar's smiling face, shining prismaticly like the sun poking through a downcast afternoon.

The woods have gone from monochrome to a kind of infrared filter. The trees and other flora look flatter, like paper, as if they were rotoscoped. When I fly through the colours, the naked tree branches leave me like the trails of rainbows. I come to the



ground and hold left-click, looking for signs of life. Instead of birds and bugs, things get more microscopic: I'm allowed into the world of tiny, but here bioluminescent, creatures. Now, when I hit space-bar, a traced outline is left behind as I hop and skip and float across the path. I no longer see my shadow.

Eventually we come not to a wood but an open field. Here, I can look for insects in the tall grass or I can lose myself in the wide horizon of the night sky that I can now see with perfect clarity. Now, my two shadow friends are with me, and as we hop, run, float, the same magic rainbow pigment that coloured the forest is now shooting from their heads and up into the sky, creating an aurora. I keep running across the field, the panorama feeling so much bigger than the woods, which are now smothering in comparison. I don't want to escape, to run to that clearing. I want to explore, and move laterally. But I can only either stop, take in a little moment, or keep moving forward.

Eventually, the line stops. The game tells me its over, "or is it?" Now I'm allowed to keep moving, now I'm running, flying, past my the outlines I made of myself, past the shadow figures, past the wood and its denizens, past the rainbows. I'm floating over a curved horizon now, and the space deepens not just outward but downward. It looks as though I'm floating over a huge mountain scape, and since the line is gone, the camera angle I choose with my mouse seems to determine my direction. I float above the mountains, above the curved horizon, and the colours of the aurora, blue, pink, nostalgic green, sashay into each other, losing me in the dance of magnetic midnight.

This is where the game ends for me, in a fantasy of a memory of an experience that never happened.

The loss of self, of identity and its baggage are encouraged despite the strong symbolic connection between these geographical phenomenons and my own upbringing. It all comes rushing back after I play but in the moment *Way to Go* evokes a certain mystified awe. A pure, childlike delight that I had, once, before I really knew that "home" was an unsafe place.

\* \* \* \* \*

Where *Way to Go* creates a lush, warm, inviting feeling of fullness with its 3-dimensionality, Micha Cardenas' *Redshift & Portalmetal* is flatter, using poetic branching text superimposed onto looping, relatively static video clips. Both games have a kind of in-the-moment documentary look, feeling more like "found footage" than the polished editing of a feature film, but *Redshift & Portalmetal's* flatness makes it feel colder, more hostile, and more remote.

In this game, I'm told, my planet is dying. I have to leave, I'm told, and that's whether I try to stay and help or not. My character, Roja, is a trans woman of colour living in a dystopic near-future of ecological catastrophe. She can text her girlfriend or contact her when she reaches a new planet. She can sit and wait while the guard on the Ice Planet where her employment is (in)validates her identity, or she can try to run through the barrier. She can pack her hormones or perform a bio-hacking procedure later. On the hot, dessicated desert planet, Roja can visit a doctor and get in touch with herself spiritually. On the Ocean Moon, Roja and her lover can breathe in the briny air and feel some sense of balance, closure, tinged with nostalgia.

A lot of these events aren't depicted visually, they're suggested in the branching text of this interactive

free-verse poem. In some obvious ways *Redshift & Portalmetal* feels much like a Twine game--its linking passages suggest a logic that brings Roja to her final destination, but twists, complicates, and expands the story along the way. Often we're giving false choices (we can choose to click "run" from the guard, but the game prevents us from actually doing this), but what these do is provide backstory and character development, allowing us to better understand Roja's feelings and motives and dig into her emotional inner life.

While the text is very evocative, it's the looping gifs and short videos in the background that realize the spaces described in the poem. It uses its imagery to situate and focalize Roja, giving her journey a texture, gravity, dimension and temperature. Rather than suggesting the scope of the universe, which may as well be boundless from the perspective of a human, these two-dimensional moving images on static web pages suggest constriction, pressure, and claustrophobia. The feeling of insignificance within the caring embrace of naturalistic awe that we see in the sprawling space of *Where to Go* is replaced in *Redshift & Portalmetal* with an urgent mortal need for safety and comfort, and for home. *Where to Go* lets us lose ourselves in a way that's reaffirming and edifying, allowing us to amble through its snowglobe world. Ironically, the structure and presentation of *Redshift & Portalmetal* imposes a feeling of lostness upon us which is unsettling, disconcerting. We trace through the forking branches of Roja's past, her needs, her regrets, her wishes, her fears as she travels from place to place looking for that one locality that will hold her in for all that she is.

When Roja is on the Ice Planet, we see on the icy white and blue horizon the smoke stacks of industry as if through the window of a vehicle. Some

ghostly reflection shines off the glass, proving its existence. We hear the howl of wind. The HTML5 video seems to move but never really gets past the stacks. Other such pages on this planet show us the snow-frosted barren plains and cracked icy waters and the verse indicates how this climactic harshness reinforces the need for warmth and togetherness. On the desert planet, the sun beats down on red, orange and brown rock formations. The sky glows cyan in contrast and a woman, presumably Roja, kicks up dust as she climbs. She strikes poses while balancing on flat stones. This hot planet, oppressively dry, creates a need instead for distance and separation, for individuality. Naturally, the text reflects how on this planet, Roja is able to feel safe and confident asserting herself more than on the Ice Planet. The Ocean Moon finally brings equilibrium. It regulates the tide. Here it's neither too hot nor cold. Here Roja can dance on the rocks by the shore at night, the water lapping up against her feet. She can sit comfortably, coolly, at once close to her lover and to the ground of her new place while still retaining a clear personhood. She keeps with her the memories of what brought her there: the lessons, the wisdom, and from this she can build a home.

But the player doesn't feel this materiality. I'm always going to be a little removed from these fantastical spaces, unlike *Way to Go* where there's a kinaesthetic immediacy to occupying the space. (In other words, I feel it more directly.) In *Redshift & Portalmetal*, the story is not my story. It's the story of Roja, of Micha Cardenas, of locations--Toronto and Los Angeles--where she filmed and therefore staged these very tonally different "worlds." It's about the native populations of these places that Cardenas works with and the environmental degradation that is destroying their homes, our planet. It's a narrative about identity and of cultivating

and maintaining spaces that reflect that identity; it's a metanarrative about environmentalism. But these places aren't for me to inhabit, to be a part of as myself.

In one striking video clip, we're given a close-up of the actress's deep but stoic gaze. She's standing in the snow and we just look at her, and she seems to be looking back at us. The self can't be effaced in this moment. Instead I become self-conscious, aware of myself in relation to this image. It seems to be a silent provocation.

In *Way to Go* we experience what it is to be in the world, to be a small part of it and to bask unadulterated in its wonder. Much has been made of "cinematography", particularly in blockbuster games with so-called "cinema envy", but usually this refers to things like filmic lighting and camera techniques in rendered virtual environments, usually during cutscenes. In *Way to Go*, the film footage is the foundation of the world, creating this uncanny, magical melding of forms, blurring the line between realities in much the way a documentary provides the viewer with a very deliberately framed version of a real event. *Redshift & Portal-metal*, too, is a mix of text, video, various scripting languages, and wildly different environments. But it's more about being of the world, being formed and moulded by its subjectivities and pushed and pulled as an actor within its systems.

Both are using film footage to imply space, but also

texture, distance, temperature--and all of these implications influence how we see ourselves situated in that space, whether focalized through a dynamic character or a silent, smiling avatar. Both are also creating a compromise between how time travels in the realm of film--at the fixed pace of the camera--and the way game worlds yield a more flexible pace over to the player. The question then isn't about how ideas and stories are constructed in moving images, but rather how the player's relationship to these spaces and the objects inside them construct meaning.

I can, in that snowglobe world, sublimate all my baggage and mental scarring into pure energy. I can recover a part of me that I had lost by allowing myself to wade in the religiosity of "the grander scheme of things." I see the very small--the microscopic--in relation to the very big. I get suspended for a moment in the aurora, what's also termed "magnetic midnight." I see that ecosystem fitting and folding inside itself. If I stop, the world seems to stop. But if I keep chasing the horizon I just end up revisiting my own shadows. I feel alienated from the world. I feel dry, cold, isolated, distant. I watch the world pass by me, undergoing frightening changes I can't seem to affect thanks to systems in which I'm complicit. Both games, in their way, evade "home" as a tangible space for the player to occupy, a space which is at once inside of us and around us. But they hint at some figment of that structure, and the need for it, like the memory of an experience that never happened.

# On Intermedia Translations

*By James Earl Cox III*

Below is a walk-through for an intermedia translation game. When character names and specific locations are mentioned, you may choose your favorite of three different Intellectual Properties: Harry Potter and the Sorcerer's Stone, Lord of the Rings: Fellowship of the Ring, and Star Wars: A New Hope.

You emerge from (a lit hallway of Hogwarts/a hobbit hovel/the moisture farm). Others wander about minding their own business, yet all seem repelled by you and scatter as you enter the scene. (Dumbledore/Gandalf/Obi Wan) approaches. "Welcome to (Hogwarts/the Shire/Tatooine). I am (Albus Dumbledore, your headmaster/Gandalf, your uncle's friend/Obi Wan, your mentor). (Hogwarts/the Shire/Tatooine) is full of secrets, (Harry/Frodo/Luke), so search everywhere. But keep in mind, not all secrets are rewarding. Now hurry, or you'll be late."

He stops talking but remains, silently staring off into space. He is now a piece of scenery, no different from the level itself. No matter what you do, he pays no attention. When he was animate, his voice didn't quite match the actor's you remember from the film, but it was close enough to appease your inner fandom.

You continue along the linear path in this textured void, and another character runs out to meet you. "Hey, (Harry/Frodo/Luke)! Remember me, (Ron Weasley/Samwise Gamgee/Uncle Owen). My (brothers Fred and George/friends Merry and Pippin/droids R2-D2 and C-3PO) have something to show you. Follow me!"

As he speaks, another aimless character runs past, apparently forgotten by the introductory herd. (Ron Weasley/Samwise Gamgee/Uncle Owen) scurry down the single-path game corridor, unresponsive to your movements. “Follow me (Harry/Frodo/Luke)!”

The NPC pauses in front of a statue and rotates to face you. Next to the statue are (brothers Fred and George/friends Merry and Pippin/droids R2-D2 and C-3PO). “Hello, (Harry/Frodo/Luke). We can show you how to get around (Hogwarts/the Shire/Tatooine). Follow us for a secret lesson.” (Ron Weasley/Samwise Gamgee/Uncle Owen) begins to speak again. “I’ll see you later (in Defense Against the Dark Arts Class/at the festival/back at the moisture farm). Good luck, (Harry/Frodo/Luke)!”

A secret passage opens up, and your new caretakers hurry inside. You easily keep their pace. The next phrase you hear is “We’re going to teach you how to climb.”

I’m Ron Weasley, Your Best Friend. Do You Remember? With a bit of paraphrasing (and added character choices), the previous excerpt was a reconstruction of the first five minutes of the *Harry Potter and the Sorcerer’s Stone* game. This game isn’t so much an adaptation of the novel of the same name as it is a platforming action-adventure overlaid with Harry Potter skins. This isn’t particularly a bad thing, nor is the game a “bad game.” What is important to note is that this game caters to Harry Potter fans; it is an effective appendage of the Harry Potter media empire. Without having read the novels, the characters and plotting will make little sense. A few minutes farther into the game, you are forced into another pseudo-cut scene: “It’s me, Hermione Granger. We met on the Hogwarts Express, remember?” If we

rely solely on the game to answer this rhetorical question, our implied answer would be “no.” The game began with our traversing a labyrinth of castle-textured passages ten minutes ago.

My brother Joe has a phrase for such syndicated videogames, which he applies to Michael Bay films as well: “cultural filler.” It’s a term that has grown on me, that can be used to describe media that adds no significant value to its field, media that makes no attempt to be art or to stand out from the crowd. Almost kitsch, but without as much homeliness. And that’s ok. Knowing that a bag of chips isn’t a nutritious meal doesn’t make it any less enjoyable.

The goal of this Harry Potter game, as it is with most syndicated IP, is one of revenue tied to the Harry Potter media franchise. Familiar inputs (run, jump, shoot) paired with recognizable characters. The creators assume that the audience is well acquainted with the plot, so they can cut straight to the game-y interaction. The game was a success; it was profitable enough after its 2001 PC and Playstation release to be remade and released in 2003 for next-generation consoles.

Yet, if we consider this game’s relationship to the narrative world it is meant to embody, it lacks a lot. Never once while playing do you feel like Harry Potter, nor do you feel like you’re reading a Harry Potter novel. Critical aspects of the story are gone, literary devices are missing, character development and world building are nil. It is just a 3D gamified space, collectables and achievements included, with the characters, terms, lore, and setting layered on top.

As Hogwarts paraphernalia populates every corridor, the game keeps reminding you of who

you are meant to be, keeps asking if you remember who everyone around you is. “Harry Potter, it’s me, your best friend.” “Harry Potter, it is I, Severus Snape.” “Harry Potter, don’t you remember us? What’s wrong? Please remember us,” as if these hangnail reminders will be enough keep us sated, tied to the gameplay long enough to make it to the next “Hey Harry, I’m Neville Longbottom.”

This sort of intermedia translation game is unsatisfied with its role as an adventure-platformer wearing Harry Potter masks. “You are Harry Potter,” it whispers one more time through another set of lips. “Remember?” This yearning for immersion is borderline eerie. Maybe the game isn’t just reminding us of our role. Perhaps it is projecting onto us its own insecurities. If it doesn’t recite its own characters’ names enough, it’ll forget what story it’s trying to be.

When Hollywood unintentionally turned *The Great Gatsby* into a satire of its own decadence, a small, freeware, Gatsby-themed game resurfaced, bubbling into local papers and across the internet. Titled *The Great Gatsby* for NES, the game resembles a NES/Gameboy Color side-scrolling platformer. After pressing Start in the menu, you are tossed into a mansion. As you progress, you must avoid a sea of “Wilfred”: scowling bald butlers, busking oeuvres in red koopa patrol paths. A touch loses you one of three valuable lives. Occasionally, during and in-between levels, the game tosses quotes from the book at you.

Years ago, before the film, I had played this game and was rather upset with it. This wasn’t *The Great Gatsby* in interactive digital form, but just a NES-style game with Gatsby-inspired sprites, just another platformer wearing a face. Without the title or the sparse quotes placed throughout,

a player need never discover that it’s based on a novel. I was both right and wrong. It’s true that the game is a poor example of true-to-text intermedia translating. Fitzgerald’s depth and meaning is completely lost. Nowhere in the novel does Nick Carraway fend off crabs and ghost soldiers by tossing cabby hats at them.

But I was mistaken in my interpretation of the game’s motives. It doesn’t aspire to portray the story accurately, and never pretended to. It was imagined as a lost artifact, a forgotten NES cartridge. If you navigate to [greatgatsbygame.com](http://greatgatsbygame.com) and click “About”, you can read a short fictional account of how a long lost Japanese NES game based on *The Great Gatsby* was uncovered at a yard sale. There’s even a polite request to contact the owners of the site if you have more information. The Gatsby game is a piece of metafiction, which is a genius way of accounting for its own form and style. It needs the novel to be understood, but it admits this. It’s an honest parody, and a self-aware exploration of syndicated intermedia games like *Harry Potter and the Sorcerer’s Stone*.

Intermedia translation games can also keep the theme, mood, and tone of an original work intact. The end result of this approach is a game that contains a similar depth and critical theory to that of the written work. Playing an intermedia translation of this vein should enable you to have a critical discussion about theme, message, and overall plot with someone who has only read the written fiction.

*I Have No Mouth and I Must Scream* might be the most renowned intermedia translation game of this sort. Based on the short fiction of the same name, what makes *I Have No Mouth and I Must Scream* an interesting example of intermedia

translation is that the game contains significantly more narrative content than the written story. Harlan Ellison, the author of the original story, collaborated with David Sears on the design team to expand on the lore of the fictional world.

The short story *I Have No Mouth and I Must Scream* takes place in a dystopian world where a supercomputer has destroyed all of humanity sans four unfortunate individuals. The supercomputer torments this fragment of humanity throughout the narrative. To mirror this aspect of the story within the game, the player can almost never win. Their choices are often summed up as two different roads to failure: lose with dignity by uniting with the other humans, or lose with selfish intent by seeking your own release. This binary reinforces the desperate hopelessness of the short fiction. Unlike the Harry Potter game or the Great Gatsby game, it would be difficult to reskin the *I Have No Mouth and I Must Scream* game. The fate-oriented play is inseparable from the world's fiction. The game is not a form of escapism; it brings the player deeper into reality.

Intermedia translation games exist as artifacts. Even if an intermedia translation is self-contained, it is tied inseparably to another work. True-to-text examples won't remind you of who you are meant to be, nor impose objectives that conflict with the source's message. These games also retain the belief systems of the source material. Syndicated games that rely on established fiction only for visual substance tend to have disjointed messages, flickering ideas that pop in and out of play meant for a third person shooter.

*An Occurrence at Owl Creek Bridge* is an intermedia translation game I made based on the short fiction of the same name. The story opens with a

man at the edge of a bridge with a noose around his neck, Union soldiers of the American Civil War behind him. The original written piece provides a glimpse into his backstory: Peyton Farquhar was a confederate sympathizer but remained on his farm instead of joining the war. One night he received a tip in a bar about how he could sabotage a Union bridge. The tip was a trap by Union soldiers designed to weed out confederate sympathizers.

This game translation of *Owl Creek Bridge*, besides the opening title screen and credits, has no written or spoken dialogue, so the bar section was removed; it would have been difficult to communicate this scene without the use of text, and it wasn't needed for the audience to understand the story. Though removing this flashback does obfuscate Payton's origin, the player gleans enough through the visuals of the bridge scene, which invites them to explore and speculate, invest in the narrative, sort of like a reader of the story has to speculate on the visuals.

Prose fiction and videogames are both infinitely open in similar, yet opposite, ways. Even with a linear plot, a videogame player can choose to sit still for hours or rush through. Each journey plays out slightly differently. Yet, written fiction is just as open. Perhaps not temporarily, as the characters will always take the same course of action. But visually, written fiction overflows with as many possibilities as there are readers. When we read the words "old man in robes" each of us pulls from an individual knowledge of old men and robes. We each think of our own version of this old man in robes. Each slightly different, yet similar.

It feels easier to ignore syndicated works as bizarre chimeras of plot and objectives. But we should pay attention to how these games rely on other media.

Someone once told me: “It’s safe to take in the best and the worst media, the gray stuff in the middle is what you should watch out for.” And sometimes we just want to relax: throw on a hoodie and sweats. Crash on the couch, soak in some cultural filler. Perhaps dust off the old PS1 and boot up the last game we left in the system. “Hello Harry, remember me? I’m Ginny.”



# Rothko & Abstract Architectures

*By Claris Cyarron*

What's it like, being in the room with a Rothko painting?

Whenever I speak about Mark Rothko, one of my favourite painters, it always comes down to an attempt to describe this sensation; it doesn't matter if I'm talking to a believer or the uninitiated. It makes sense considering that, above all else, this was what the abstract artist was supposedly after—forever chasing the dream of an artistic approach that could reach anyone. A way of painting that did not rely on the viewer's ability to read symbols, understand myths, or even recognise objects on the canvas as representations of something else. In their ambiguity, these paintings are filled with possibility.

*"I'm interested only in expressing basic human emotions tragedy, ecstasy, doom and so on...The people who weep before my pictures are having the same religious experience as I had when I painted them."*

The "multiform" paintings, which Rothko began to produce in 1946, were his signature style. They featured vaguely rectilinear forms arranged along the canvas according to an implied grid, usually vertically. You can enter the room, or open a Google image search, and see right away the shape, the form, the structure of the works. That's how they get their names: *White Center*, *Light Red Over Black*, *Black on Maroon*.

And these forms are always cloudy, always wooly—that's what makes them work. The misty texture draws you in, and it looks as though there is a light shining from the other side. These are massive paintings, often more than 7 feet tall, sucked onto the wall like some kind of strange alien creature, or unknowable device. They seem to breathe, to quiver, to seethe; they roil like an ocean, but an ocean of you-know-not-what. You aren't even sure you want to know, but it occurs to you that you are now standing a few feet away. While you were thinking, your feet moved seemingly on their own, as if you were entranced. But that's impossible. They're just fields of color.

You are now 12 inches away from the canvas, the ideal distance according to Rothko. The painting looms over you like a massive figure - the bouncer of your own inner sanctum. After his suicide, many of Rothko's works were consolidated and placed in rooms together according to the artist's demanding standards. The others in the room loom just as menacingly. You can feel their presence even without looking, and feel as if you are shrinking as a result.

You can't quite make out what the haze at the left edge reminds you of, but you feel deeply...burdened by your consciousness. The edge conditions of his paintings set the stage for the dramas of everyday life in ways that a kitchen, or a hospital, or a post office could. In those fuzzy boundaries we can travel to a fight with a lover, the birth of a child, the death of a parent, war, greed, the height of glory, a pit of despair, any and all in between. It is a possibility space fully charged with emotion. A portal into your own mind. An engine with you at its heart.

And then, before you can go any further, before

you *dare* go further, you take notice of the crowd gathering behind you, and politely step aside. The trance is broken. You consider taking a seat at the bench in the center of the hall, but you think better of it, and walk quickly out of the room.

My first experience coming face to face with a Rothko painting was along these lines. Art historian Simon Schama, in his BBC program *The Power of Art*, also described strange spatial and transportive qualities when recounting his own first encounter with Rothko's work:

*"It was like, going into a cinema—expectation in the dimness ... I felt pulled through those black lines into some mysterious place in the universe. Rothko said his painting begins an unknown adventure into an unknown space. I wasn't sure where I was being taken, I wasn't even sure if I wanted to go. I only knew that I had no choice."*<sup>21</sup>

There's an experiential quality to Rothko's work that not only defies solid description, but also lends itself to the same kind of confessional criticism that became known in the games scene as *New Games Journalism*. There's something about "the journey" that is crucial to understanding the work—how you come "face to face" with the image, and where the painting takes you afterwards. There is absolutely no substitute for *Being There*.

Further, there are spatial qualities to Rothko's work that sets it apart from that of his colour-field contemporaries. Rothko was deeply interested in architecture, specifically the conversation produced between the gallery space and his works. He was notorious for having extremely demanding expectations on the gallery space his work would be displayed in. Rothko famously backed out of the

extremely lucrative 1958 Seagram's Mural project over concerns with the architecture, and when he later gifted the murals to the Tate gallery, it was on condition that they construct a room to house them that would finally satisfy his specifications.

As a long time (and proud) New Yorker, it is likely that the city's modernist grid and monolithic International-Style skyscrapers served as an inspiration for the rectangular nature of Rothko's "multiforms." Many times throughout the final decade of his career he endeavoured to create spaces in the traditional sense of the word, working side-by-side with interior designers and architects, and sometimes doing the interior design work himself. Of course, he also created space in a less conventional way, from the moment he picked up his paintbrush.

Recently, I have come across several games that carry many aspects of Rothko's work, from disembodiment, to death, from abstract architectures, to explorations on the space of the mind: *Forska*, *Condor*, and *A Cosmic Forest*. All of these games, despite each being heavily invested in exploring movement in interesting ways, also offer up fascinating still shots that are often similarly portal-like and inwardly contemplative.

\* \* \* \* \*

The first thing I noticed about *Forska* was the way you can simply move around the game's landscape at will, and how very congruous this was with the idea of being in a space of the mind. Movement in the game is as simple as clicking on the landscape where you would like to go, and then, voila! You are there. If there ever was a journey from your previous location to the new, it was edited out of your experience. The result is not unlike *Myst*, but

in that game each mouse click yielded a set distance and a slight loading time. The act of travelling far still felt arduous in some way, but here the strain of movement has been completely removed, and without any other means of a more embodied movement (like a jump button), there's not really much reason to think that the player has been granted a body at all. The removal of symbols of physical embodiment is a hallmark of all three of these games. In the realms of Rothko's paintings, there was no room for figurative notions of flesh either. There's blood but never a body.

Divorced from your corpse, movement is both highly specific and also very loose in *Forska*. It's difficult to be precise, in the same way that one has limited control over a daydream.

Perhaps the most fascinating peculiarity of *Forska* is how the player relates to time. To jump forward in time, all you have to do is press the spacebar. With each press, you instantaneously jump another pre-determined increment of time forward into the future. Functionally, this makes it easier to see each vista exactly as you would like, and to quickly comprehend how its appearance changes over time, but it also further speaks to the fleshless existence enjoyed by the player here. When the player isn't hopping ahead, time progresses at what would be a normal rate for a videogame (that is to say, still much faster than normal).

It's worth noting, however, that this method of time-travel is arduous in exactly the same way that *Myst*'s movement is and that this puts the way the player moves spatially and temporally into dissonance. The player's mastery of time is unequal to their mastery of space. Perhaps this speaks plainly to the fact that we are far more spatially capable beings than we are temporally.

To me this small artifact unpacks into an unpleasant thought: that although we might like to escape from time's tyranny, we lack both the means and the minds for it. And while this isn't necessarily something that Rothko sought directly to address, it is certainly up his alley, so to speak.

In a way, this makes *Forska* an evolution or at least an iteration on the themes that Rothko wanted to address. Although Rothko's work can certainly make the viewer aware of time, and even help them travel through it to the past or a possible future, the nature of the paintings precludes the kind of commentary that is allowed for in *Forksa*.

*“By directly staining the canvas with many thin washes of pigment and paying particular attention to the edges where the fields interact, he achieved the effect of light radiating from the image itself. This technique suited Rothko’s metaphysical aims: to offer painting as a doorway into purely spiritual realms, making it as immaterial and evocative as music.”*<sup>2</sup>

Dotted around the landscape are also portals that transport you between “worlds.” These are eerily similar to Rothko's portal-like murals. Maybe instead of Rothko, the game was taking took its cues from *Myst*, which features close-in shots of doorways that serve as “confirmation” screens. All of these murals were painted with reds, purples, and blacks, the colours that dominated Rothko's final years, and the same colours that the *Forskan* portals emanate. And the way you face the portals—the view right before you click to signal your intention to cross—is claustrophobically close. Like Rothko's, these portals are intimidating, imposing objects. They loom over you, beaming out colours most often associated with danger.

With no instruction given as to what exactly they are, or where they will take you, crossing their threshold is an uncomfortable leap of faith.

The worlds themselves are imprecise, unnamed, simply designated numbers with their distinct qualities only known through direct experience. They are all islands, in the same way that the “multiforms” are all paintings, but both share the quality of being inhabitable places. The forms in *Forksa* are fuzzy and vague, but not entirely similar to Rothko's. There's more a sense of impressionism at play in the algorithmically produced strokes, whereas Rothko's work abandoned short, sharp marks for phantasmal ones.

Some of these worlds in *Forska* are snow-covered, while others enjoy a more tropical palate, others still are mountainous, yet all of these worlds are most like Rothko's work at night, during the witching hour. It is in the dimness, under purple skies and gray shores, and with a glowing pink-red portal nearby, that the spirit of Rothko is strongest.

*A Cosmic Forest* is an abstract field of coloured rods presented with no expectations that the viewer can or will correctly parse their ‘meaning’. Figurative Meaning is only injected into the game via the title, which encourages a reading of the rods as some kind of tree, and the environment as some kind of forest landscape.

*“One thing about A Cosmic Forest is that for the first 10 seconds or so, it’s difficult to tell that you’re in a 3D space. It just feels like are colours moving by across the screen. And it’s interesting to play a game that doesn’t allow you to have a full understanding of where you are initially”*<sup>3</sup>

There have been attempts to read Rothko's "multiform" paintings as landscapes—abstractions of places. Rothko stated to his daughter on a train journey across North America that he was inspired by the landscape and colours of the southwest, particularly New Mexico. However these interpretations have been rejected by his family and those closest to him and his work. I myself enjoy the idea that Rothko's paintings are landscapes, but not in the abstract—I like imagining them as realistic renderings of strange worlds yet unknown to us. *A Cosmic Forest* is such a landscape.

The game's developer, Titouan Millet, weighed in on the meaning and narrative he wanted to express through the game in an Arcade Review interview (back in issue #1). He spoke at length that his primary aim to create a space that would be pleasant, "initially it wasn't about making a First Person Shooter, it was about making a Forest about colours—a path of light and colours in motion." But he also explained that there is a "hidden ending" of the game, which requires the player to find, free, and guide a black entity in the Forest to a white entity.

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

Examining *A Cosmic Forest* reveals interesting ideas about constructing and presenting highly abstract spaces that, like Rothko's work, must be experienced to be truly understood. The way you

move is like pushing a bead curtain aside forever. The 'walls' formed by vertical bands of colour forever fold away for you. There you are, inside an idea, and then you push against the membrane of the moment, and like any good dreamscape, it constantly yields, again parting itself as a curtain would. This is a game foregrounds any digital materiality, and so the space is hung on a logic completely alien to our physical existence, and yet like any screen media, it still must be experienced with the same senses and sensibilities that we turn to more "conventional" spaces. This makes for a dissonance this is every bit as mesmerising as the ambiguous forms of a Rothko painting. *A Cosmic Forest* offers up a kind of architecture that plays by different rules, smearing itself across a flat surface, playing with notions of motion, form, and colour.

I sometimes see Rothko immaturely compared to a Magic Eye picture, and I can understand the observation. Rothko's are painted in such a way as to appear in constant motion, morphing and changing depending on circumstance, and a viewer is often unsure of what to make of them initially. But Magic Eye pictures come from a long tradition of images that have specifically embedded authorial intent. Unlike a Magic Eye image, which gives up its meaning to the viewer for only having enough patience, the significance of a Rothko originates only from the viewer themselves. *A Cosmic Forest* also raises questions about the nature and role of "meaning" in games.

*"A Cosmic Forest is pretty big game for me, it heavily informs my understanding of how first person games work. One of the things it tells me is that games don't necessarily need detailed plots, or rigid narrative structures to create interesting experiences."*

From my vantage point as a narrative designer as well as an art historian, games have an interesting relationship to meaning. It is so often either everything or nothing. The idea that games can have meaning but not have that meaning designated by an auteur is a relatively novel, if not unthinkable, concept in game design. And yet, there was Rothko, 60 years ago, putting forth exactly that.

*Condor* is a disorienting, dizzying affair, but one that I truly love. It is a slow and methodical experience. "The Dark Souls of first person platformers circa 2001,"<sup>4</sup> according to the game's developer, Connor Sherlock. Highly abstract spaces, yet legible, edge-conditions made uncertain with depth coming from the darkness.

The central premise is this: you are a cyborg who has been tasked with hacking nodes and traversing a vertiginous cyberpunk skyline. You have augmented legs, a jetpack, and a stealth suit. In having these modifications, you have also functionally lost many of the videogame hallmarks of embodiment, though unlike in *Forska*, you can still grab sick air by pressing the spacebar. Thanks to "diversionary acts of cyber-terrorism" you will not encounter anyone else. The central challenge of the game lies in your ability to gauge spans and leap death-defying distances between buildings as you wayfind to the next glowing, golden checkpoint.

While still more representational than the fields of colour employed by Rothko, Sherlock did elect to use only basic geometries in the construction of his cityscape. Here too, it is colour—arranged into rectilinear bands and blocks—that creates the tone and casts the magic spell.

Like Rothko's works, the uncertainty and ambiguity

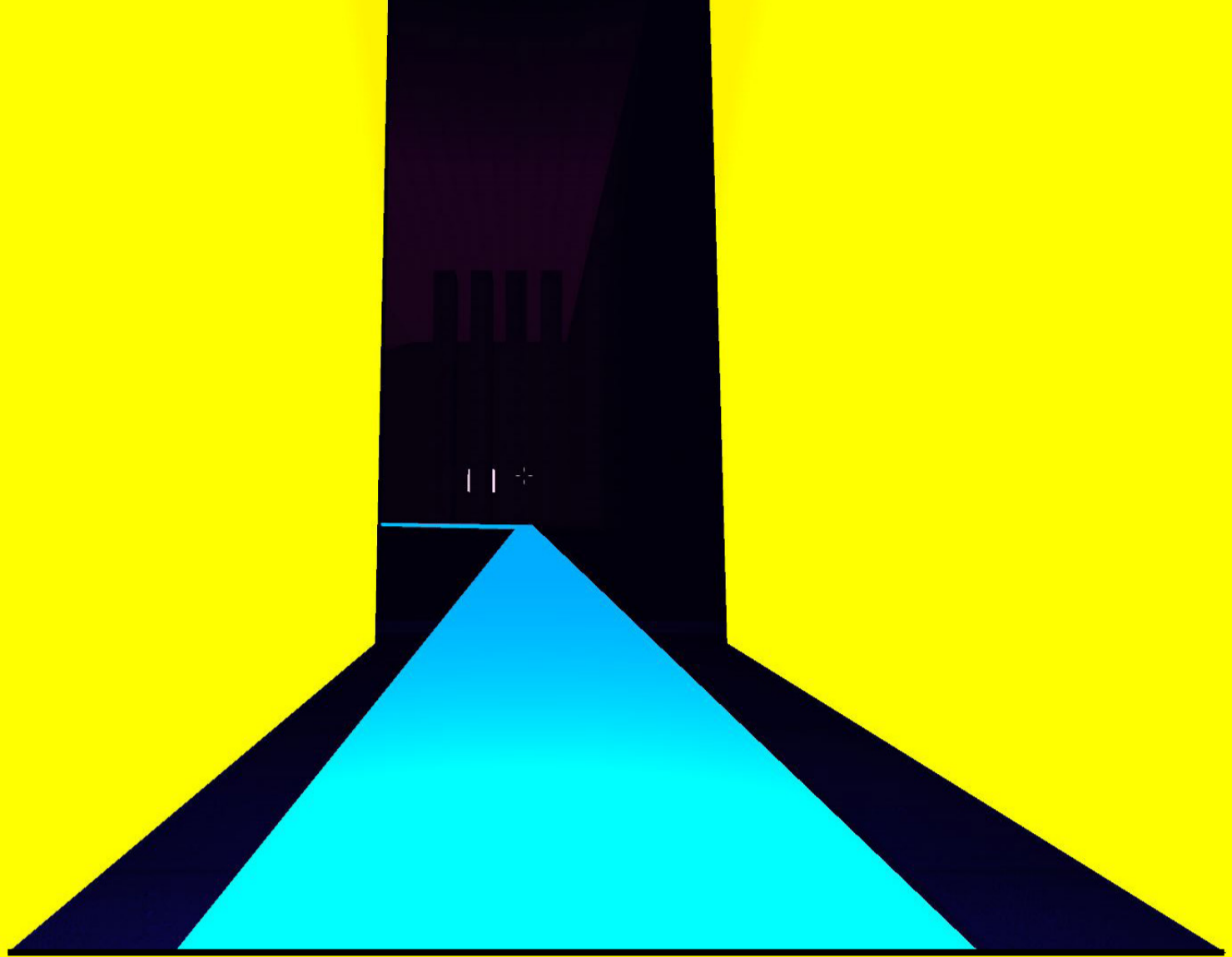
derived from abstraction allows the observer to impose their own reading and interpretation on what is being presented, and to make their own decisions as to the emotional components of any given scene.

The views and vistas—set-ups to strange three-dimensional geometries—is so much the point of this game, despite the player's given mission. The journey is the act of punching through each one of them as you run along your allotted path. In this way, the game is not unlike a gallery designed by the artist, with similar ambitions to Rothko.

There are dreamlike qualities to the movement here as well thanks to your trans-human abilities. You can run forever, with the camera bobbing along dutifully, but once you leap off each building and take flight, you are more "flying consciousness" and less "person with a body."

"Death" comes often, whether from a mistimed jump or a botched landing, but it does not come quickly. You just fall and fall and fall. However, yours is a fleshless death in *Condor*. There is no splat at the end of your journey. There is no zzzzap to signify that you have respawned. Is this a redo? Did you merely dream your past failures? This further makes for a fevered, disorientating, disembodied affair.

Often when you "die" in the game, you will be looking longingly upwards. The game trains you never to look down because down is death. Its camera moves in the direction you are looking, even if it is upward or downward, so the jump key offers a huge boost but looking down at an inopportune moment means cancelling your momentum. Another of Sherlock's games, *TRIHAYBFEFYH*, also uses the camera controls to signify death and fear;



with each thunderclap in the game, the camera jerks downward and quakes. When you respawn in *Condor*, you will regularly find yourself still looking up, still struggling against the gravitational forces that killed you moments earlier. Unsure of what is up and down, straining skyward in fear—in this way death offers vantage points.

Rothko's final pieces are housed in the Rothko Chapel in Houston Texas. The chapel is a stunning fusion of Rothko's art and architecture, exuding the themes he was obsessed with in his darkest days. These are works preoccupied with spirituality and death, and the architecture of the chapel is reminiscent of one of Rothko's favourite places: The Laurentian Library in Florence, Michelangelo's evil-minded masterpiece.

*"[Michelangelo] achieved just the kind of feeling I'm after - he makes the viewers feel that they are trapped in a room where all the doors and windows are bricked up, so that all they can do is butt their heads for ever against the wall."*<sup>5</sup>

I believe there is a lot of significance in Sherlock's summary of *Condor* as "The Dark Souls of First Person Platformers." Dark Souls is a game that is obsessed with death, with challenge, and endeavour. Through its difficulty it hosts a conversation about trial, triumph, limitation, darkness, and the human spirit. Each obstacle is a metaphorical (and sometimes literal) wall, thick and imposing, that must nonetheless be traversed. Rothko wanted his audience to feel trapped and to butt their heads against a wall forever. Dark Souls and *Condor* not only expect the same, they expect you to break through.

Like Rothko's final pieces, *Condor* is also preoccupied with Death and Finality. It shares a colour palette with many of Rothko's last paintings: purples, reds, blacks, blues. It is a game concerned with traversals, with the quality of the journey, and with the question of where we are ultimately all headed and what we will lose getting there.

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**A  
Conversation  
with  
Andi McClure**

Edited by Zolani Stewart



**Andi McClure** is an artist, a game maker, and a software engineer hailing from San Jose, California. Along with Michael Brough, she was nominated for receiving a Nuovo Award for their game BE A GREAT ARTIST IN JUST 10 SECONDS from the Independent Games Festival last year. I spoke with Andi about her long trail of work in experimental digital art and videogames, her history as a creator, and her future as a game maker and software developer.

You can play nearly all of Andi's works discussed here on her website, at [runhello.com](http://runhello.com).

**Zolani Stewart:** Andi, last time we talked, you were working in software. Is that still true?

**Andi McClure:** Yes, have a day job writing software in the corporate tech space, I have been doing that for about ten years now.

**Zolani:** I'm asking because, I'm wondering how videogames become something you started putting time into

**Andi:** Well, for playing, this has just been something i've done on and off for years, I was super into video games when I was five or six, I lost interest around the Playstation era, I got back into them around the Gamecube era, I started losing interest again at some point and then discovering "indie games" kindled it again for a while. I keep getting bored with what the medium is doing and then fucking off until someone figures out something to do that will interest me again. I'm actually not sure playing video games is all that relevant to my practice of making them though.

**Zolani:** What is relevant to your practice of making them?

**Andi:** Basically, I just have this constant need to be making things. If I'm not making things then I keep getting these ideas for Art Things and then it just sort of itches until I try to make it happen. And I spent a really long time trying to find some kind of artistic medium I could work in and express myself in. For a really long time this was music.

**Zolani:** What kind of music did you make?

**Andi:** (A zillion years ago in the sixth/seventh grade I did actually try to make various games and silly useless software programs that were basically games, but let's leave aside that). So basically right after I graduated high school I started making weird little

electronic music. A couple friends of mine had made bedroom indie rock music with 4-track tape recorders and "fruityloops" during high school, and i'd found that really inspiring. Ever since that time I'd been really into music that was really concerned with like... timbre, and the way things sound, and sometimes just trying to make beautiful noises rather than thinking about rhythm or melody at all, "ambient" or something. So I started making music like that. And this was when I kind of... at the time, what I felt I was skilled with was, I knew how to write software. And I felt like writing software could be a creative act. And I think I have this pattern of kind of, whatever medium I'm working in, I try to do it by writing software that will do the thing I want. Because that's the skill I have, and because software is creative to me. So the music I wrote, I would write very small sound generator programs. And then I would make sound collages out of the noises my sound generators made. And I did this for like... about six or seven years, actually. And very little of that is left over

**Zolani:** It's always through compiled code? Through an IDE screen?

**Andi:** Um, not necessarily! So like, the music I'm proudest of is still the music I made that one summer after high school. At the time I didn't know how to write audio software. But in old versions of Linux there was this thing called "/dev/audio" and it meant that you could like... if there was a program printing something at the command line, you could direct its output to /dev/audio, and instead of the text being printed to the screen, it would be interpreted as 11 khz 8-bit  $\mu$ -law encoded audio and played out through the speakers, and I didn't know anything about audio engineering at the time, I didn't know what 11 khz  $\mu$ -law audio was or anything but, I knew how to write things that could print out characters at the Linux command line, and I knew how to pipe them into /dev/audio. So I would just... play with things. I would

put random files into the speakers. Or I would write programs that wrote different sequences of numbers and I would just see what they sounded like. And this was the command line, and in Linux you can like "pipe" things, at the command line? Like, the output of one program becomes the input of another, so I'd like, write a little c program that printed numbers, and then I'd pipe that into a little perl program that took the numbers and modified them, and pipe that into *another* program, and that into /dev/audio, and I just experimented until it sounded like... something, without really knowing what it was.

And it was GREAT, I was just... I was exploring this bizarre space by linking together my little perl scripts like legos and finding all these strange noises I could make, and then i'd record it and like, sometimes i'd sort of try to adjust it to be a more normal song.

Like, i'd play bass or some other instrument on top of it, i'd let the noises lead and i'd play more conventional music that seemed to align with the music the noises were suggesting. It was a really wonderful feeling, and that feeling of exploring was enough to keep this interesting for like seven years even though basically nobody was hearing any of this music, except me, and my friends from high school I sent stuff to.

**Zolani:** Did it ever go further than that?

**Andi:** Well, it just sort of petered out. I had a couple attempts to make more structured audio programs, so that instead of making music i'd make like an audio tool that other people could use to make their own music.

**Zolani:** I assume then another wave would come around in the next few years, being videogames.

**Andi:** Well, what happened was that the point I started getting frustrated was like... so there were two things that frustrated me, one was that I was writing things and I couldn't figure out a way to get an audience for it. We didn't have soundcloud or whatever back then.the other was that I was sort of...the entire time I was making music, I never felt like the things I was creating were coming out the way they were in my head.

**Zolani:** When was this?

**Andi:** Oh, this was something like 2006 or 2007. 2007 I guess. So I'd have these ideas for songs, and then I'd try to make them happen and it just... it wouldn't be the same once I'd made it, or it would be way less interesting than some piece of accidental audio I'd made along the way. And I was **happy** that so much of my work was great in an accidental way, I liked having that sense of chaos in there, but I wanted to have the ability to make something on purpose if I wanted.

So I started trying to find something else I could work on. I tried making little web apps for a while. And then like... there were two random projects that lead me into video games. One was that I was trying to make a musical instrument based on the Wiimote. The Wii had just come out, and it was possible to connect the Wiimote to a computer using Bluetooth. And there was some code online that let you do this. So I made this little theremin thing that made tones controlled by how you were holding the wiimote in the air. **[Link]**

**Zolani:** wow!

**Andi:** And I had this bigger idea, that I could make a little sampler program that used the input to control various things about how a sound was being played back. That never got finished, and the most interesting thing from it (still) is a bug that happened when I accidentally set it to play a sequenced drum loop at negative BPM. **[Link]**

Also somewhere about that time, I'd like... someone had sent me this really hard romhack called Kazio Mario World, where the only way to play it was to constantly be rewinding every few seconds, and I became kind of obsessed with it, and I was thinking a lot about like... you play through each second of the level many many times, and I wanted to see what it would look like if all of those different playbacks were visible at once.

**Zolani:** AND THEN JUMPMAN!

**Andi:** Yeah!

So I sat down and I hacked snes9x to make the video I had in my head, and I wrote this inane thing about pop physics to go with it **[Link]**, but like, after that was done, I was like...wow, that was \*easy\*, and i'd recently played Jason Rohrer's *Passage*, and at some point I'd taken it apart sort of? and been startled how simple

it was, like, the level format was just a TGA image file, the music was actually a TGA image also and I was like, well, maybe I could make a game and it would not be that hard. And so that became Jumpman, basically, thinking about Kazio Mario World, and wanting to make a game that used the Wiimote. Jumpman was designed from day one with the idea I was eventually gonna hook up the Wiimote code I had to do the gravity controls. And then I just never got around to that part (until I made the iPhone version and added tilt controls, which didn't work as well as I'd hoped).

But, basically, all it took to get me locked on to the form was to make one video game. Because, like... well, I'd tried to make games before, but I guess before 2008 I just didn't have enough knowledge about coding to make games in the way I wanted to make them. But what happened was, I got to the end of Jumpman, and like... Jumpman started with a little drawing on a post-it note, and when it was done, if you go to like, level five, you basically see exactly what was on that post-it note, and then I posted it, and people responded really well to it. And suddenly I had both of the things I'd felt were missing in making art: one, I had made something and it came out the same way I'd intended in my head. And two, I actually had an audience all of a sudden. So basically I just diverted all of my creative energy there

**Zolani:** Where did that audience come from?

**Andi:** tigsources

**Zolani:** mm

**Andi:** Everything in Indie was centered around Tigsources at that time. It was a much more readable site then, and there weren't alternate channels anyway.

So I got on the front page of tigsources, and then somehow inexplicably it got on the front page of boingboing, and then somehow it got on frigging Andrew Sullivan's blog?? Still confused by that one.

**Zolani:** hahah

**Andi:** I KNOW RIGHT? It's especially funny because the first thing posted on the blog that I originally posted Jumpman on, the very first post has an extended segment just blasting Sullivan and basically calling him a fraud. I thought I wanted to write about

politics then.

**Zolani:** Well it's nice to know even back then he was a fraud.

**Andi:** I think what helped Jumpman spread was I made a really really catchy demo video. So it got a lot of blog posts embedding the video (because that was how info spread on the internet then, forums and blogs).

Anyway, I think I had this idea, ok, well, nobody wants to listen to my music, but I'll switch over to video games, and then I can embed the music in my video games, and people will incidentally wind up listening to my music that way. And it seemed like a really natural fit because like, the kind of music I made was highly procedural, but procedural music can be a lot less interesting when you just record it because the mechanism that generates the music becomes hidden that way, but in a game, the mechanism of the music can be partially embedded in the game mechanics itself. And I really liked that idea, especially because most of the music I'd made were like, little loops that only seem interesting for 20 to 60 seconds so if I had that audio coming out of something in the game world, they'd be propelled to the next thing automatically by the player's actions. Anyway this was a plan, but somehow all the games I made especially at first have wound up having really simplistic audio compared to the music I was making before games, because I get so distracted on all of the game bits that I don't have time to put effort in the music. Also I keep having trouble finding a platform where it is easy to code audio gentsh at was sorta what drove me off from polycode anyway.

I guess the more I got into games or "something like games" the more it seemed like the art form I really wanted to be working in.

**Zolani:** \*nods\*

**Andi:** Because it's naturally fit with wanting to make systems that incidentally create other forms of art, and the medium is flexible enough to encompass any one other thing I might want to do (like tell a story).

**Zolani:** So this makes a lot of sense, when we come into something like Sun Sets, right?

**Andi:** yeah!

**Zolani:** Basically what I'd like to do now is sort of... move through some games I think are pillar in your huge catalog. And Sun Sets is one of those games for me. It was the first thing from you I ever played, back in 2013, when I was just starting to get into this small games thing, way before The Arcade Review. I feel like, Sun Sets really captures that sense of music from software, it feels like a real culmination of everything you've been trying to do up to that point, from what you've been telling me. Would you agree with that?

**Andi:** I do feel that way, I feel like everything I want to make happen in a video game comes together in Sun Sets.

**Zolani:** Yeah, it's great

**Andi:** I'd made a series of games over that last year kind of moving away from recognizable game forms ( the games that wound up in "Sweet Nothings" ) and that is probably still my favorite. Did you ever play the mods? I made some mods that added color.

**Zolani:** Yes, I did! I think I helped you test them. The thing about Sun Sets for me, is how it captures your sense for music through software, but it manages to establish a really interesting subtext.

**Andi:** haha

**Zolani:** Last time we talked of the game I told you it felt like the thing a TV sees before it dies.

**Andi:** That is a cool interpretation. I like making things that feel open enough to give a lot of different interpretations. The thing that's interesting to me in Sun Sets is the structure of the configuration space.

**Zolani:** What do you mean?

**Andi:** Oh, um, sorry, that's jargony I guess. So there's basically four things you can change in Sun Sets. Ignoring the text. You can move the cursor X and Y, and you can change those two graphics parameters, and Sun Sets is basically this eternally running system that will generate a different-looking image depending on how those four values are set, or it will sort of pick a kind of image and a kind of sound and it will

keep doing that based on the four values.

**Zolani:** Right

**Andi:** So what's interesting to me is like... it's like those four parameters are like a four dimensional space you are moving around in. And you're exploring and trying to find little "places" inside this space that feel interesting.

**Zolani:** Yes. Sun sets is a lot more than its screen boundary.

**Andi:** And it's sort of... a lot of the ways you can configure things don't look like much, but there's several distinct places that are kind of interesting. And usually when you play it I feel like you're sort of moving along a series of points that each feel interesting.

**Zolani:** It's pretty heavily implied there are things going on beyond your vision.

**Andi:** Like it's a maze without walls, only paths that you can tell if you're on them or not because when you go off them it stops being interesting. I think the screen in Sun Sets is giving you a view into some other kind of thing... anyway configuration space is this idea from AI/robotics research, the idea is that a "dimension" in a space is another word for describing a degree of freedom, so if you have some sort of a mechanism, like a set of gears or a robot arm, then you can imagine a space where each degree of freedom you have is a dimension in that space. And then you can imagine shapes in the space, that correspond to like, combinations of parameters (i.e. combinations of ways you can use your degree of freedom) that are impossible, or possible, or good or bad. And you do this in robotics because you can designate a particular point in the space as your "goal", and then you can path, find on the space to find a way of moving your robotic joints that get you to that goal without hitting a "wall" (usually moving your robot limbs in an impossible way).

**Zolani:** But here it's literal, or that idea is pretty clearly represented as such.

**Andi:** It feels literal because you're using the literal arrow keys to move around in it. But it's still a little... you still have to sort of use imagination to visualize the space because two of the axes you're moving on are

literal (moving the cursor around), and two of them are sort of conceptual. But I really really like... what I \*hope\* is that when you play it, you get some sort of sense of that four-dimensional space, even though not all the dimensions are literal. And I think that like if I tried to explain this configuration space idea to someone it would come off as dry and mathy and I'd not be able to explain it clearly enough because I'd assume knowledge about jargon, and they wouldn't get it. But I can show someone Sun Sets, and they can play around in the space, and maybe they'll understand the idea even if they couldn't articulate it? I have a couple games that try to do something like that.

**Zolani:** Because it's something that responds to you, it feels intuitive, and the images are evocative.

**Andi:** \*nodnod\*

**Zolani:** I think the thing about Sun Sets for me is, it implies something beyond regular 2-style dimension because of how it fucks with representation. I'm kind of all about abstraction/representation and images, and the weird mix between a harsh black, a static, which implies to me that there is something there but it is blank, as opposed to a void, placing this really loud Caps text on it, it's really conceptual in a really flamboyant way.

**Andi:** That is really cool!

**Zolani:** It asks you to think about images and space in ways most games don't.

**Andi:** The aesthetics were actually sort of put together in a random/intuitive way, I can't brag that I was doing anything very sophisticated there on purpose :) I definitely want to create visuals that create spaces for people to imagine things. And there's definitely a few kinds of image I like to return to, and some specific choices I keep making again and again that are designed to suggest things and give people room to fill in their own borders... maybe borders isn't the right word.

**Zolani:** No I think it makes sense, these games create boundaries, right?

**Andi:** Sure. The kind of math I really like is very good at suggesting shapes that can't quite be described

using the space we're used to. And I like finding ways to put forward things that let you feel you understand the outlines of one of those shapes.

**Zolani:** Always giving you the chance to set something up, look at those controls, and there's something about Sun Sets that's also very... I'm not going to say distant, but it doesn't seem to make loud assertions, it seems to just exist on its own. But what I've realized playing your games (because I know they can be thought of as toys, and I know you've used the term before) is that Sun Sets and onward, I'm always seeing a heavy subtext. These games give you the space to imagine ideas but it's still pushing very challenging images. It's definitely asserting itself in some way, even if it's giving you space for interpretation.

**Andi:** What subtext do you see?

**Zolani:** Well Sun Sets is really tonally weird, right? It kind of has that flickering sound to it, like a wind chime, so it feels pretty, but then this wave of static comes in that's very loud and kind of intimidating. These games are kind of beautiful but always a bit scary, in how they push images and sounds you don't understand.

**Andi:** Yeah

**Zolani:** And the idea of static itself really communicates deadness to me. Sun Sets feels alive but it is ultimately dead. It moves and shifts around like a screen but all that comes out are instructable aesthetics, it's a bit dark. And that darkness, and this is just me, but I feel like I see that in a lot of your work. Not grimdark, but, something a bit more sober. But SS is also a toy! So you can play that without even thinking of it, but Responsibilities is different.

**Andi:** haha, okay. I like these interpretations

**Zolani:** I'm glad!

**Andi:** It's always... it's very weird to be working in abstraction, because you never are really sure what the thing you're making is going to mean by the time it gets into the audience's head. Like, even less so than other art.

Anyway, before I say anything about Responsibilities, I'm curious how you were intending to introduce it?

**Zolani:** Well I study abstract art a lot, and you're trying to see certain things, look for tics and specific ideas, so to me your stuff definitely isn't a wild random object. But I'm def an outlitter, this is all I do, hahah.

With Responsibilites, coming from Sun Sets, it is definitely clear there's some very purposeful imagery. I assume that's mostly on Liz Ryserson's part? Can you tell me a bit of how you got to working together, and how that worked?

**Andi:** So, my position about Responsibilities, is that Responsibilities is a Liz Ryerson game that I happened to do the programming on.

**Zolani:** right

**Andi:** That was a very intentional thing about how we set up that collaboration. There was some extent to which collaborating with me guided her decisions, because there were limitations imposed by what I could or couldn't do. But all the decisions were hers. The design was hers, the art is hers (except for one sprite a third party made, and a couple sprites taken from Stone Soup), the music is hers and the levels are all designed by her. (Stone Soup is a creative commons sprite set, I used it for mockups before Liz's art was in and a couple of the sprites stayed in because they seemed funny.)

I think I was the one who originally approached her about the project—it was a Ludum Dare, and around that time I was trying to use the Ludum Dare jam as an opportunity for collaborations, which is something I kept doing for a couple years and it worked really well, my collaboration with Porpentine came out of that process and so did GREAT ARTIST, but she'd contributed music to my projects me once or twice and I really liked her work and I was curious what she'd do if she was working outside one of the "gamemaker" type of tools.

**Zolani:** \*nods\*

**Andi:** I think I was hoping she'd be free to make something more mechanically complex if she had a dedicated programmer on a project, but I think I ultimately held her back more than I helped!

Repsonsibilities is pretty mechanically simple whereas Problem Attic which Liz made herself in Stencyl is

very mechanically complex. Anyway, I started talking to her about that, and she said she'd been thinking a lot about isometric view games and wanted to make something with that. So I threw together an isometric engine (on the Id jam you're allowed to use premade code to a greater degree than the compo), and we talked about ideas for games. Unfortunately I barely got the isometric engine working by the time Responsibilities was done :) so she had these fairly complex mechanical ideas, but by the time the compo started the engine wasn't quite finished so she designed a game around what the engine was able to do. Actually, most of the design in the game was molded around bugs in the original engine! Like, she designed puzzles around navigating a space despite bugs in the camera system, or designed environments around bugs in the display code, and so then eventually I get my batch of stuff done, and i'm like "ok i'm going to fix these bugs now", and she's like "NO NO THEY'RE THE ENTIRE FOCUS OF THE GAME".

**Zolani:** LOL

**Andi:** Anyway it is a pretty minimal game but I think you can definitely see an aesthetic line from it to problem attic

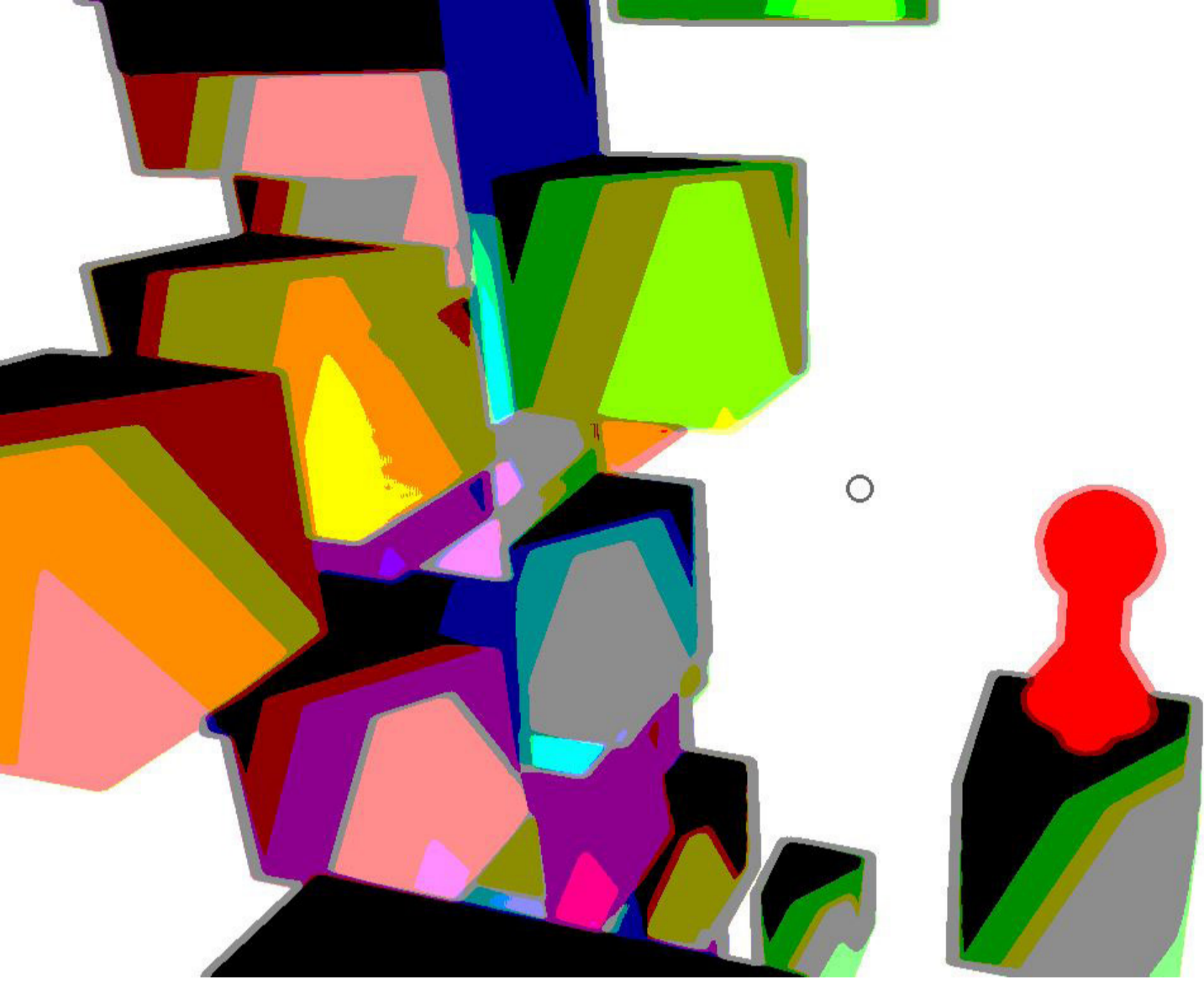
**Zolani:** From what I understand the game is designated as not finished and I assume that's why

**Andi:** Heh, there was an extended version that was planned, but it didn't ever get finished. A couple of the environments she made after the game was done were pretty amazing. One of them (the unused levels) is the thumbnail on runhello dot com.

**Zolani:** Was there anything about that process you feel like is worth noting? Is there anything you took away from it?

**Andi:** Well, it was... from my perspective just as a coder, it was a pretty important project, because it was the first time I'd ever tried to work with another human. And it made me realize just how much my process was bound up with the idiosyncracities of my own head.

**Zolani:** How did you reconcile this idea that you usually try to write software that puts out your own expectations? Now it's not your head you're trying get onto the screen but someone else's



**Andi:** I mean, the first version of the editor I designed was still way totally based around understanding the engine to an unreasonable degree and the weird workflow that seemed sensible to me. So that kinda forced me to think a lot harder about like... I \*do\* have aspirations to write creative tools, and I do have aspirations to make game making tools, so fucking up so hard at writing a simple level editor made me reevaluate a bunch of stuff. And once liz pushed me into making a more capable level editor, the parts of it wound up being adaptable in certain ways in future projects and it made those projects better. Um, I think that's all.

**Zolani:** Do you want to take a bit of a break? We've been talking for a while. There are only a few more games I'd like to talk about

**Andi:** k! i'll be here

\* \* \* \*

**Zolani:** So the next game I'd like to talk about, is *Four Shades of Grey*. I played it again, last night. It's really terrifying, huh? It's very intimidating.

**Andi:** hahaha, thank you!

**Zolani:** No Problem! But seriously, it feels like again

you've moved up a step in.. getting your head onto the screen. Grey feels very blunt. You're just flashed from place to place and point to point and it's kind of intense, for something that really isn't pushing you to do anything.

**Andi:** I think I was trying to play around with my style more by the time I got to 4SOG

**Zolani:** It feels a bit harsher than your earlier stuff. And obviously, now finally there's dialogue text, right? There's an explicit context to what's going on.

**Andi:** I \*do\* try to have a certain amount of consistency in my visual style, and I think that was starting to feel limiting, and I was also kind of... I was frustrated that I wasn't making things that \*said\* anything. A lot of my work is very cerebral or mathy and a couple of the games around that time were intentional attempts to push back against that for a bit. Dunno if it succeed.

**Zolani:** I think you did. This is the point where I noticed a real shift.

**Andi:** And yeah 4SOG was... I think I was feeling kind of unusually indifferent to the player on that one >\_>

**Zolani:** And so is this character, right?

**Andi:** The final level maybe actually breaks what would otherwise be my design guidelines a bit. In that it's really just \*punishing\*, I usually try not to do that. I think I kind of am pushing you in the fourth level to just give up and leave her alone.

**Zolani:** Does that gender feel obvious to you?

**Andi:** well.

**Zolani:** That you would just put out a "her" without thought? I mean, it was to me

**Andi:** I don't want to impose an interpretation that overwrites anyone else's. But my interpretation is that the "chess piece" is a she. She was very specifically designed to suggest the female restroom symbol, and of course the way the player interacts with the chess piece feels very gendered.

**Zolani:** In that we pursue her, right?

**Andi:** Well, or specifically that it's implied the pursuit is repeated despite being understood to be unwelcomed, which implies a sort of privilege that feels very masculine in nature (although the power dynamic certainly can happen with configurations other than one male and one female), I don't know.

**Zolani:** No you're right! We're sort of placed in this position to constantly assert ourselves onto the space. It's a very.. dude way of existing.

**Andi:** I've never been sure how I feel about the politics in that one, just because like... you know you actually wound up guiding the design of that one to a certain extent? You, Zolani, I mean. Because overall the game does something I sometimes don't like in other contexts, like, the thing of trying to criticize a thing while the game itself is participating in it, the whole Braid/Line thing.

**Zolani:** It's hard for me to feel like this game is a Spec Ops, but how you're implicated in the space is such a bind though, right?

**Andi:** Well, what I mean it was trying not to be.. because I did make it right after The Line came out and a lot of people were criticizing this thing where it, or to a greater extent that one Spec Ops with the rus-

sian airport mission, where the game would literally force you into a thing and then shame you for it. And somebody, I think it was you, was at some point going on this twitter rant about the subtle things those games do to... they're trying to make the player complicit, but it winds up being a sort of entrapment.

**Zolani:** Right, the critique becomes superficial

**Andi:** And there was some discussion I remember seeing and I walked away thinking about like... the way games reward behavior are really subtle. And especially, I feel like, the primary way games reward you is to give you more game. So like, you can imagine a game with a morality system, and it does one thing if you do the "right" thing and another thing if you do the "wrong" thing. And they usually try to "punish" you in a story sense for the "wrong" thing, but they're really, really rewarding you in that way by taking the "wrong" path, because usually what happens in the story doesn't affect \*you\*. It affects your character. as for you, \*any story\* is reward. Because you want story. You paid \$60 for it.

And that's... kind of terrifying? From a designer's perspective, I mean? if you want to put something in a game but have it be disadvantaged you can't, because in some sense responding in \*any way at all\* to the player is a reward. I was trying to think how to get out of that trap and it seemed really hard, and while I was thinking about Braid, which is like... so 4SOG does this thing where it indulges the trope of a woman being a flagpole at the end of a level, I had just played Super Mario 3D Land, and it \*literally does this\*. The final level is you get one of those flagpoles like from Mario 1, and Peach is \*literally tied to it\*

**Zolani:** Jeez

**Andi:** It literally conflates the damsel-in-distress and end-of-level-flagpole symbols into a \*single in game object\*, it's amazing in its horrible obliviousness. Also some pretty good ropework but let's not get into that... anyway, by comparison, the woman (if she's a woman) in 4SOG looks very much literally like a flagpole. Braid meanwhile did this thing where it openly tries to criticize the idea of the Princess as an end-of-game reward. But it like... it doesn't escape it? It just \*does\* it, and then it comments on it.

I don't know if you've finished braid but like... the mes-



sage of the final level is supposed to be that this princess you've been pursuing is not just a prize at the end of the level, that she's a person with her own inner life. But literally, mechanically, in the game, she *\*is\** a literal success point. At the end of the level, you get to her, and then you get the little cinematic that communicates you shouldn't have done that. The final level is really really cool and the message it wants to put out is neat, but it still is kind of complicatedly broken from a message standpoint, and most of why has to do with writing or mechanical decisions Blow made way earlier in making the game.

Like one problem with the Braid approach is that like... the movie *Her* did the same thing? The message is that the male protagonist has a limited view and that the female object of desire has an inner life he should have respected.

**Zolani:** Yeah! I liked that movie (in my very straight dude way).

**Andi:** It was a really amazing movie, I had a lot of feelings about it. But then the work itself is told solely from that male protagonist's limited view. The work states the female object of desire has an inner life, but you never see it.

(*Her* is better about this than Braid). So they want you to take her seriously as an individual, but they refuse to flesh her out enough to make that possible. Anyway, 4SOG was my attempt to take all these lines of thought and see if there was a way to do these things right? And you mentioned it being kind of... prickly in certain ways, or not doing much to guide the player.

**Zolani:** I think it guide the player pretty well, but it's tone is very offputting.

**Andi:** And I think that feeling was the result of me contorting in various weird ways to avoid endorsing what the player is doing.

**Zolani:** yes!

**Andi:** So like, I don't want to reward you for doing this "wrong" thing I've lead you into by giving you content. So I don't do anything to make progressing rewarding. You just end with that black screen. It's kind of a cheap cop out I guess to say "and my artistic gesture was... I did less work!", but I did do some specific

things with the presentation to try to make that final moment seem like you're specifically being cut off rather than just I ran out of game there. And the chess piece... she doesn't get an inner life exactly, you don't get to see what's happening in her world. But, the one thing she does get is she gets to be assertive. I tried to give a sense she had agency. So even if she is, in a literal mechanical sense, a literal flagpole-shaped object at the end of a game level, she knows this and she is *\*very intently pushing back against this\**. Actively resisting the game she's contained in. And I really did hope it would wind up being an illustration, in this tiny jam-game-scope game, of how to do the Spec Ops Line thing without going wrong. I did worry a lot afterward that I was also just doing the thing I criticized, but, I dunno, this was the game I'd made ^\_^;

**Zolani:** So, yes there's this woman object that doesn't want you around her. She asserts herself in her rejection of *\*your\** assertion into her space. For a woman to say No, right? No as an assertive act. But I think.. it seems to me the space itself is hostile to you. It seems this world is hostile to you, and doesn't want you there just as the woman doesn't. And you *\*feel\** it! You feel that you're in the wrong place, and you're going ahead anyway, but there's an unsettling vibe about how the game, and the space is not welcoming to you

**Andi:** Maybe! The game is not very clear about what the spaces are.

After I'd played it a few times I started to feel like the aesthetic/layout particulars of the levels imply them to be certain spaces. Like a street, or an office building, or a nightclub. Which seems to imply things about how the player is behaving in that space.

**Zolani:** Well in my mind its the harsh shading, the repetition in the shapes that makes it very freaky looking. I jumped a few times doing a quick turn.

**Andi:** *\*nod\** Maybe I just make harsh spaces :D but, I think it would work to suggest the harshness is somehow imposed by the player character's state of mind.that this is the filter they are seeing the world through. And maybe they understand what they are doing is wrong, but they keep doing it, forcing themselves forward through a performativity of toxic masculinity that takes active work to sustain.

**Zolani:** I want to say that I don't think it's your job to make the player have some moral epiphany, I think the game itself speaks to an idea that is coherent.

**Andi:** Definitely the game is not going to make you feel good about what you are doing.

**Zolani:** It's not superficial, right? It's not Braid because braid says one thing in its diegetic context and its rep. on screen, and says another with its structure and how its positioning you in that structure.

**Andi:** Sure! And even if it was my job, I'd probably make the game I was going to make even if doing so is "wrong." But it's still interesting to me to analyze these things. That's the intent, yeah.

**Zolani:** So that dissonance isn't there, Blow's understanding of these things is caught between wanting to (smugly) say something but also having values that perpetuate the marginalization of women in these narratives, right? Puzzle and skill mastery, we run around and collect keys and open things, this is what we're taught to value for hours and you can't just switch around like "op wait now you have to care about a person." That's why it comes off as superficial to me.

**Andi:** Yeah, and probably the story still works— he definitely has more space to make his argument, whereas I'm making this tiny minimalist thing you can finish in four minutes. But there is something broken there, and I was trying to see if one could avoid that.

**Zolani:** So I would say you succeeded in at least making a game that exists in a conscious way, I can't say you have in the sense that this will make people feel the things you may want them to feel, because I don't know if you can control that.

**Andi:** I actually really like Braid. I at one time was looking into modding it, and I figured out how you could swap in the princess as a playable character, I wanted to make a level segment starring her.

**Zolani:** Oh that would have been nice

**Andi:** I don't know if I had a very good sense of what that mod was going to try to say, though. either way, I never did it. i'm not really all that good at

working in level editors and such. my medium is code  
^\_^

**Zolani:** Is there anything else you'd like to note with FSoG?

**Andi:** I think we've covered it pretty heavily!

**Zolani:** So, I think this is a good point to head into *He Never Showed Up*. That was for datejam, right? It was the jam organized by... Pauli Kohberger?

**Andi:** Yeah! I feel like this one is very of a piece with 4SOG.

**Zolani:** So this is, in terms of just surface stuff, this is the most explicit story you've told, right? Like here is where you're really putting out real, identifiable people in identifiable places. I'm wondering how it is you got to the point where you felt like this was a turn you wanted to go into.

**Andi:** I think it was just a reaction to the work that came immediately before it. I'd been doing a bunch of stuff that was all of a very particular type, and it had been nice but I didn't want to get into too rigid of a pattern. So I intentionally tried to do the opposite for a while. That was also the summer I did a lot of stuff with Twine, I think again sort of very far away from my comfort zone. I also... I guess, I don't know whether to talk about this but I do think it is significant that that was right about the time that my gender transition was sort of starting to feel real.

**Zolani:** Can I ask when you started transitioning?

**Andi:** I don't... I don't actually \*remember\*, exactly. It's a little hard to line things up because things happened later in my work life than in my personal life.

**Zolani:** Right

**Andi:** It's also really hard to because the point at which it "started" could be said to have happened anywhere over the span of a year or a quarter or more. And in the games space it... I think I actually went to GDC "as me" nearly a year before I was doing it in other social spaces.

**Zolani:** My assumption was that it's understood as starting when you start undergoing real medical



changes? As in, taking hormone medications?

**Andi:** I think most trans people would not agree with that way of constructing it.

**Zolani:** Yes, ok.

**Andi:** One problem with framing it that way is it suggests someone isn't "really" a woman (if we're talking about a transwoman) until she starts medical steps, etc. Sometimes one thing I do to make things simpler is to talk about "social transition" and "medical transition" as different things.

**Zolani:** Right

**Andi:** But there's one specific moment I think of as when transition "began", and to me that mostly was about the point at which I started thinking of myself as a woman rather than a crossdresser or a gender-queer person as I had before that. i.e., I think of transition for me as having started at the point when I had a definite intent to transition. And, I guess, I think of that as being linked to a very specific moment in time, actually I can think of a specific day it happened, but I think i'd prefer not to put those specific dates in a public space like this.

**Zolani:** Of course.

**Andi:** One thing i'll say is I can see very clearly the way that my transition changed the way that I interacted with people in game space and also the work I was doing. Like, I like abstraction, but there's some extent to which at a certain stage in my life I was using abstraction as a way of hiding myself. My online avatar would be, like, a rectangle or something. When I was making games I'd make works where any characters were nonrepresentational in a way that let me hide things.

**Zolani:** I remember that

**Andi:** Like, there was one game I made early on, uh, *You Don't Fit*, which was originally \*about\* gender / body dysphoria stuff, where the mechanics were supposed to kind of represent this feeling of having a body that isn't compatible with the world around you. It was actually very specifically trying to put into game form this feeling I got from like, wearing a girly T i'd just gotten and it not working with my shoulders at all. And the fact the main character was just a \*box\* let me say that without saying it. Because saying it outright was scary. It turned out to be a good deci-

sion because maybe the idea was a little bit literal or facile, and also I couldn't really get the mood I wanted to come across in the game, so since I hadn't committed to that being the meaning, I could just drop that meaning and it became a game about something more general.

Anyway, I had these defense mechanisms, and I think to some extent they lead me to make art that was in some sense distant from myself.

**Zolani:** So *He Never Showed Up* was a pretty good sign.

**Andi:** By the point I got to *He Never Showed Up* I was kind of starting to feel aware of these things I just described, and by that point I had out as a woman in the indie community for some time, and I was out to my parents and to my work, and I felt like... I felt like I understood my own self enough to put my own self in work. But I felt like I hadn't necessarily been doing that, so I just made an intentional decision to the extent of literally making an autobiographical game >\_>, which HNSU was. I never actually got stood up in the rain, but I had a relationship with a dude which the story in the game is meant to represent.

**Zolani:** Nothing wrong with autobiographical haha! It's one of the better ones I've played in my experience, for what that's worth.

**Andi:** I *really* like HNSU, I am proud of it in a lot of ways. The art was a challenge, I was definitely pushing myself and things didn't work out *exactly* the way I wanted... I'd originally intended for the protagonist to be more gender ambiguous and for both of the characters to be more ethnically ambiguous. But I did get across what I wanted in the character design, which was that the protagonist's emotional state is really externalized in her look and her posture, so I'm really happy about that.

**Zolani:** I think that may be the most important thing for me, you're putting together some really clear visual set-ups where we immediately understand what's happening. I really appreciate how the game sort of folds in on itself, how you were able to create these clear representations, and then break it in order to push something very important about how this character was feeling.

**Andi:** Something I really like is how carefully aligned the representation... breakage, I guess, is with video-game tropes

**Zolani:** Is it?

**Andi:** Well, I feel like you could imagine some game where the hammer attack does something resembling what it does in this game. But certainly not that. Like you could imagine a puzzle game where you're smashing blocks to rearrange things in a certain way, but that isn't happening, she's just destroying stuff. I guess it feels like something that *could* have been in a video game, but it doesn't feel like a video game mechanic here, it feels like it's there to move along something about the story.

**Zolani:** And it means something here too. It feels like it matters

**Andi:** Yeah but it doesn't feel... constructive. I like this one because in some respects it's like *Sun Sets* or some of the other games in that mold, it's just a sandbox in which you manipulate a system, except here the system means something, narratively and emotionally, and there's a specific definable 'goal' which is something i've never really been sure if I can even make happen--to keep those exploringdrifting feelings from my "toy" games but harness them toward some specific end. And then communicate something on top of that. It's not the game most of the people who play my stuff single out as important but it's one of the ones I try to evangelize because I like it personally so much ^\_^

**Zolani:** It not being constructive kind of lays down the complete anger of this character. It's lashing out, right? Like a punching a wall. But what I love is how we're able to both see what she wants to do, and what she can't. That if she could she would take the whole sky down! But seeing her back in the rain shows how helpless she really is, how much she actually isn't capable of affecting the world around her.

**Andi:** Yeah, haha. I just love how absentminded the destruction is. Like she just keeps that vaguely zoned out look on her face the whole time, like this isn't even her outwardly fuming, just staring into nothingness and in her head imagining everything evaporating.

**Zolani:** mhm

**Andi:** Feeling hopeless

**Zolani:** She doesn't know what to do with herself. Like what am I even here for?

**Andi:** And when she destroys the source of her irritation she doesn't seem to know why she did that, either, it doesn't mean anything to her.

**Zolani:** Yeah so I'm not sure it helped her, like i'm not sure it was really a release.

**Andi:** It wasn't.

**Zolani:** And that's a good reflection of how anger works. It becomes an urge, you fill it but it doesn't make you feel better, it doesn't put you in a better place. I also know this first hand, as you know probably.

Is there anything else you want to note with the game?

**Andi:** The story I was trying to represent there was that there was this guy I dated for like, a year and a half, and he just never became emotionally available, we had the awkward first date like four or five times over, where i'm just like um is he even going to touch me or anything? And then he just doesn't.

**Zolani:** Hrm

**Andi:** He kept expressing desire but then freezing up when we were actually together. There was some weird sexuality things going on there, my gender was still in flux at that point and I think he was afraid actually opening up or doing anything with me would make him ~~gaay~~

**Zolani:** ah

**Andi:** But overall it was just like... a lot of wasted energy, put into someone who never reciprocated, and there was a lot of frustration from that, and all of that was emotion I had to just swallow. I never threw it back at him, none of it went anywhere

**Zolani:** That's awful, that really weighs you down

**Andi:** Eventually I just gave up on him. Nothing came of it and nothing was learned, except "don't date

straight boys", I guess.

**Zolani:** hahah

**Andi:** That may not actually be a healthy lesson

**Zolani:** It's your choice! I respect it.

**Andi:** I am finding it to be a good operating rule for the time being. Anyway, I think that's all about that game.

**Zolani:** yeah, ok! That's great

\* \* \* \*

**Zolani:** Now.. at this point, especially with this game, I'm noticing these harsh vibes, right? And then you put out, *You Will Die Alone At Sea* which, I mean... like now we're in kind of deep in this hole, or at least I am feeling like I'm in this hole of where you're at artistically, at this point.

**Andi:** haha, like I said, I think maybe I just make harsh things ^\_^ . In this hole?

**Zolani:** A low emotional point

**Andi:** No, I don't think so! I think the last 15 years have been a low emotional point for me ^\_^ . The ACTUAL low emotional point was 2014-2015, which you can tell because I haven't released many, or any games in that timeframe.

...geez, was actually He Never Showed Up and You Will Die At Sea the same \*year\*? I must have worked in three different engines that year.. anyway, if you're noticing a harsher tone in the 2013 games, I don't think that specifically reflects my life but is more just that I'm gradually getting more technical skill as an artist by that point, and i'm able to put emotional spins on things at all by then.

**Zolani:** Was Die Alone just a project you wanted to put out? Is there anything particular about it?

**Andi:** It was a Ludum Dare game. It was literally, like... it literally just happened in the last 48 hours of the Ludum Dare game jam. I originally was going to collaborate with someone particular that LD, but then that fell through. And we'd discussed vaguely the idea of

making something that looked Virtual-Boy ish. And I just happened to have this image that popped into my head of a boat floating on an ocean. So I was like "i want to make that real".

Actually most of my Ludum Dare projects have been like that! I usually do some engine fixup work in the couple weeks ahead of a Ludum Dare so that I can maybe make some thing I'm vaguely thinking about, but like, usually the day before the LD, or the evening the LD starts, I just latch on to some particular image or snippet of imagery that seems interesting to me, and then I push toward that.

**Zolani:** I like that

**Andi:** Breathe, Die alone at sea and Super Fungus Attack all worked that way. Breathe was the game that eventually got hollowed out to make Sun Sets. Ludum Dare was really important to me. I did every single LD for like ten or eleven in a row. The one a couple weeks ago was the first one I skipped since 2011. But the last two I did were like... Super Fungus Attack I really did just give up halfway through and not do most of what I intended to do with it because I wasn't feeling it, and Electric Organ never actually got released. Electric Organ was a collaboration with Loren Schmidt, it was really cool but at the very last instant we ran into packaging issues and we couldn't compile it in a way that it worked on anyone's computers except our own.

Anyway, the whole Ludum Dare thing was really useful as a way of teaching me to make games over short timeframes or on really compact ideas. In the case of Die Alone it was, I want to make you feel alone and lost and helpless on a giant angry ocean. Die Alone is really very much just sort of a single mental image in executable form. I'm pretty happy with it and there's some sense in which it feels like my "last" conventional game, because after that I only made art programs, and then I started on Emily.

**Zolani:** Can we talk about some of those art programs? Icosa and ARTIST? I'll be honest, they never really captured me, at least ARTIST, but it's also probably the most successful project you worked on, which says a lot about me! Why do you think ARTIST got as much attention as it did?

**Andi:** So I think that one's easy, ARTIST got attention

because it has the social element. The process of using ARTIST means making things, and then you're inspired to show those things to people. And that creates this loop where it draws more people in to look at the thing. I could make this perfect gem-like experience of a game, but people would play it once and forget it, and maybe a couple blog posts would get written but that's the end of it. Something like ARTIST is inherently evergreen because the stuff that's made with it endures, or because stuff gets built on top of it, it's just as interesting to someone who discovered it a year ago as just noticed it. I think also ARTIST is really pretty accessible and it has a good inviting structure to it, which definitely doesn't hurt. It also has a depth to it, I think, which can help keep it alive. You can use it for a long time and still be finding new and weird things. Almost every time Liz Ryerson goes back to the program she seems to discover a new technique I had not been aware of before.

**Zolani:** We have a review of ARTIST in this issue's Arcade Review where Ansh Patel, one of our staff writers, talks about how it really muddies up the line between what we want to make in our heads and how we get it onto the screen.

**Andi:** Yeah, that's one thing I do like about it. It kind of takes a lot of the things I feel about art and the creative process and sort of... it forces other people to walk through the creative process the way I do.

As an exploration, I think I mentioned earlier that like... especially used to when I made music, my work relied a lot on accidents, and I was happiest when I was in a zone where anything I made was a collaboration between me and the machine. The machine had a willpower to it, so did i, and we eventually found a compromise between what I wanted and what it wanted. I think most people make art that way, to some extent, but I don't think they really think about it that way. ARTIST foregrounds that in the creative process.

**Zolani:** What does it mean to you, when you say it's "accessible"?

**Andi:** As far as "accessible" goes... you kind of can't \*not\* make something with it? Button-mashing is a totally acceptable approach, and fucking up never feels frustrating or dissatisfying. Like, literally, all you have to do to play it is keep pressing keys. Compare this to Icosa, which like... if we think about that "con-

figuration space" idea I mentioned in the context of Sun Sets, the "paths" in the configuration space which are interesting are a lot narrower and a lot easier to fall off of. You can get "lost" in Icosa. You can just leave the icosahedron and point the camera away from it, and possibly never find it again. Icosa needs a reset button.

But almost all of the configuration space of ARTIST is interesting. There aren't really any failure states, or things that you do that feel "wrong" afterward. There's a COUPLE configurations you can get the board in that feel, like... homogenous. Like, it's really easy to get the pile-of-sand image or a spiral. So I think if you've been playing it a while, you treat those as the states you're trying to avoid. But at the low end, those states don't feel like punishments. Because they do look interesting? Although it sort of has the failure state that if you make the screen go totally black it's hard to get out again... which did become a problem once we started trying to exhibit it.

**Zolani:** So.... that's kind of all I have for you in terms of your games! We kind of covered most of what I wanted to talk about.

**Andi:** One last thing i've noticed, especially once I started exhibiting it, is that like... if you're trying to do something, and you mess up, your natural inclination is to just mash the keyboard. BUT MASHING THE KEYBOARD IS AWESOME. The game actually rewards you for failing! And that keeps you engaged, I think, because you can never really get too upset at it, when you fuck up it gives you that little boost of look at the pretty silly spiral you made.

**Zolani:** Where are you at right now, Andi?

**Andi:** hm. What do you mean?

**Zolani:** Is videogames still something you're putting your head into? Are you looking at other things?

**Andi:** Oh, in that sense, I am taking a break from video games, and i'm not exactly sure when or if I come back to it. My current full time project is Emily, which is a programming language, and it's something I could possibly spend years on.

**Zolani:** Yes, I've been hearing about it

**Andi:** But, it is a programming language i'm designing with the intent of making it a tool for making games, or building creative or game-making tools on top of it. And I \*might\* be able to get to that point pretty soon! I'm very close to adding C integration, which is technically all I need to do simple game work in it. But there was a thing where... around the time that I spent a year and I only made art tools plus the mysterious lost project with Loren, I was kind of starting to lose faith in games as a medium.

**Zolani:** \*nods\*

**Andi:** I was starting to see a lot of inherent problems with the medium, and I wasn't sure I could use it to say the things I wanted to say, and if I DID say those things I was afraid it would seem facile because of the literalism inherent in communicating things through mechanics, and just in general the process of making games was feeling more and more frustrating. Even just mechanically, I wasted... I spent a lot of time on getting controller support working right in Icosa, and it never did work with some devices. There was an entire game in there that was sort of a bridge between my art programs and my Sweet Nothings games, it was like a two player art program, never figured out how to make it make sense, and I was starting to feel like I wanted to make something \*very\* different or distant from what i'd been doing. So that became Emily.

**Zolani:** right

**Andi:** And then I found the gamemaking process was getting frustrating until, halfway through the ludum dare where I made Super Fungus Attack, I realized I just didn't want to do it at all anymore. It just wasn't rewarding, and the Emily project \*did\* seem rewarding and I felt inspired on it.

At first I thought this was like when I got frustrated with music and moved to games, and I thought this might just be a cycle I do— like, spend five or six years making music, get disillusioned, spend five or six years making games, get disillusioned, do something else. But, I don't think that is it, because as Emily is taking shape I'm finding myself thinking a lot about the things I want to make with it, and just sort of fantasizing about projects it will enable. So I think really

my frustration is more with the mechanics of making games, I don't have any tools that feel really expressive enough that I can focus on the parts of game making I want to focus on right now. And I've said the things I can say with the tools I've previously mastered. So now I'm making my own tools, and I think once I have the sort of control I was missing in my previous projects I think I'll be able to do some REALLY interesting stuff that I can feel inspired and proud about.

(It's hard to express what I mean by "control"— it's mostly kind of subtle stuff having to do with how framebuffer buffers are managed or how audio generators are commanded)

(And C++ isn't flexible enough and Lua isn't cross-language library compatible enough for either one to let me do those things.)

(Hence Emily, which at least in theory is supposed to be maximally cross-language compatible and flexible enough you can build your own forms of expression in it.)

**Zolani:** It certainly sounds like something I'd like to try. I'm really looking forward to what you do with it, Andi.

**Andi:** Thanks!

**Zolani:** And I'm really happy that you're making steps for yourself you think are right.

**Andi:** Thank you.

**Zolani:** And I just.. one of the reasons I wanted to do this was because I know you have this huge catalog of work, and I could tell you were drifting away from gamemaking and I didn't want this work to just disappear.

**Andi:** Well I'm glad. I mean, one advantage to the way I've historically done things is that I don't actually need an audience to keep going. Because so much of my stuff is generative, I'm usually as surprised by it as anyone else.

**Zolani:** mhm

**Andi:** This is how I was able to keep going for six years doing music when I \*had\* no community... ANYWAY, I'll come back to the medium at some point, and I've got a lot of time to decide what it will look like when I do.

**Zolani:** In that sense, that would conclude our session. Thank you so much for talking with me this long! I hope this was productive for you in some way.

**Andi:** haha sure. Thank you for talking to me.



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Ice Water Games

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2. Juliano, Linzi. *DIGITAL: A LOVE STORY; BULLY; GRAND THEFT AUTO IV; PORTAL; DYS4IA*. Theatre Journal 64, no. 4 (December 2012): 595-98.
3. Graham, Beryl. *Not a show about new technology, a show about interaction*. 1996.

## *Barbetween*

Jason McIntosh

2014

[[Play it Here](#)]

1. And even if you couldn't, the poem text is recoverable from a corrupted version of the Agrippa program.
2. For a fun (if completely tangential) thought experiment, you can run a variant of the Theseus Paradox on this: say Barbetween has seen seventy visitors before the server that hosts it is struck by a small meteorite. (Thankfully, no one is hurt.) If I then stand up a new instance of Seltani (identical to the previous Seltani), replicate Barbetween exactly, and claim my Barbetween has had seventy visitors, does it really have all that history? Or am I just a lying jerk? I'd argue the former, but of course a lying jerk would do that.
3. In what might be an unreasonably weird moment of free-association, Barbetween has a surprisingly large amount in common with the gunpowder art of the Chinese artist Cai Guo-Qiang. His pyrotechnics, too, can be separated into event (what he films on camera) and artifact (calligraphic scorch marks on paper) and is concerned with the transformative and creative properties of a normally destructive medium, viz. large explosions.
4. McIntosh, Jason. *Barbetween: Design Notes*, 2015.
5. Short, Emily. *Shufflecomp's Outcast: Barbetween*, 2014.

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## **Images Used**

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Barbetween: Ian Mackenzie, *Guadirikiri Cave*

Resist: [stneishus.wordpress.com](http://stneishus.wordpress.com)

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*Our cover was designed and illustrated by Katie Rose, an artist based in Austin, Texas. You can view her work at [katierosepipkin.com](http://katierosepipkin.com). Thank You, Katie!*

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