LIMBO

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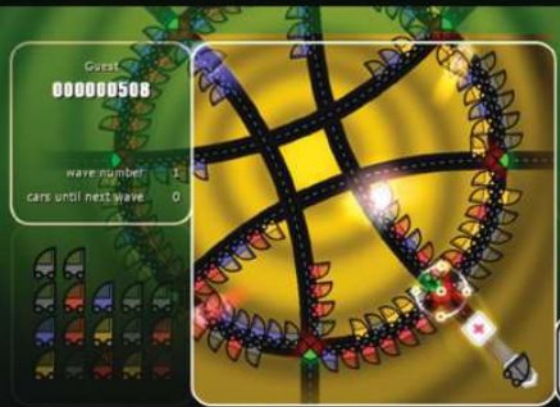
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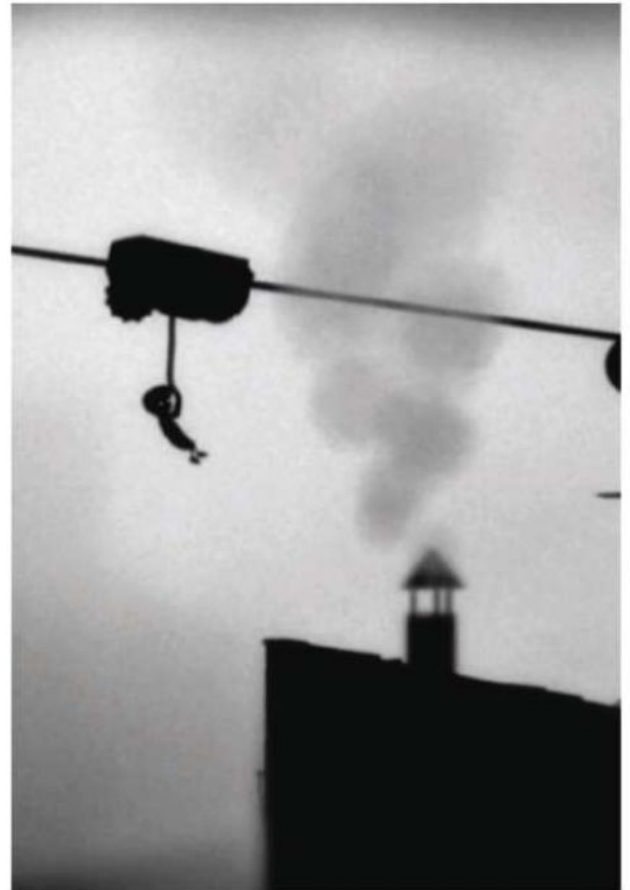
About our Reviews

We rate all of our games based on their graphics, gameplay, sound, and lasting appeal. Each category is given a score on a scale of 1-10 (10 being perfect and 1 being horrendous). The average of these scores is tallied to give each game a percentage score and grade (A thru F). Games are more than the sum of their parts, so we do adjust our average scores based on our final assessment of the game, its appeal, creativity, uniqueness, and overall value.

A: 90-100%   D: 60-69%
B: 80-89%   F: 0-59%
C: 70-79%

Beginners Guide to Indie Game Development Part 6 of 6
Marketing - It is Never Over

Don't get frustrated when your game doesn't sell thousands of copies on day one. There's a lot of Indies out there who say, "My game has been out for a week and I still have no sales!" Sometimes it's because the game is lousy, but more often than not it's because nobody knows about the game. Marketing is paramount!

We've already talked about how to build buzz for the game while you're working on it, but don't just forget about your game after you release it. Here's a few marketing essentials.

Website – This was touched on in Lesson 2, but obviously creating a website and using it to interact with customers is a no brainer, so do it.

Email Blasts – If you don't get the press to cover your game, then nobody will find it and you'll be whining about your lack of sales. After your game is done, think about your audience and target the websites, magazines, etc. that make sense to contact. My overall advice for your email is to come across as a real human being. The press is a lot more likely to actually read your email if you have a concise subject line, introduce yourself and talk about your game. The gaming press gets blasted with press releases all the time that are impersonal and corporate. You're an indie developer so use your personality to stand out from the crowd. If you don't get a response from someone about reviewing or

featuring your game, don't lose hope either. It is okay to send a follow-up email…just don't go spam crazy. Don't ask if they're interested in a review copy either; just send it!

Game Trailer – Creating a game trailer showing your game in action is a great way to garner interest and encourage downloads. Be sure to send emails out about new trailers and post the video around the net.

Social Media – Twitter, Facebook, YouTube, etc. are all great ways to interact with fans, link to your website, announce promotions, give away free copies etc. They're great marketing tools that are free to use.

Newsletter – Collect email addresses through promotions and sneak peeks at your game. Once your game is out, email these potential customers about your game release. You can email these same potential customers about future games or upcoming promotions and discounts.

Forums – Register for appropriate gaming forums and provide links to your website and game demo in your signature. Every time you post, there will be a way for readers to check out your game.

Attend Conventions – Attending IGF, GDC, PAX and other conventions are great ways to meet other game

developers and gaming press. Network and create partnerships so that you can market your game more effectively and build links and traffic to your site.
Advertising – Indies have had mixed results with paid advertising, but it's worth mentioning that there are ways to pay for web traffic. Some people have found that they can be very successful with pay-per-click and other low-cost advertising campaigns.

Don't Give Up, but Don't Go Overboard Either!
Marketing is a full time job. Instead of sending one press release when your game is finally completed, think about sending a press release announcing your game, announcing the free public beta, and then finally announcing the game's release. Continue marketing your indie title with relevant announcements about game updates and more. A good tip is to break up the monotony of marketing your game by doing only a few marketing tasks a day.

There's no magic bullet to marketing an indie game, but if you're personable and have an interesting product, you should be able to get some press coverage for your game. Marketing is an ongoing process. Stay with it and give your game time to grow.

- Mike Gnade

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Interstellar Marines - www.interstellarmarines.com - PC - Mac

Interstellar Marines is a first person shooter that's being released incrementally as chapters, each containing a little chunk of content. The first chapter served as a tech demo showing off a space ship environment, while the two most recent chapters, "Bullseye" and "Running Man", the former a shooting gallery and the latter a training course with mannequin bots, have actual gameplay. The games are more graphically intensive than you might expect from something that runs through a plugin in your browser. The graphics are at least on par with any last generation first person shooter. There are some drawbacks to the plugin model: every time you want to play the game, it seems you have to download all of the content again, which results in slightly excessive five to fifteen minute waiting times on my fairly slow DSL connection.

As for the games themselves, they're not bad. The "Bullseye" chapter is my favorite of the two. It's simple enough, familiar to anyone that's every played on of those light gun games at an arcade. You have a sub-machine gun, hit all the enemy targets, don't shoot the civilians. And very satisfying, if a little repetitive. The gun sounds and feels like it packs a punch, and the targets disintegrate into impressive sprays of shredded paper. Hits are registered with a slick display that shows the points earned and exact point of impact on the targets. It was entertaining for at least thirty minutes, probably more if you played it a few minutes at a time. There are upgrades to your gun and your reload speed and accuracy improve as you earn more points, while the difficulty of the challenges ramps up as well.

The "Running Man" game is less satisfying. You run through a bland series of training rooms with crates where faceless robots run directly towards you while you try to destroy them, while some mediocre voice acting encouraging you along the way. Combat against an AI that runs straight towards you isn't all that challenging or interesting, so it suffers a bit from that. The level and setting feels a bit generic and bland. I understand that it's a training facility, but it doesn't feel like a real place. There's not a spot of dust or grime, and no bullet holes or damage from the waves of recruits that have passed before. The download time also ran longer, so I got less value out of my time. The free part was also very short. Despite all that, it's still an impressive showing from an independent developer, and the novelty of being able to play in the browser makes it worth a try.

The developer, Zero Point Software, is using what they call a AAA indie model, where you can support them at different levels, ranging from five dollars to just unlock more "Running Man" levels to $39 for the entire planned trilogy of Interstellar Marines games when they come out. The promised feature set is impressive: dynamic open world, co-op, persistent character development, and more. I'm very interested to see where this goes. It seems to be a very promising start, and progress and updates seem steady enough - the "Running Man" chapter came out this July 2nd. Hopefully this model works out for Zero Point and they're able to keep cranking out chapters.

- Sam Combs

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5 realistic ways to make money on the App Store

The App Store has of course opened a huge market for the Indie developer to work towards. Just recently 148apps.com released findings showing that, compared to traditional media, the App Store has a much greater market share for new and unique titles than established brands.

This spells good news for gamers and Indie developers alike, but what is the more common experience on the App Store from the developer's end, and can that lend itself to allow a developer to stay afloat monetarily? Well... Having talked with many other Indies and have seen the result of many an effort, those particular results haven't looked all too appealing in the general case. Not all, obviously, but most.

There are of course many factors that can be the cause to have contributed to this, such as limiting to just the top 100 for browsing (no luck if your #101), lack of funds to burn for marketing or experienced talent, perhaps even just a poorly developed title with a bad idea. Regardless, I personally see the App Store as the modern day equivalent to the "California Gold Rush." Sure, a lot of people made a good amount of money early on, but as more and more titles flooded the market, it's now heavily over saturated.

Are you going to be able to stand out in that saturation? Do you have what it takes to duke it out with the various AA and AAA companies pushing things out to the App Store? Is there really a way to make a name for yourself on the App Store anymore?

Method 1: Use Established I.P.

One of the most exciting things that I have seen lately is the taking of previous open source Linux games, from "Battle for Wesnoth" to "Hedgewars", and porting them over for sale on the App Store. It is rather interesting, thanks to the popularity of the Linux movement and its fan base (or any base with popularity for that matter), to watch how every major iPhone publication outlet, from AppBoy to TouchArcade are dying for previews, interviews, etc.

Really, if a developer can get their hands on something for which the popularity contest has already been decided in advance, established I.P. is a sure fire way to get recognized and make it to smooth sailing on that top 100 list.

Method 2: Copy-Cat

I'm not even joking. I wish I was, but there are a number of companies who actively go out of their way to copy-cat others (and they know who they are). Keep in mind that you can't claim copyright infringement on ideas – you can only claim patent violations, granted you own the patent to that idea and have the cash to defend it in court (good luck).

Of course, copy-cats may not be the best in terms of P.R., but the App Store has spoken to a much different tune. From "Flight Control" to "Pocket God", all major million dollar successes have been copy catted by others, some with great success.

When a copy cat App can exist on the top 100 board next to the same exact App (and sometimes at a higher price for no real value other than different graphics), it's a real wonder why somebody just doesn't spend their entire time doing this... Oh wait, they do.

Method 3: Sell the Shovel

Relating back to the gold rush analogy, one proven way to make some great income, and this is nothing new in the world of software, is to contract yourself out and make something on somebody else's dime (i.e. sell the shovel). I've heard of some contractors, on the upper end, getting paid up to 150$/hour, although a more common figure I hear fluctuates between 25$/hour to 50$/hour.

Here's the thing: don't charge a fixed price (the client always wants more – charge them for it), don't charge a percentage on gross income (if it is successful they'll come back to you for updates), just build whatever and take an hourly wage from it. Let somebody else own all the risk, pay for all the marketing, and take all the money made from the six units sold in the end.

Of course, be aware that when working with a client, most of the time they will have zero software knowledge. Use this to your advantage, charge for your talents, but be aware of those who belong to the "let's re-build Facebook, but with a slightly different UI" crowd. They exist in swarms of fail.

Method 4: Reviews

If you really want to see a neat way to make some money on the App Store, take advantage of the over saturation and dying need at exposure by charging for reviews and advertising. This is just simple supply and demand at work.

Think this doesn't work? Just try taking a look at how much some key sites charge for advertising and review services (or even just the smaller gigs). Sure, some provide supposedly free reviews, but having been there done that, unless you pay them (either for advertising or some other form of bribery) don't expect a word from them unless you have the next great game.

Unluckily, trying to get a good review site up and running isn't going to land you a fancy new house or car, but, compared to only selling those six units after six+ months of intense labor, 30$ for an hour or two of work starts to look really enticing. Just ask a few developer teams who have done exactly that.

Method 5: Have cash to burn

Do I really need to say it? Yeah, I do. Having the cash to burn can buy you a great artist, good marketing, a talented programmer, etc. It is no joke, it's real. I once read about a formula that applies to all sorts of products (and couldn't upvote the original poster enough after I read it): worth = idea × implementation × marketing. Don't think it works? When is the last time you paid money for a mediocre movie that you saw advertised for on prime time T.V.? Ever look up how much it costs to advertise on those spots?

Of course, that's the world we live in. If you don't know how to play the game, you won't climb very high. Sad, but true.

-Jonathan Wolf

Carcophony - glpeas.co.uk - XBLIG

For the most part, Xbox Live's Indie Game Channel has been a bit of a disappointment. I've found it to be a tremendous chore to search through the XNA library and find a decent game amongst all the amateurish and hobbyist apps. To put it simply, Carcophony is one of the best games I've played on Xbox's Indie Game Channel thus far.

I enjoyed Carcophony primarily due to two factors. First off, Carcophony is incredibly addicting to play. The gameplay is simple and revolves around selecting and changing traffic lights to help motorists get on their jolly way. If things get too congested, you lose. Like great classics such as Tetris, failing is inevitable. Carcophony is all about frantically surviving for a few more seconds for a new high score. The game's simple design and challenging nature kept me playing despite the stress of traffic jams and impatient drivers.

The second factor that makes Carcophony so great is the fact that it's 240 MS points ($3). Unlike most of the games on Xbox Live's Indie Game Channel, Carcophony is a great value. The game features a tutorial that walks you through the basics of the game along with 5 challenging maps. The maps are unlocked as you replay levels for high scores. While playing, I found myself unlocking a new map right as I was tiring of the game. This made led me to tell myself, "One more round on the new map and then I'm done for now." After doing this with 4 of the 5 maps, I was finally able to tear myself away from the game.

The fact that the game has pleasant graphics, music and overall presentation contributed to my enjoyment, but are not spectacular on their own. With all the hokey Avatar games, controller massages, and other forgettable downloads on Xbox's indie game service, it was refreshing to play a well designed game that stuck to its simplicity without devolving into a 1-level arcade survival game. The stress of traffic and overall challenge of Carcophony may be too much for people, but I found it a great example of the potential of XBLIG. Carcophony is the only game I have ever played based on traffic jam. It's originality, challenge and execution make it quite the value at $3. It's definitely not for everyone, but hopefully it's found a nice little niche on Xbox's Indie Marketplace.

-Mike Gnade

Steve Webb
As competitive gamer and old school game enthusiast, Steve finds more joy out of his Atari 2600 and NES than new gen games. You can find Steve's scores on Twin Galaxies.

Jordan Rivas
At the start of 2010, I started JordanRivas.com as a way of getting back to writing about things I love, and sharing insight on areas often over looked in gaming, entertainment, physical health, and personal growth. Before that I worked as a sports writer, and video game reviewer, and I occasionally still do a little of both.

Stew Shearer
Stew Shearer works as a freelance writer and has worked with GamesRadar, UGO and IGN. He currently writes a gaming column at Orson Scott Card's Intergalactic Medicine Show and when he's not working spends time with his wife in their home in Vermont.

Sam Combs
Sam Combs is an aspiring game designer and student at the University of Texas at Austin.

Jonathan Wolf
Jonathan is the executive producer of the Indie group Rogue Pirate Ninja Interactive (http://www.roguepirateninja.com) and has a B.S. & M.S. in Computer Science. Reach him at johannes.von.luck@roguepirateninja.com

Mike Gnade
Mike is really frustrated that after IGM raised over $500 for charity, Kickstarter cancelled/suspended the project because it was not supporting a creative project. An Indie Magazine isn't creative? They later apologized.
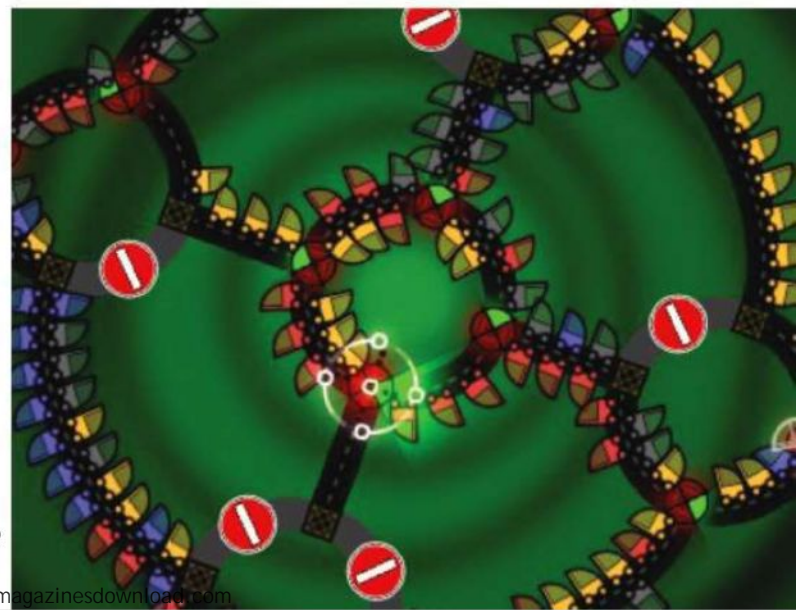
What Makes an Indie Game Indie?

Indie gaming is a growing sector of interest and popularity today. But what really makes a game indie? What does the term really mean? What's the difference between games like Braid, Castle Crashers, and Flower?

It's a slippery slope trying to define indie gaming since there is a lot of discord in the game-making community. Some developers think that to be truly independent, you have to be creating artistic experiments with mechanics that have never been experienced before. Others think it's a mindset where you're not letting money, marketing, and big business cloud the vision for your game.

I'm not going to try and come up with a definition. Instead of trying to pigeonhole a wealth of titles that are incredibly artistic, let's talk about a few games: what makes them different and why they are (or aren't) indie.

The Game
Modern Warfare 2

Why it's not indie: Let's start out with an easy one. Clearly Modern Warfare 2 is not an indie game just like Transformers 2 is not an independent film. An immense team of people at Infinity Ward developed MW2. Activision Blizzard, a huge, publicly traded publisher, owns the studio and paid for all the funding, salaries, and marketing for the game upfront.

WSA2 Tarantula IFV

6 Grenades

HEALTH 199

The Game
Shadow Complex

Why we're getting closer: The game is a digital download for Xbox Live Arcade and was made by a small team at Chair Entertainment who published and developed the indie title Undertow.

Why it's not indie: Epic Games (Gears of War, Unreal, etc.) acquired Chair in May 2008. They funded and oversaw Shadow Complex's production and release.

The Game flower

What makes it an indie game:
If you've played Flower, you've experienced its artistry and uniqueness. The experimental gameplay mechanics, storytelling, and concept are all very unique and capture the indie spirit. Beyond "feeling" indie and being a digital download, Flower was designed by the small independently owned studio, thatgamecompany, whose members are very involved in the Independent Games Festival.

Why some may argue it's not indie:
thatgamecompany has a direct relationship with Sony and Santa Monica Studios as their games have only appeared on the Playstation Network. Sony does not own thatgamecompany, however.

The Game Castle Crashers

Why indies are jealous: It's one of the biggest hits on Xbox Live Arcade and has made developer The Behemoth a ton of cash (it has sold over 1.5 million copies). The Behemoth was founded by four people -- among them were Tom Fulp and Dan Paladin of Newgrounds fame -- and has always seemed well funded.

What makes them indie: Their first title, Alien Hominid, was completely funded by the four founders via mortgaging their houses, cashing in 401Ks, liquidating savings accounts, and taking on second jobs. They ended up working with a publisher to get the original game onto GameCube but saw real success with its release on XBLA. Castle Crashers was also completely self-funded and published by The Behemoth and was featured and won awards at the Indie Game Festival.

Why some may still argue they're not indie: They're too corporate -- a weak argument for sure but still something I've heard. Also, XBLA is evolving into a platform where substantial capital is needed for certification and publishing, making it harder for indies. The Behemoth's success means that their team doesn't share the plight of other indie developers.

Why indies are jealous: Braid created a lot of buzz for indie games. It was a critical darling, receiving tons of incredible reviews and awards from the mainstream gaming press.

Why it's indie: One guy coded and designed Braid: Jonathan Blow. He recruited and hired help for the art and music, but Blow supplied nearly everything else (including the estimated $250,000 of development costs). The game was the creative vision of one man -- completely unencumbered by corporate influences.

The Game
Gratuitous Space Battles

Why it's really indie:

Like Braid, GSB was coded and designed by just one guy. Cliff Harris (or Cliffski) of Positech Games not only funds his own projects, but he also self-publishes them on his own website, handles all the customer-support questions and emails, markets, codes his website, manages his forums, and writes his own blog. Positech Games is a one-man shop that embodies the work, risk, and effort it takes to be an indie developer.

Hopefully after reading about these games and studios, your interest in the field is piqued, and you've started to develop your own opinion about what makes something "indie."

- Mike Gnade

11

LIMBO

www.limbogame.org - XBLA

Limbo is a fantastic game with gorgeous visuals, but it falls just short of greatness.

Limbo has been in the works for years. I think I first saw a video trailer popup on its website back in 2006. Playdead used the trailer to secure funding for the game and then spent years polishing their game and bringing it to Xbox Live Arcade. Limbo picked up a lot of awards before it was released from the IGF, E3 and more but the question remains: Does it deliver on the critical acclaim and hype?

Not quite. On the one hand, Limbo is a well-crafted puzzle platformer with unprecedented ambiance and a unique monochrome art style. This originality and polish add up to a great game, whose minor flaws and missed opportunities make it fall short of excellence.

The description of Limbo in the Xbox Marketplace reads, "Uncertain of his Sister's Fate, a Boy enters LIMBO." That sentence is about as much storytelling as you will get through the entire game. Limbo's storytelling is all done through its visuals and ambient audio track. The manner in which the player is thrust right into the game is certainly unconventional; I have to admit that I have been well trained to expect an opening tutorial level, but after a quick pause to look at the simple controls I was ready to explore Limbo's realm.

Limbo is a haunting place. The lack of information leaves the player to project their own interpretations into the game. Different religions and people have their own dispositions and beliefs about what to expect from Limbo/Purgatory. In the game, Limbo is an ominous and malevolent place with giant insects, traps, murderous children, and other dangers. It is a gray and foreboding shade of the real world.

The world of Limbo, its black and white visuals, dangers, animations and sounds, are simply sublime. Screenshots don't do it justice and the environment of the game alone is worth

your time and money to experience. Once you get past the wow factor of the game's presentation, you are left with a solid puzzle platformer. Limbo's gameplay is nothing new and rather traditional. The player moves the boy with the left analog stick, jumps with the A button, and B is the action button. The game's controls are tight and the puzzles are really well designed.

As you progress through Limbo, the environment evolves from a haunting forest into a sterile industrial district. There's no repetition and new mechanics are introduced as you progress in the game. Discovering

Sidebar
(Warning Spoilers)

the solutions to these puzzles is fun on your first play through, but there's really no replayability other than to experience the game again or go after achievements. The variety of puzzles, challenge of the game, and it's unique and ever changing environments make Limbo a joy to play from beginning to end.

I'm not sure how big of a problem it is that the game is short, but it is. The game's length wasn't as big of a problem for me as the overall level progression. Limbo starts strong with unique creatures, a horror filled forest and gruesome children. The game and environment is gripping from the start, but as it fades into a factory and urban environment, the player is left to interact only with machines and sterile environments. The abrupt end immediately following the player's solitude left me wanting more (see sidebar). Not more puzzles, but simply more resolution.

I can't fault Limbo for its stellar graphics and moody soundtrack, but smashing through a pane of glass isn't my idea of a great way to conclude a story. Don't get me wrong, I love the vague nature of the world and stories that are open for interpretation are fantastic (Inception anyone?), but give me something! The game toys with the player worse than TV's Lost. It introduces monstrous insects and primitive children that seem pulled from Lord of the Flies. This is all great stuff, but where the hell did it go? The last half of the game is spent in a boring and lonely factory. Where did all the interesting life forms go? If we are to believe that Limbo is some sort of religious purgatory, why are machines and technology present?

My problem with Limbo isn't that it is open to interpretation. My problem is that all the intriguing story threads are dropped. Where'd the kids go? What other monsters lurk in Limbo? Playdead just ends their oddly beautiful game with some physics inspired puzzles and a smash of glass! I think Limbo would have been spectacular if the latter half of the game were as engaging as the beginning. How cool would it have been to introduce some color in the finale a la Schindler's List? How potent and powerful would an ending voiceover or dialogue been? I love the fact that the boy ends his journey in the same place that he began. It just sucked that the beginning was the only intriguing part of the story.

I can't help but compare Limbo to Braid. Both are indie games that feature 2D puzzle platforming and both feature unique storytelling techniques. While I prefer Limbo's visuals and sound, I found Braid to be superior in story and gameplay. Limbo really lacks gameplay innovation whereas Braid added an interesting time component. The big difference is in the payoff at the end. Braid's was spectacular and Limbo was lacking.

Limbo meticulously creates one of the most ominous and beautifully terrifying atmospheres in any video game. The game sets expectations so high from the start that its brevity and conclusion spoil an otherwise stellar gaming experience.

-Mike Gnade

REVIEW

Gameplay:	9
Graphics:	10
Sound/Music:	10
Lasting Appeal:	6

Score: 89%

Grade **B**+

Joe Danger - www.hellogames.org - PSN

Joe Danger by Hello Games is Sony's answer to Trials HD (which has sold over 1 million copies) - the only difference is that Joe Danger offers a whole lot more variety and not quite as steep of a learning curve. When you add in Joe's rich track editing features and multiplayer modes, you have one of PSN's best downloadable titles.

Joe Danger is a down-and-out stuntman trying to make a comeback. The gameplay is a mix between the aforementioned Trials HD and the old NES classic ExciteBike. You control Joe through different tracks with different objectives. The challenges range from hitting all the targets to collecting D-A-N-G-E-R to racing and brawling other motorcyclists. The level design is reminiscent of old Tony Hawk games since each track has a variety of objectives that Joe allows you to tackle in any order that you wish. Each objective awards you with stars that are used to unlock new levels and progress through the campaign. The level progression system and the ability to restart any track with the press of a button without any loading whatsoever are two of Joe's strongest features and keep the game challenging without being frustrating.

Joe Danger is a nice looking game with bright colors and vibrant colors. While I prefer the realistic and gritty visuals of Trials HD, the graphics in Joe are nothing to scoff at and fit the overall presentation and motif of the game to a t. Joe's animations are also top-notch and the menus and level select are depicted as stunt show wall posters hung up on Joe's Trailer. The fun-loving and charming presentation is further supported by catch tunes and an announcer who's "J-J-J-Jo-Jooooooeeee D-D-Da-Da-Daaaaanger!" yells embody the era and motivate the player.

Joe Danger is a highly polished product, but what really makes it one of PSN's best downloadable games is its lasting appeal and depth of features. The single player game has a ton of challenges a great variety of objectives that will offer up hours of entertainment, but Joe's longevity is truly amped up by its multiplayer features and track building and sharing functionality. Joe Danger is truly this generation's ExciteBike...only this time you can share your creations with your friends right through the internet rather than having to invite them over to your basement. My one complaint about the user created levels is that you can only send tracks to your PSN friends versus having a global database of levels at your fingertips (think Little Big Planet). Joe Danger also has a great multiplayer modes that lets you race people over Playstation Network or locally. It's great that Hello Games included local multiplayer and split-screen since nothing beats creating a level with your buds and being able to experience your track collectively.

Playstation Network does not have nearly as many games as Xbox Live Arcade, but their games seem to be (on average at least) of better quality and value even if they are fewer and farther between. Joe Danger is a shining example of what PSN can offer. The game is robust and fully featured. Joe Danger is a charming title that expertly balances its challenges so that it never gets too frustrating. You'll get more playing time out of Joe Danger for $15 than you will most $60 PS3 titles. If you own a Playstation, you really should add this game to your library. Go Joe!

- Mike Gnade

REVIEW

Gameplay:	9
Graphics:	9
Sound/Music:	9
Lasting Appeal:	10

Score: 93%

Grade A

15

Zeno Clash: Ultimate - www.zenoclash..com - Xbox Live - PC

Zeno Clash is one of the oddest games that I have played since the original Oddworld. You play as Ghat, a relatively normal looking human, who has killed Father Mother. Father Mother is this crazy looking rooster that has apparently spawned all of the weird inhabitants of Zeno Clash's world. The story really isn't important; all you need to know is that a bunch of bizarre critters are pissed and want to beat you to a pulp.

Zeno Clash other unique feature (besides the out-there art design) is the fact that it is a First Person Brawler. The majority of the gameplay revolves around punching and kicking rather than shooting. While there are some interesting weapons, the game stays focused on small arenas and brawling. There are a million first person shooters out, so it is nice that Clash offers a new spin and game mechanic. There's a good variety of moves, blocks, and counters. It's an interesting game mechanic, but it never really hooked me and the brawling became a little repetitive.

The game's biggest strength is the odd art design. The bizarre looking creatures and locations all look great on the Xbox and are pretty impressive for a downloadable title. Everything is well animated and looks good up close – which is important since you get up close and personal with your enemies quite frequently. I would describe most

of the creatures in Zeno Clash as ugly and sometimes grotesque. Like a car accident, the main draw of this game is the grotesque and disturbing visuals. It's wonderfully and completely out there. In fact the only graphical flaw is that the menus and title screen feel like an afterthought.

Zeno Clash could have better leveraged its unique art style and game mechanics. While the visuals ooze style and substance, the story is simplistic and nonsensical. The game is further hampered by its linear level design and sparse environments. There's no exploration at all. You basically follow a path forward and encounter larger 'arena' areas where you fight enemies. There's some levels that focus on shooting too where you just make your way along a path and shoot at smaller critters. This lack of freedom and variety really hurts the game.

Sound wise, Zeno Clash serves up some great effects as your fist smacks someone's jaw. The music is fine too, but the game's voice acting is amateurish. I haven't heard voice acting this bad since the first Resident Evil and the writing isn't much better.

The Xbox 'Ultimate' Edition adds in some features that definitely enhance the original title. Online or split-screen multiplayer is available and there's also a bunch of new challenge modes and

leaderboards. If unique battle system grabs you, there's a lot here to keep you busy.

Zeno Clash impresses with its odd and intriguing art design and has a fresh take with its brawler mechanics. It's a shame it gets bogged down by simplistic level design. With no story to motivate you, the game becomes somewhat of a chore.

- Mike Gnade

REVIEW

Gameplay:	8
Graphics:	9
Sound/Music:	5
Lasting Appeal:	7

Score: 75%

Grade C

16

Deadly Sin 2 - www.deadlysinstudios.com - PC

I wanted so very much to love every bit of Deadly Sin 2. For the record I am a huge fan of retro RPGs. The 16-bit era of consoles produced some of the best role-playing games ever, including several titles that modern games are still hard-pressed to live up to. Deadly Sin 2 is a 16-bit RPG in all but release date, bringing together familiar visuals and gameplay to create a fun if flawed adventure.

Deadly Sin 2's is at its core your standard turn-based RPG. Battles proceed in cycles; you pick your moves and following that the enemy counterattacks. You have four different characters in your party, each representing a different class. These are for the most part the usual mix of melee and magic fighters. Each character has its own unique set of abilities that only they can learn. No one can be a jack of all trades. This is a smart move as each character feels like a vital part of the team rather than just a replaceable cog.

What really helps differentiate the otherwise standard battle system is the addition of "threat." Threat is an additional stat that rises as each character does damage. The higher a character's threat level, the more enemies will focus their attacks on them. It's a small addition that adds a light layer of strategy to the game. For instance, mages may be able to dole out loads of damage via their spells, but doing so will bring down the wrath of every enemy on the screen. You can mediate this by using your melee fighter's special abilities to re-direct the enemy's attention. In most every RPG I've ever played my sword wielding warriors were the heavy hitters while the magic users played support. Deadly Sin 2 effectively flips this on its head.

The game also streamlines a few things that will likely sit well with fans of role-playing. The dungeon design is fairly good, but as with other random encounter based RPGs exploration can be a bit cumbersome when every few steps results in a new battle. Deadly Sin 2 solves this by positioning nodes throughout each dungeon that can be deactivated to halt the flow of monsters. If you find yourself stuck and frustrated by constant encounters, finding a node can be a godsend. That said, there are other elements that could have been done better. The inventory system can be a bit confusing initially and there is little explaining what means what. You'll need a bit of trial and error to figure it out.

Accompanying the fine gameplay are visuals that hearken directly back to the 16-bit era. The environments and sprites are a bit smoother than what you might have found on the SNES circa 1995, but they are nonetheless decidedly retro. The game world, in short, is colorful and well drawn. Comparatively, the combat sections are equally well animated. Your warriors are large and detailed, and the monsters and backgrounds during battle are quite attractive, showing a genuine level of care. The music similarly is nice if a bit forgettable. I didn't walk away from the game humming any particular tunes, but the soundtrack as is does the job well enough.

The game stumbles in its writing. It isn't anything worse than some mainstream games have put out in recent years, but it is still rather uninteresting. The ironic thing is that it flies through a number of plot points that should be anything but boring. Within the first few hours alone you deal with terrorist plots, religious genocide, and full fledged war, none which are very well explained. They just seem to happen. The dialogue floats between poles of adequate and cringe worthy. It tries to sound adult with the occasional expletive and open talk of adult situations, but most of the speech falls flat. It doesn't help that the main cast is composed of your essential RPG clichés; the stoic warrior, the lady's man, the quirky witch, etc. In short, if you've played most any other JRPG, you'll see every twist in Deadly Sin 2 a mile away.

That said, Deadly Sin 2, flaws and all, is a fun RPG that brings some interesting elements to a table that is full to point of collapse. While there are a few bumps along the road, the developers have done an admirable job and I look forward to seeing what they come up with in the future.

- Stew Shearer

REVIEW

Gameplay:	8
Graphics:	8.5
Sound/Music:	7
Lasting Appeal:	7

Score: 78%

Grade C+

17

TIDALIS

It was a pretty memorable moment, when it hit me. I was browsing through and trying the variety of different game modes available in the latest puzzle game fromArcen Games – Tidalis – when it occurred to me that this is one of the most complete, and thoroughly designed games I've seen in a long time.

Tidalis is a highly polished, cleverly designed puzzle game that is saturated with content, and detail in a way that even many larger studio developed titles often don't compare to. I'm not typically a fan of puzzle games personally, but I found myself highly entertained, and quickly hooked on this title.

WHAT I LIKED
Clever, ingenious design

The core gameplay of Tidalis is remarkably sound. You're asked to shoot "streams" through a series of colored blocks, chaining together at least three of the same color to clear the blocks. The stream can pass through blocks of a different color, only affecting blocks of a similar color in that stream, but can't travel more than two spaces unless it passes through a block matching that stream's color. It is a highly simplistic core design that is satisfying of itself, but has the mark of any truly great game design- it scales magnificently well. The amount of tweaks, and variables that can be added to a game are almost endless. It's the purest of games, the simple kind that doesn't get old quickly, and can be refreshed with variants without disrupting the core idea.

Remarkable level of options, game modes, and customization

There is a lot, in this puzzle game. It's amazing to think that at the core of this all is such a simple gameplay mechanic. So much is branched off of the basic design. There are several different game modes, all highly unique and creative variants of the basic standard game. There are also custom games where you can use all the different elements and rules to come up with your own game type. It's staggering how much depth there is in this game. There's one game type where the colored blocks are replaced by "sun" and "moon" blocks, and you have to connect streams only in alternating order of sun, and moon blocks. Another game mode challenges you to eliminate a set number of blocks with only a limited amount of moves. Puzzle challenges are where you have to eliminate a series of blocks, all in one move. You can make your own puzzle challenges, upload them for other to play, or download ones other people have made.

This is a highly robust game, with tons of depth, scalability, and almost endless opportunities for customization.

There are a remarkable amount of options to customize your game in Tidalis

Neat minimalist story

I relish story-telling in video games, so even in a puzzle game, I dig on some narrative to tie things together. Tidalis has a highly minimalist story in adventure mode that serves as a clever, and mildly comedic thread tying together a series of puzzle challenges. The developers clearly set out knowing what they wanted to do: create a light, fun, story that will ping your imagination, told with well drawn art, and simple text. Mission accomplished. It works, it's short, and it most importantly it doesn't get in the way of solving puzzles.

Great, quaint score

I love the music in this game. I know the word "quaint" can sometimes hold negative connotations, but for anyone lacking a dictionary, here's what I mean when I use the word:

1 : expert, skilled
2 a : marked by skillful design b : marked by beauty or elegance
3 a : unusual or different in character or appearance : odd b :pleasingly or strikingly old-fashioned or unfamiliar

It deftly evokes the emotion of wonder, openness, and mystery that the sea, and a deserted island would make you feel. It's an absolutely necessary component, that was expertly delivered upon, and I can't imagine this game without this music. While taking breaks from the game, I just left my laptop open on the menus and chilled out to the music. The "victory song" that plays when you successfully complete a puzzle? Yeah, I want that for a ring tone.

You can even combine two separate game modes, like Zen mode, and Sun-Moon Mode

Excellent tutorial system

It's highly robust gameplay, but there levels of depth to acclimate yourself to as you move along. The tutorial system in the game is simple, friendly, and effective in introducing you to each new level of complexity in the game. I know it's a small thing, but the tutorials were succinct and helpful, and I consider that a note-worthy touch of polish.

WHAT I DIDN'T LIKE
As a rule, I've always thought it was necessary to include something in this space, to list something I didn't enjoy about a game. Here's why I feel good about not doing that in this case: Tidalis aims for a simple core concept, and doesn't fail in any way to deliver it. I've always believed in judging a game for it is trying to accomplish, not what I as a reviewer want it to be doing. I think Tidalis is aiming to be a clever puzzler, with casual appeal, but also with significant depth – and it does that flawlessly.

Secondly, almost anything about the mechanics of the game are open to be customized. Anything small, subjective complaint I might have had, I could change to appeal to my own tastes, and I think that should satisfy any reviewer.

Perhaps there's something I will come to dislike if I spend enough time with the game. I know months after continual play time on some of my all-time favorite games, I've been able to most clearly see their flaws. I'm sure that as I continue to play Tidalis I will find something I don't like... but it's going to take me a while.

- Jordan Rivas

Play MP3
Interview

Tidalis - www.arcengames.com - PC - Mac

Every so often, a puzzle game will be developed that attempts to create a whole new style of gameplay. Some are revolutionary while others are thrown to the side. Tidalis is one of those games that sits right in the middle of it all. While Tidalis does boast a new playing style, it still lacks in a few departments.

When you take a quick glance at the game, it almost looks like some form of a Tetris clone, but once you start playing, it's much different than what you would expect. The whole point of the game is to create chain reactions of at least three blocks, causing them to explode and pushing you closer to your goal. Sounds pretty simple, right? WRONG! There is so much more thought you have to put into this game compared with other casual games.

Each block has an arrow in it and can be moved to point in four different directions (up, down, left, and right). By clicking on one of the blocks, you will begin your chain-reaction fuse. The fuse can travel up to three spots without touching a block with the same color before it dies. In addition, you need to have at least three blocks in a single chain in order make them explode. Once those explode, the other rows fall into their place and start up other chain-reaction fuses. This forces you think ahead like crazy to set up other chain reactions. As you get further into the story (yes, there is a story), the game starts throwing objects like wood and

glass at you, causing you to overthink more and more about how you're going to take care of all of this. Luckily, if you hate the adventure side of the game, you can just go to the puzzle section and spend all your time working on those.

The music and sound effects are what you would expect from a casual game. Gameplay music is mellow, the kind of music you would think of if you were having a picnic with woodland creatures. The sound effects are good. Blocks have their own sound effects depending on color, which makes it easier to tell which blocks are shooting fuses without having to keep your eye on everything at once. Not much to say about it really; the game creators did a pretty good job.

Just like the sound, the graphics are also what you'd expect from a casual game. They are well done—not flashy, but not boring. Cinematic art has pretty good detail, while creatures you meet in adventure mode aren't the best (I still think the little yellow monsters' tiny thrusters look like turkey basters). Gameplay graphics are bright and vivid but not to the point where they put a strain on your eyes.

Many casual games have the ability to evolve into something more than just casual and can become competitive. Tidalis seems like one that will stay casual for the most part. Since there is

online play, competition will be there, but probably not to the level of other games like Tetris or Bust-A-Move. If nothing else, there is a ton of puzzles that will keep you occupied if you get bored with the adventure mode.

All in all, I don't really know what to make of this game. As a competitive Tetris player, I feel Tidalis lacks a few points brick-based games should have, but makes up for it with new gameplay styles. I wouldn't say I'd stop playing it, but it won't be a regular choice.

- Steve Webb

REVIEW

Gameplay:	7.5
Graphics:	8
Sound/Music:	7
Lasting Appeal:	6

Score: 73%

Grade   C

19

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