INDIE GAME MAG

Issue 4: May/June 2009

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Indie Game Magazine
Issue 4 -May/June 2009

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STAFF

Editor-in-Chief
Mike Gnade

Writers/Contributors
Joe Blacato
Josh Moles
Tex Pine
Taylor Hall
Benjamin Hayhoe

Mike Gnade
Zak Gebelein

Art & Magazine Design
Mike Gnade
Zak Gebelein

Sponsors
Dave Toulouse / Golemizer
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EDITORIAL

Well, this past couple months Indie Game Mag has been hard at work completely revamping our website…so this month the editorial is pretty much just going to outline the changes that some subscribers may notice in the magazine. If you've never been to the website, it's bigger and better and has a host of new features.

So if you're reading this magazine on Zinio or as a PDF on your computer, you'll be able to click these nice buttons to do some virtual magic. If you're reading a paper copy, unfortunately all virtual goodness is removed during the printing process. Don't fret though, these buttons correspond to the same things on www.indiegamemag.com, so visit online and try out the magic for yourself.

Link – click this button and a link to the developer's or game's website should open

Film – click this button to open up a trailer and watch the game in action

Download – click this button to download a demo of the game and try it for yourself

Shopping Cart – click this button to be an Indie Hero and purchase the game

There's some other great new buttons on the website that allow you to browse game categories, share articles, download magazine issues on your Kindle or iPhone, etc. If you're like me though, nothing beats the printed version. Me likes the glossy paper.

Spread the word about IGM and Indie Games…otherwise the evil giant publishers win!

FEATURE

Diner Dash DS:
Flo on the Go

Feature by:
Joe Blacato

Nintendo DS

To be Published by
Empire Interactive
www.empireinteractive.com

The line between casual and hardcore continues to blur. Well, not blur so much as pixellate. As casual games make their way onto consoles and infiltrate digital distribution channels the days of judging a gamer by his choice in hardware are numbered.

This pixellation is most noticeable on the Nintendo DS. The DS is Nintendo's best-selling modern console by a wide margin, having moved over 96 million units since its inception in 2004. (The Wii, another landscape where the hardcore and casual mingle, has sold just under 45 million units since its 2006 launch, putting it slightly off the DS's pace.) It's also the only system both you and your mother own and use for the same purpose. And if Nintendo didn't design it that way, it's the happiest accident in gaming history.

It's an issue of hardware. The DS is about on par, power-wise, with the Nintendo 64. This is why you can throw a dart at the wall-o'-DS games at your local Gamestop and have a good chance at hitting a Castlevania or Zelda port from the Super Nintendo. The small screens don't lend themselves well to 3-D graphics, but high-contrast sprite-based displays pop out and catch the player's attention, even when partially hidden under a stylus. Sprite graphics are staples on the SNES; they're also big in the casual games space. To make the system even more appetizing to casual game developers, the DS's inherent portablity means a large portion of the user base wants games they can pick up and put down at a moment's notice.

It's the way of the future, literally in the palm of your hand. Which is why when I was invited to check out Diner Dash: Flo on the Go, due out on the DS in June of this year, I figured it was time to raise my arms, palms up toward the heavens, and be cleansed of my hardcore gamer preconceptions. Hey, it almost worked.

I had only heard about the Diner Dash series; the closest I got to the game was an ex-girlfriend who played Lemonade Tycoon, which she liked quite a bit.

Here's a quick primer. The first Diner Dash was developed by indie studio GameLab, a company based out of New York City and famous for its casual titles, and published by PlayFirst, a casual game publisher that opens its development kit to aspiring developers via its website. PlayFirst developed the subsequent Diner Dash games internally. Diner Dash falls into the "time management" genre, and the series' protagonist, Flo, has become so popular that people write fan letters to her, even though she doesn't exist.

Flo herself is a restaurateur who leaves her job to create her first diner in the first game, and in Flo on the Go, she and a friend stumble upon a poorly-run restaurant on the cruise ship on which they're vacationing. Rather than turn up her nose and leave the struggling wait staff a bad tip, she instead offers her services to the manager in exchange for a free trip and enough spending money to last throughout the cruise.

It's here that you take the helm. You're presented with a bird's-eye view of the restaurant, which in early levels only has a few tables, a long bar where you drop off orders and pick up food, and a dish washing area where you leave dirty dishes. Customers line up to the left and wait to be seated.

You control Flo via the DS stylus, and tap along the bottom screen to seat customers, take their orders, deliver them to the counter, pick up their food and drop it off to them, then collect their money, then clean off the table to make it ready for new customers. That's it. It sounds simple because it is. But it gets ridiculously complicated, ridiculously fast.

The customers you have to seat come in different numbers. Sometimes you'll have a group of two people to sit, who talk more and stay at tables longer than single customers. However, single customers are less patient than groups and usually demand quicker service, lest they leave you the dreaded bad tip. And since orders come out in roughly the order you turn them in you have to finesse whose order you take first. However, to throw a monkey wrench into the works, occasionally the cook will deliver a party of one's food between the party of two you're waiting to feed. Meanwhile, a line will form outside if you don't work quickly enough, and if they wait too long to be seated, they'll begin their time in the restaurant pissed off and less likely to tip well, assuming they even bother to stick around at all.

To make matters even worse, as the game progresses, different types of customers show up with different demands. "Tourists," for example, are impatient and ask you to take pictures of them. "Cell phone addicts" are noisy and offend other customers but tip well. "Families" are only happy once you bring a high chair for the baby; if you don't, the baby cries and annoys other customers. So on top of everything else, you have to figure out where to seat whom, worry about who needs their food the fastest, grab checks and empty plates, and then seat new customers with brand new demands and expectations.

All the action occurs on the bottom screen, and in the stages I played I didn't once look up at the top screen, which shows how closely it mirrors the PC version in execution. The stylus is your mouse and everything you need to play is in one area.

Halo it's not, but there's more to Diner Dash than meets the eye, and it would be a mistake for a hardcore gamer to ignore its conventions, especially since new games targeting the hardcore demographic are borrowing liberally from the casual space. BioShock's hacking interface mini-game was directly influenced by Pipe Mania, a 1989 puzzle classic that's become a casual juggernaut. (Pipe Mania DS was created by Empire Interactive, publishers of the DS version of Flo on the Go.) Even Rock Band and Guitar Hero are at their root casual games, based on old rhythm and memory-building games like Simon.

Further closing the gap between the casual and the hardcore is World of Warcraft, with its legion of subscribers. Recently, Blizzard partnered with indie casual developer PopCap to offer Bejeweled to players in-game. So even as casual games invade the family-friendly DS, they're also hitting hardcore gamers in the breadbasket. It's all pixels now.

Next time you find yourself knee-deep in a potion-creation mini-game when you're playing a dungeon crawler, and you wind up having more fun time-managing your way through alchemy than you do slaying demons, you may be getting in touch with your inner secretary. And maybe when a 45-year-old secretary stays up until 4 a.m. hammering away at her DS as she tries to knock out that last level of Diner Dash before she sleeps, she's getting in touch with the part of herself that could lose an entire year of college to an MMO. As both sides of the industry borrow from each other, it won't be long before all those gamer pixels form into a pretty great picture. Something tells me it'll look a lot like Mario.

Joe Blancato is a freelance writer based out of Brooklyn, New York. He was previously Editor in Chief of Giant Realm and an Associate Editor at The Escapist. He occasionally blogs at his website, TemporarySafety.com.

INDIE NEWS

The 11th Annual Indie Games Festival winners were announced in March. Congratulations to all the Nominees. The winners were as follows:

Seumas McNally Grand Prize:
Blueberry Garden by Erik Svedang

Audience Award:
Cortex Command by Data Realms

D2D Vision Award:
Osmos by Hemisphere Games

Excellence in Visual Art:
Machinarium by Amanita Design

Innovation (Nuovo) Award:
Between by Jason Rohrer

Excellence in Audio:
BrainPipe by Digital Eel

Technical Excellence:
Cortex Command by Data Realms

Excellence in Design:
Musaic Box by KranX Productions

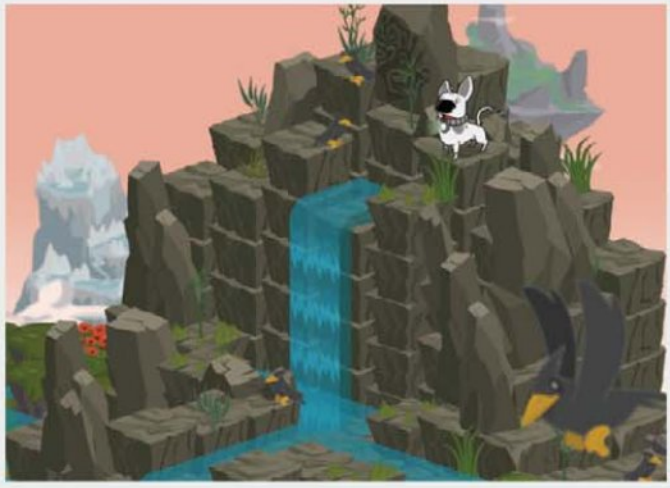
Best Student Game:
Tag: The Power of Paint by DigiPen

Qwak Adventures is Coming

Qwak adventures is a really cool new feature to Qwak, that will allow you to download 'eggstra' (I really my stop it with these egg jokes) level packs. Play them, and if you complete a level pack, the game submits your score to our site, so each level pack will get its own highscore table too!
Some level packs will be easy, some more puzzle based for the problem solving types out there!

INDIE NEWS

Gratuitous Space Battles Announced
Positech Games unveiled their newest title: Gratuitous Space Battles. It's currently in development. The name pretty much says it all. You command fleets of spaceships as they blast each other to bits.



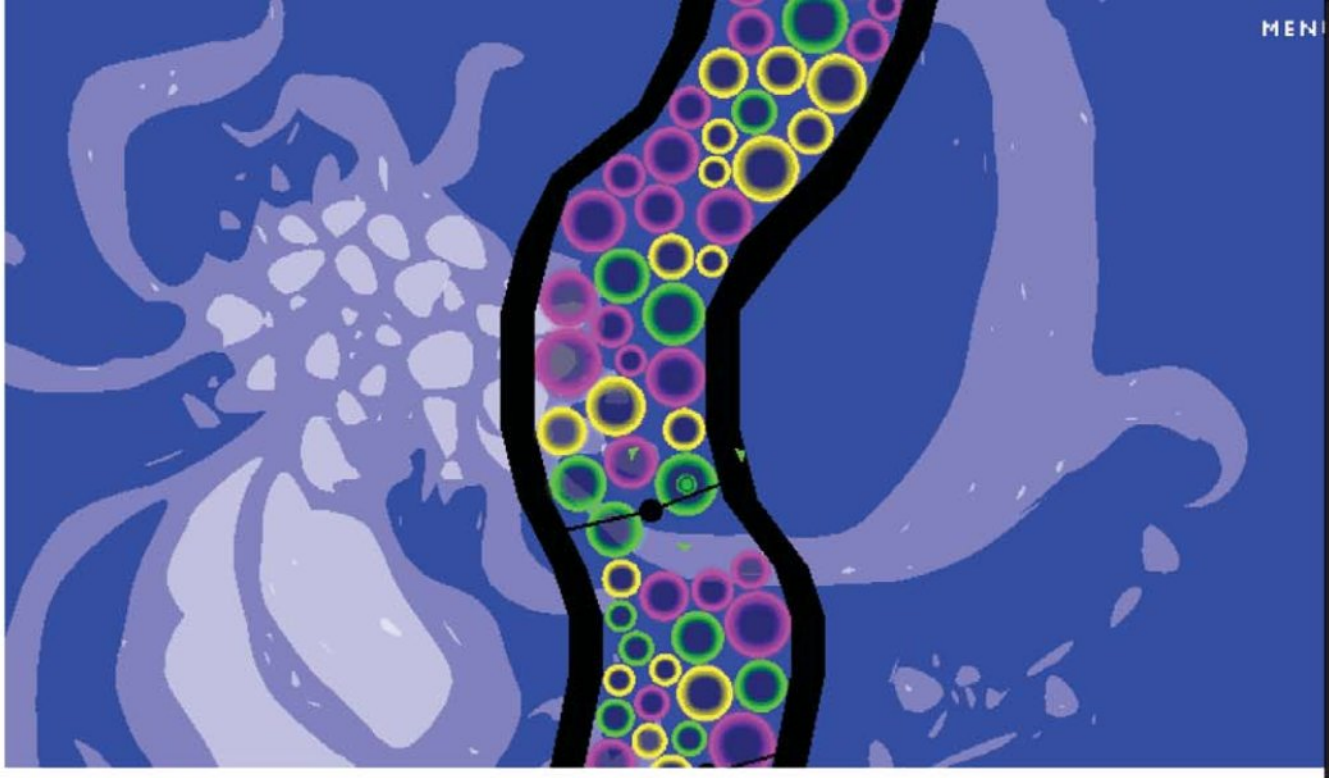
Big Fish Game Launches a Massive Multiplayer Online Game (Beta)
Fauna Sphere is a massive multiplayer online game where you care for animals in a polluted land. These animals (or fauna) mature and help you clean up the world. Faunasphere.com is backed by Big Fish Games, one of the leading casual gaming portals.

Project Aftershock - Indie Multiplayer Racer in Development

Project Aftershock is a multiplayer sci fi racing game set in the not so distant future. Massive Earthquakes were occuring all over the globe and destroyed most of earth's major cities. It would take decades before humanity began salvaging and rebuilding itself from what was left of the aftershocks.

From the ruins a new racing league was formed. Destroyed cities were turned into racing tracks and special crafts are assembled with high powered jets capable of flying over any terrain. To add to the thrill of racing through these tracks, these crafts are outfitted with abandoned military weapons and special upgrades/abilities. Players will need to race through 5 different track themes each with its own set of environmental traps where each team could use it to their advantage to slow the competing team down.

Light of Altair: First Look
Light of Altair is a sci-fi colony building game with a deep plot. Grow colonies from landing pod to metropolis, while sending off new spaceships to expand your territory to other worlds. You are not alone in space, 8 factions from different parts of the world are all following their own agendas in the solar system; diplomacy and orbital-combat are essential to learn.



DEVELOPER PROFILE

Name: Ivan Traykov
Game Studio: 2D Engine
Website: http://2dengine.com/
Studio Size (people): 2
List your titles: Chains
Favorite Indie Game: Bridge Construction Set
Favorite Retro Game (N64 or older): Contra
Best Current Gen Game: Civilization 4 and Half Life
Best Game Console Ever: NES

What is the best game of all time and why?
That's a trick question, like asking what's the best type of music or best type of food. It all depends on what mood you're in. Sometimes I want to feel like a badass so I play Contra, at other times I want to relax and play something more mellow. One game I always keep coming back to is the Civilization series, although my typical Civ session takes up at least half a day so I rarely have the luxury to play anymore.

What is the goal of your indie game studio?
It's really hard, but I do hope we earn some recognition in the indie scene for coming up with a game that is trully memorable. If we can get that down, financial success would come inevitably.

Why did you start developing indie games?
I have worked as a web developer for a while but grew bored. I'm also an artist so I decided to move onto something more creative and exciting. My brother, Philip, who in the daytime programs database applications for a big company helps out with the engine-side of things.

What is the biggest mistake you have made as a game developer?
The biggest issue for us was losing focus. We would spend too much time on one particular feature of our game or engine that would eventually get scrapped. Never fall in love with an idea especially if it's not central to your goal.

What has been your biggest success?
Why, getting our game featured in Indie Game Mag of course! Seriously, it's not like we've had major success as indie developers, we're just a couple of dudes trying to get our foot in the door. The only notable success we've had so far is releasing our first game, Chains. At the moment, we're working on a new title which will be a 2D exploration shooter.

REVIEWS

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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.

This Issue's Reviewers

Benjamin Hayhoe
I'm a full time writing and media student specialising in video game studies near Liverpool, England. I split my time up between playing old video games, playing new video games and curing diseases...Well... Not so much the last one.

Tiago Tex Pine
Tiago Tex Pine is a Producer working with games focused on casual, "non-core" markets. He's one of the owners of Interama Games (www.interama.net) and works at Tectoy Digital (www.tectoydigital.com). He writes he's own game production blog at www.texpine.com

Josh Moles
Josh has been a gamer since he was old enough to hold a controller. He is a sucker for RPGs and puzzle games, but enjoys playing pretty much any game that comes his way. Josh also writes for InvertedStick.com

Taylor Hall
A Hawaiian whose career aspirations are to be a game journalist, focusing on indie and retro titles. My dream job would be penning a blog for indie games or being an editor for a retro gamer magazine. Playing right now: Spelunky & Assassin blue

Zak Gebelein
I've always been a sucker for RTS, but open to any game that peaks my interest. Give me a game with classy graphics and a keen sense of story and I'm hooked. Some of my past times include killing zombies, conquering the world (if not the universe!) and dwelling on games of yesteryear – call me traditional.

Mike Gnade
A gamer willing to admit that Halo Wars suceeding in capturing a "console gamer" who now appreciates RTS games. I also believe Killzone 2 lived up to the hype and am highly anticipating the upcoming indie title: Gratuitous Space Battles.

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www.graduategames.com/toygame.php

PC CD-ROM SOFTWARE

What is Dr. Altus hiding from?

WWW.GOLEMIZER.COM

flower
Review by Mike

Gameplay: 9
Graphics: 9.5
Sound: 10
Appeal: 5

Final: 93%
Grade: A

flower

Developer: thatgamecompany - **Players**: 1 -
Website: www.thatgamecompany.com

PLAYSTATION Network

Flower is the newest game from thatgamecompany and follows their debut PSN title: flow. The company was founded by Jenova Chen and Kellee Santiago, whose first game collaboration, Cloud, was back in 2006 as students at USC. You can download Cloud for Free online. thatgamecompany is a truly innovative, experimental, and unique 7 person studio whose goal of making video games that communicate different emotional experiences is definitely reached with flower.

Gameplay: 9/10

Flower is a fantastic experience. Each of the 7 levels in the game represent a different flower's dream (or nightmare). The objective of each level is different, but the basic mechanic of the game is that you control a trail of flower petals as you attempt to race around and bloom other flowers. As your petals touch a flower, the flower will bloom and add to your flower trail. You control your trail of petals by tilting the SIXAXIS controller. While pressing the X-button gives you a speed boost. The controls are very reminiscent of flOw except that flower features a 3D space to move around in rather than a 2D one.

The gameplay in flower is simple, but the emotional and relaxing mechanics make it a joy to play. One of the highlights of the game is how this simple gameplay mechanic evolves as you continue through the game.

Graphics: 9.5/10
The graphics for flower are breathtaking and look right out of a panoramic landscape painting. The art direction, watercolor painting style cut scenes, and graphics are all very impressive for a downloadable title and among the best seen in a strictly download-only game. I guess this should all be expected since the founders of the studio graduated with an MFA in interactive art.

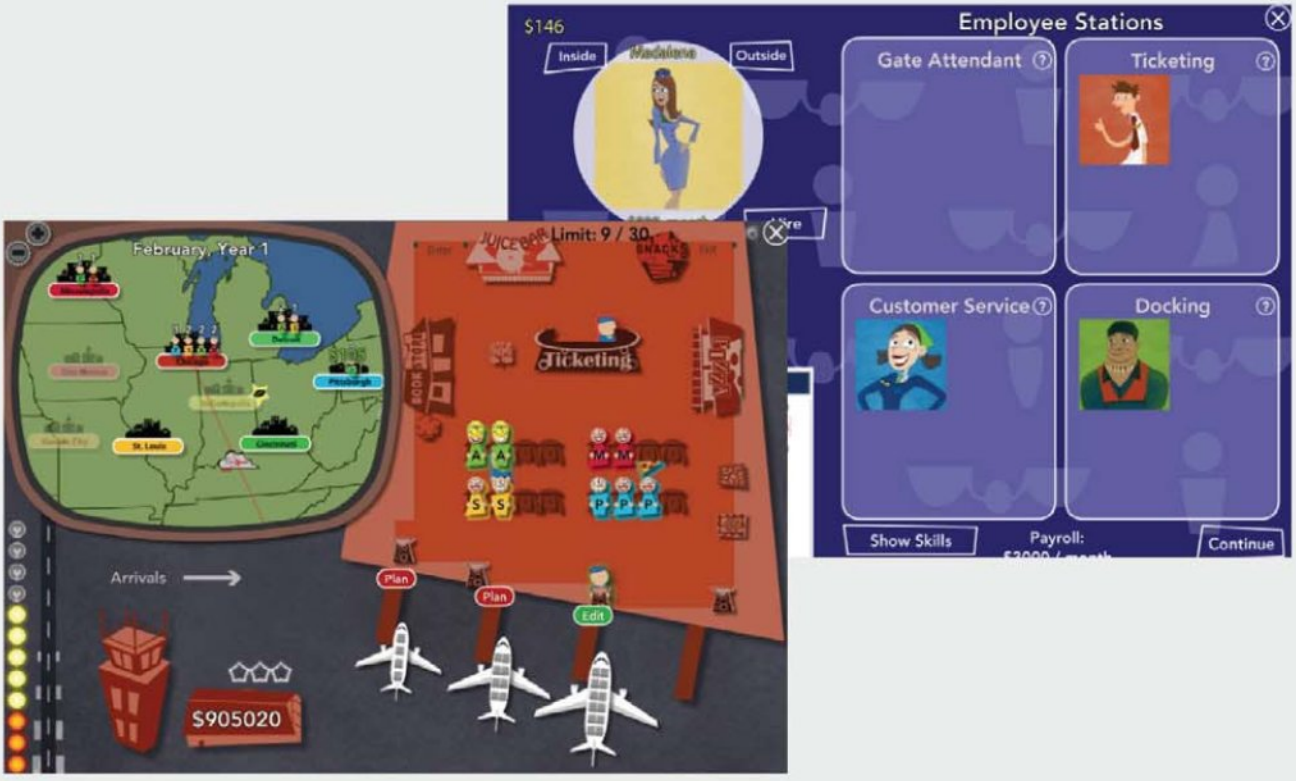
Sound: 10/10
Even more impressive than the graphics is the sound which mixes atmospheric and ambient natural sounds with orchestral music to complement the mood onscreen. As you bloom flowers the chimes of the orchestra will poignantly emphasize the joys of nature and the excitement and pleasure that this game brings.

Lasting Appeal: 5/10
Flower is incredibly short. It only has a few levels and the whole thing can be completed within 2-3 hours if you play nonstop. While it's true that there's the added challenge of finding the 3 hidden green flowers in each level and going for all the game's trophies, this doesn't change the fact that the game is one of the shortest experiences on the market, even if it's also one of the most unique.

Average: 83.75%
Tilt: +9.25%

Flower's experience may be short, but it is exceptional. The game is beautiful and moving despite never saying a word. It is a game about creation rather than destruction, nature over development, and beauty over darkness. Flower is a piece of art that resonates with a whisper rather than the revving of a chainsaw bayonet.

Verdict: 93%



Now Boarding

Developer: Gabob - **Players**: 1 - **Website**: www.nowboarding.us

Now Boarding
Review by Ben

Gameplay: 8
Graphics: 8.5
Sound: 8.5
Appeal: 9

Final: 85%
Grade: B

Have you ever dreamt of running an airport? Well, probably not. But now you can! Yes. An airport management game has been designed. Perhaps not the most exciting subject matter ever devised, but fear not! This game is actually pretty damn good! A round of applause for this 2008 release developed by Gabob. Utilizing Adobe Air to allow running the game on Windows, Mac and Linux, the game is thinking ahead. But I digress.

Atlanta's airport is struggling. Their last hope is your good self, armed with new ideas and a fresh faced smile.

The game encompasses some elements to that of Theme Park. You're able to purchase new objects to place in your terminal to entertain your passengers prior to departure. Soda machines, hot dog stands, plants and arcades just to name a few. More are available later in the game as you find yourself managing larger terminals. This is merely to aid you in your quest though and this is where the game differs from that of our usual management game. You are to manage departures and arrivals. You begin the game with three destinations. A tutorial, aided by your staff at the airport will teach you the ropes (quickly and effectively I might add). Your Atlanta terminal is visible in the top right of the screen with a map of the possible destinations on the left. The games levels are split up into working months. You have a certain amount of time to make as much money in that month as you can. As passengers begin to arrive in your Atlanta terminal, you have to entertain them until a plane becomes available and you can put them on board and send them on their way. Making them wait will ensure their immediate rage and eventually will cause them to "freak out". Three freak outs will cause you to lose and you'll have to restart that month again. It all sounds very easy I'm sure, but when you push further into the game and have 40 passengers all wanting to head to different areas of Europe at the same time and only a certain number of planes in which to juggle them, you end up being the one to start freaking out. The pressure is immense, as is the satisfaction of successfully completing a financial month without any freak outs or failures. Aside from terminal attractions, you also can purchase new planes that can hold more passengers, hire staff to help you speed up the process' that make the game challenging later on and also unlock new destinations that increase the influx of passengers and therefore increase your net profit margins.

Each financial month is finalised with a run down of statistics that leave you either satisfied with your performance or mortified at the amount of people that gave you an F rating for your service. You'll find yourself shouting "How dare you!" at your screens. Or perhaps a more violent variation.
As you progress further through the game you're given more independence on your staff hiring. You have quite a range of candidates to choose from and you have to decide which ones you want and what department they should work in based on their short bio. Candidates with experience will be on a higher pay scale. Do we hire the experienced, pricey, safe choice or the young, hopeful student full of enthusiasm?! Choice! How we love choice.

The game has a fantastic atmosphere. A selection of smooth jazz tunes running throughout the game leave your feet tapping whilst you play and add to the 60's style feel that you get from the game in general. Although charming, the graphics are very basic. 2D and no real movement aside from the passengers walking around (without legs) and the planes sliding across to their various destinations. This is ground for improvement, but as it stands the game looks pretty and the non realistic cartoon like characters really just improve gaming experience, implementing color coded game play and simplicity over the need for 3D. The sound effects are similar in this manner. Very simple, but they really don't need to be anything more. Sounds are used when they need to be to make sure you know when planes are arriving and departing with a healthy "vroooooom" and the familiar "ding dong" for when your plane's docked and awaiting passengers.

The game's fairly long. The episodes don't take too long to complete if you really concentrate on fulfilling your list of tasks as soon as you can, but I personally found it more fun to create a super successful airport first. You can make the game even more detailed by turning on "advanced routing" which basically means you have to pay more attention to whom your planes are picking up, but if managed well your airport will be far more efficient. You end up finding a great sense of pride in what you've managed to do by the end of an episode.

To top it off, the game has two unlockable modes for replay value. A free play mode that you can either use to play a relaxing, no score based game or a challenging, competitive game in which you play for a high score year by year in which each year grows more difficult. Secondly, you have survival mode which is a continuous run until too many passengers freak out and you fail. Clear your schedule. This one will take up your hours rapidly.

On a slightly lesser note the game can get repetitive fairly quickly as most casual games do. It's similar to playing a game of Tetris. A simple concept that increases in speed and difficulty, but it doesn't quite have that grasp that it needs. You'll find yourself needing breaks quite regularly. Providing you understand that before purchasing it then I really don't think you'll find yourself disappointed.

Here's some hints:

It's green

It's mean

And smells terrible...

Play for free online!

WWW.GOLEMIZER.COM

Lost City of Malathedra

Developer: Ethereal Darkness - **Players**: 1 - **Website**: www.edigames.com

Lost City of Malathedra
Review by Josh

Gameplay: 6
Graphics: 9
Sound: 9
Appeal: 5

Final: 79%
Grade: C+

Overview:
In Lost City of Malathedra, players take the role of Rebecca Wolfe searching for her missing father on Culuco Island. To find her father and the city of Malathedra, players must collect various items and work with the inhabitants of the island to solve puzzles and get information about his and the city's whereabouts. The game will take players through a fairly linear storyline while picking at their brain to see if they can figure out the next action to solve the puzzle.

Gameplay:
Lost City of Malathedra has a suspenseful storyline with twists along the way that should keep the player intrigued with what is going to happen next. The game plays like other puzzle games with an extremely linear storyline that events have to be completed in a certain order before being able to proceed to the next event. Lost City of Malathedra does so to the point that I found it somewhat frustrating when solving some of the puzzles in the game.

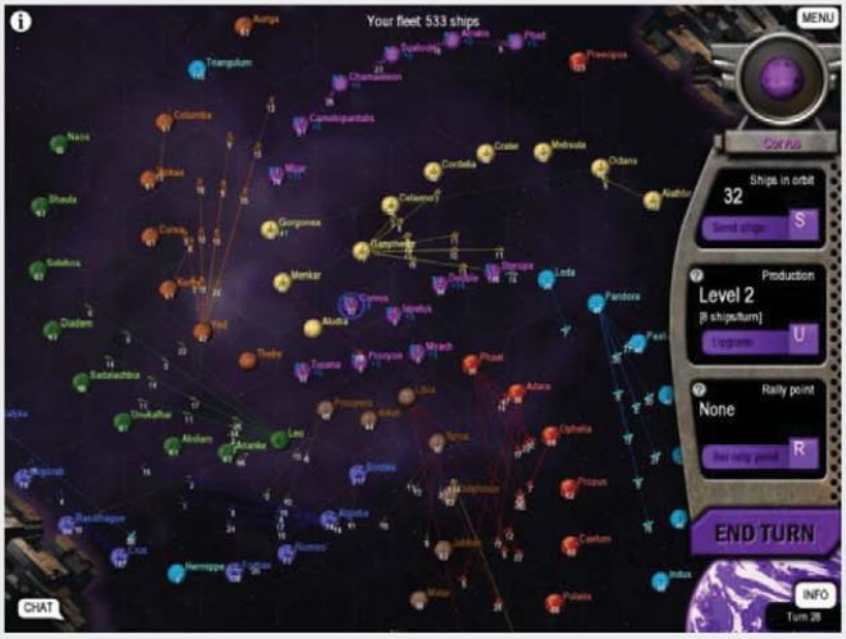
The linearity made it where there was little freedom to accomplish anything else except for what seemed to be the next step in progressing in the game. The player was free to explore and talk to other characters, but it often seemed fruitless because nothing really got done besides basic chit-chat. The case with items was also similar, each item could only be used for one particular task in the game even though it logically could be done to accomplish the task the game designed arranged it for. For example, a plastic shovel the player discovers can only dig up a particular mound and not two other mounds encountered in the game. The only other frustration I had with Lost City of Malathedra were the controls. They are purely mouse based and the keyboard does absolutely nothing in the game. Holding down to move the character around is something I personally find annoying in games—especially when the keyboard could just as easily perform the same task, if not better. Also, the universal way to exit a game is generally the Esc key to pull up a menu, but instead there is the hidden menu icon in the bottom right that makes it somewhat confusing to save, load, and exit the game for first time players.

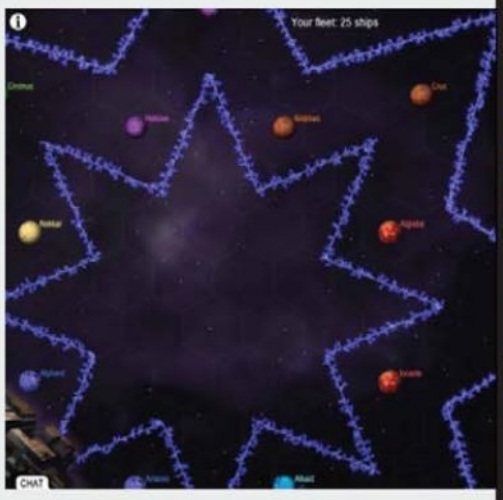
Graphics:
Simply put, the graphics are well assembled. Each human character in the game has a unique texture and set of clothing. The environment does not seem to have recycled textures all over the game and each location seems to have a genuinely unique feel to it while still tying together nicely. Each of the items in the player's inventory also has a unique look to it and seems to accurately look like what the player would expect and what is being described. The "cut scenes" are simply dialog and on-screen events that the player does not have direct control over. This type of "cut-scene" works great with games of this genre and makes the whole story seem more believable and flowing.

Sound:
Lost City of Malathedra has a decent soundtrack assembled to reflect the tone of events in the game. The music is pleasant to listen to while exploring the game and the sound effects all seem relevant to events seen on screen. Locations in the game did share the same tracks, but it did not take away from the game play. The sound tracks were all professional sounding and well assembled throughout the game.

Lasting Appeal:
Due to the linearity of the game, Lost City of Malathedra has little replay value. If you are looking for a one-time puzzle game that you can spend a day solving puzzles, then Lost City of Malathedra is a great match for you. Lost City of Malathedra was a decent puzzle solver the first time through, but after playing the game through once, it would trivial to go back and play it again. Perhaps after a year of forgetting about the actual game, it may have some value to play again then.

Conclusion:
As a player, if you can get over the frustrations mentioned in the gameplay section, Lost City of Malathedra is a decent puzzle game that should keep a player entertained for at least an afternoon's worth of playing and puzzle solving.





Mayhem Intergalactic

Developer: Inventive Dingo - **Players**: 1-8 - **Website**: www.inventivedingo.com

Mayhem Intergalactic is a turn-based strategy game of space combat. Your goal is to expand your galactic dominance by conquering planets and fighting other expansionist AI or human empires (like yourself, muawaha!). Mayhem Intergalactic is a well-made game that can provide hours of fun for fans of strategy, specially on multi-player. I liked playing it but lacks both complexity for long-term value and a good single-player mode.

Gameplay

The gamepay is a turn-based strategy featuring simultaneous gameplay among players with simple and easy to understand concepts. You start with one planet that produce X ships per turn. Move them to other planets to attack and conquer new planets that will produce even more ships and so on. You can attack neutral planets that only defend themselves, or planets of enemy factions (AI or other player) to weaken and destroy them.
Ships can be sent to any planet on the map, but they will need a number of turns to arrive. This is a key element of the game's strategy. Since you can attack anyone at any time, you might send surprise attacks that will arrive much later while you distract the opponent by attacking peripheral planets, for example. You can also upgrade planets and set rally points so all production of a given planet is automatically sent to another one, which is pretty handful once you expand your empire (specially on Large maps).
The gameplay resembles Galcon but with turn-based logic instead of real-time. The mechanics are similar nevertheless and for Mayhem this isn't that good. In Galcon the lack of complexity works fine due to a fast-paced action. Mayhem could make them work with additional layers of strategical mechanics and complexity besides basic production upgrades and rally points, but it doesn't. Multi-selecting planets for a joint attack is also a problem.
Generally, gameplay works, but could have more depth.

Graphics

Graphics of Mayhem aren't fancy but do the job. This is not a big problem though since having fancy graphics clearly ain't the game main proposition. The HUD is very well done though.

Sound

Same as for graphics but I found that the soundtrack is a good one. Sound isn't great, but it doesn't get in your way either.

Lasting Appeal

The gameplay is simple, but too simple to have a strong lasting appeal for a turn-based strategy. The game don't go much far beyond planet upgrades and huge maps, and doesn't feature a campaign mode. Of course you have a number of gameplay options to choose before starting a new map, which adds some gameplay variety (like being or not capable to see ships in transit to planets), but the game itself won't add much more besides the Achievements system.
The main problem, however, is the somewhat weak artificial intelligence. If you are like me and like to be capable to quick-play without investing time on gathering a multiplayer session (or waiting in the multiplayer room), a challenging AI is an important missing feature.

Even so, the game does have lasting value due to the great number of configurable game options and the multiplayer mode..

Mayhem Intergalactic Review by Tex

Gameplay: 7.5
Graphics: 6.5
Sound: 7
Appeal: 5.5

Final: 67%
Grade: D+

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game development and porting

Airport Mania

Herod´s Lost Tomb

Mahjong Epic

www.lemonteam.com / info@lemonteam.com

Penguins Arena

Developer: Fro Games - **Players**: Multiplayer - **Website**: www.frogames.com

Let's just say it: Penguin Arena: Sedna's World is not a quality game. It defies any target audience; It's too young for the average indie game player, too hidden for younger gaming families, and no mainstream player would ever leave their CoD maps for Arena's colder pastures. But maybe that's not the point.

Indie gaming can be a precipice, one to gaze from and see the future ideas and designers of the industry. And there are also games like PASW which are frustratingly content with exacerbating gaming stereotypes. With a ridiculous story, average graphics, vanilla-bread gameplay and - the death blow - an environmental message. I needed to find a lie to play through Penguin Arena.

The game transported me back to elementary school when our whole fifth grade class raced to see which groups of friends could beat all 152 levels of Lode Runner on the Apple II. Would we rather have been playing Killer Instinct? Yes. But it beat learning, and we learned to love it; to this day it's one of my all-time favorites. No such luck with PASW.

I imagine kids will reach for the acres of flash games available to them within five minutes of PASW's preachy yet bland opening cinema. Basically, global warming is destroying the earth, so a space-asshole named Sedna tells the Penguins that there is only enough food on the planet for one tribe and they better fight to the death because she doesn't want to have to, you know, decide. Think about that for a moment.

That's equivalent to if in Captain Planet, Gaia came down after pollution killed most of the world and she gave the planeteers their rings and instead of saying, "work together" she said, "I can only fit one of you in the ship and the rest of you will die, so I would prefer it if you would kill each other for me." It's unbelievable, and the kind of environmental message that only the Joker could appreciate. It's so shallow and an obviously tacked-on attempt to add story to an otherwise boring shooter. Except, believe it or not, the developer of this mess is Frogames, a company dedicated to environmental education through games, which means that, in all likelihood, the story came first, and they thought, "Well what would best illustrate this masterpiece of storytelling? Answer: First-person shooting death-match action."

It's insulting. It's Captain Novolin and 3D Noah's Ark all over again - edutainment that teaches and talks down to its audience. Well sorry, but that business-model died with full-motion video.

To be fair, PASW doesn't have glaring gameplay flaws like Novolin's hit detection and controls, nor is it a total rip-off like Noah's Ark was to Wolfenstein 3D. No, PASW has fine controls and hit detection. Even the graphics are charming, in an eMac circa 2002 kind of way. It's just that everything - its whole aura - is so damn dated.

This is the original unreal tournament with a layer of adorable iced over it. The levels are small (arenas, duh), and the challenge is getting your opponent' low enough that they launch off the side, much like Smash Brothers. However, this amounts to a singular strategy of keeping your back to a barrier and launching snowballs until the round is over. The snowballs are your basic weapon and haven't been changed in execution since South Park on the N64. The other weapons are all food themed, which is extra insulting because aren't they supposed to be low on food? Whatever. You got all your basics: Shotgun, missile, etc - but arctic themed, unlike the music.

In PASW, the music feels like mid-90's lobby music, or the kind of thing that would play before a game of marble madness. Its bubbly guitar and synth lines are safe and do nothing to add to the atmosphere of the game, probably because the game doesn't even know what mood it wants to set. Am I sad for the penguins, mad at the world... happy? What?

One of the methodologies at Bungie is that a great game is 30 seconds of fun that you can do again and again. This is what hurts PASW the most. The gameplay is like a first-person shooter interpretation of Smash Brothers, without any drama. You start, you run, you shoot. There's no break in the style and nothing to worry about outside of shooting. It's frantic, yes, but it also makes you miss running through the map to find the enemy, or sneaking up on them, or laying low. Strategy is absent, with nothing except stand in front of wall and shoot. It's gameplay that could only be enjoyed by someone with a five-year-old's capacity for attention, and most five-year-old's I know have already started to master CoD and Halo. So who's left to care for PASW? Nobody.

With pleasant graphics and frantic fun, PASW could entertain you for a while. But when I tried to play online, very few people were playing and rightfully so; PASW is a directionless game that gives nothing back to the FPS genre from which it takes so much. At best, it's a pleasant afternoon if everything else you own was thrown into a deep hole. And at worst, it represents the nutrition-less side of indie gaming. $20? Buy Braid twice.

Penguins Arena
Review by Taylor

Gameplay: 7
Graphics: 5
Sound: 6
Appeal: 5

Final: 57%
Grade: F

Caster

Developer: Elecorn - **Players**: 1 - **Website**: www.elecorn.com

Caster
Review by Zak

Gameplay: 9
Graphics: 7.5
Sound: 9
Appeal: 8

Final: 87%
Grade: B+

Caster is a 3d shooter and a gem for the price ($5). Caster takes us to the world of Middon, over-run by insect-like Flanx (big bugs, worms and crabs). Your objective as a Caster recruit: destroy the Flanx. The game revolves around you traveling the world, acquiring new weapons and abilities and using those abilities to complete the aforementioned Flanx smashing task. Killing Flanx gives you energy and upgrades. Combine that with other objectives and level bosses and my nostalgic bones were giddy with memories of Panzer Dragoon. It wasn't all pretty, but one of the coolest indie games I've played lately.

Gameplay:

This game is a delightful shooter, plain and simple. You shoot things to bring life and shoot to bring death. The game controls keyboard (A,S,D,W), with the mouse used to aim at and shoot baddies. The game ran smoothly without freezing or stalling. New stages bring new weapons and abilities, which you can use to level up weapon attacks, health, dashing and jumping abilities – think Superman. Destroying the Flanx brings you energy and upgrades. Each new weapon has different effects; like homing projectiles, for example. The action is charged and you have to put on your strategy cap when dealing with the enemies. Weapon choice is important; certain enemies will swarm you, while others with barrage you with firepower. You have to decide what weapon will prevail and how you can use them to set traps for the Flanx (i.e. – opening up the earth to lava while baddies are rushing you). Pick you battles carefully and don't be afraid to shoot on the go – it's sort of the point. Remember to dash!

Graphics:

The graphics were the only spot where this game fell short for me. Honestly the game plays at a level beyond the graphics, but for an indie game designed by one dude, the graphics are delightful. I loved the distortion effects the weapons generated. Another great feature of the game is environmental damage. During a colossal melee between you and Flanx enemies, the environment retains the marks of your battle. You can raise hills or break through the earth's crust; sometimes I was surprised by the unassuming graphics. When I was dashing past enemies, the motion blurs gave me the feeling of speed and added a new depth to the game. That said, the graphics are straightforward and remind me of earlier 3d shooter games – albeit beefed up with fantastic particle effects. I think the graphics have room for growth for some gamers, but maybe we've just been spoiled by today's top sellers.

Sound/Music:

The music is a great match for the sometimes frenetic gameplay. Upbeat electronic sounds and high tempo balanced with the more mellow pieces and the music made the game all the more enjoyable. Mike Smith did a great job making the music and sound effects match what he wanted to convey onscreen. Much kudos Elecorn - enough said.

Lasting Appeal:

Caster would have a strong lasting appeal – if it lasted. The biggest disappointment I had was how short the game was. By the time I was ripping Flanx to pieces on an epic godlike scale, the game seemed

to be over with. Elecorn's Mike Smith has stated on his site that this was but the first installment and gamers who fork over the $5 will have access to the following chapters for free. In a recession, it doesn't get any better than that.

Average: 83.75%
Tilt: +1.25%

Mike Smith has made an elegant and surprising pleasant game. The gameplay and structure are solid. The graphics need a little work and the length of the game is promised to be improved upon. All in all, I have to say Caster is one of the best compiled games I've played in recent memory. I would happily spend $10 to keep up the good fight against the Flanx. In conclusion, this game gave my fingers a work out – and a slight god complex. Pick it up!

Verdict: 85%

2nd Opinion by Mike

Caster's screenshots certainly won't blow you away, but the gameplay will. We are spoiled by top sellers like Gears of War, Halo, Call of Duty and the rest. Caster's graphics feature some amazing effects, but the character models are a smudge on an otherwise pristine game. I think if Elecorn has splurged on a 3D artist we would have the next XBLA hit on our hands.

Have I mentioned that Caster's only $5? That is just absolutely preposterous, and I'm actually a little mad at Mike Smith for valuing his game so low. Perhaps the price change is in preparation for the iPhone version of the game (click the film link below to check it out), but there is no reason a game of this quality should be priced so low for PC and Mac.

Caster plays fantastic. It's fast, action-packed, full of abilities/magic and controls amazingly well. The levels are short which makes the game great for short pick-up and play sessions (great for the iPhone). The game reminds me of the Siphon Filter series, but Ethan is a hell of a lot faster than Logan…and can jump higher…let's face it, Logan wouldn't stand a chance against Ethan. And in that lies one of the best things about Caster, Ethan gets uber powerful. After the 3rd Level, I could jump like 300 ft in the air and it felt damn good.

The game is a little short, but free DLC is promised and the experience is great while it lasts. The bottom line is if you like action games, Caster is a must buy…actually a steal at $5.

Scores:
Gameplay: 9.5
Graphics: 8
Sound: 9
Appeal: 8.5

Verdict: 89%

iPhone

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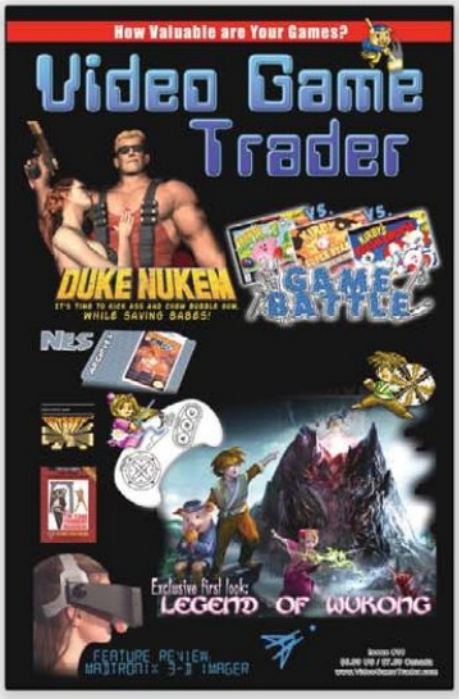

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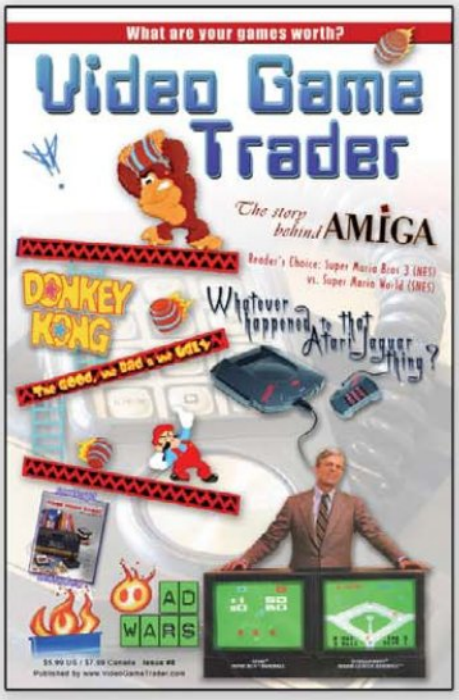

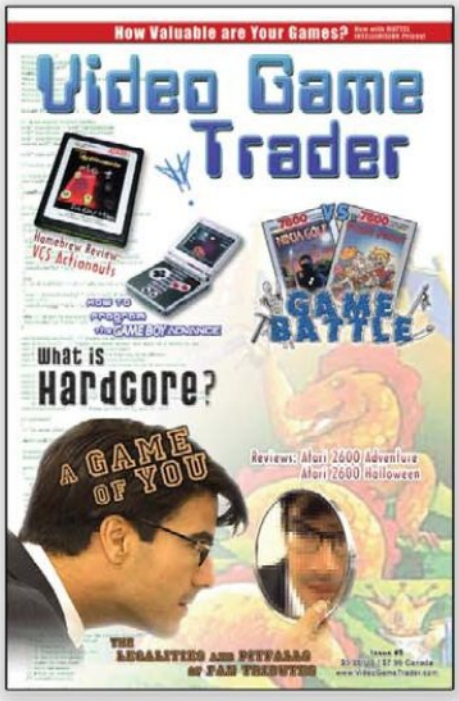

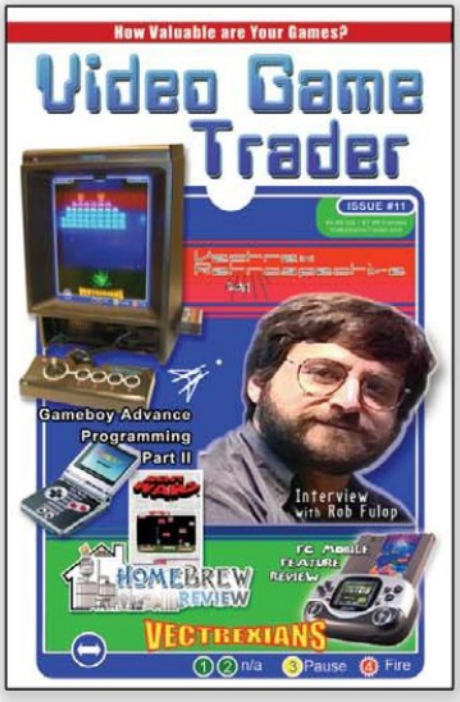

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5 INDIES TO WATCH

Blueberry Garden
eriksvedang.wordpress.com

What?

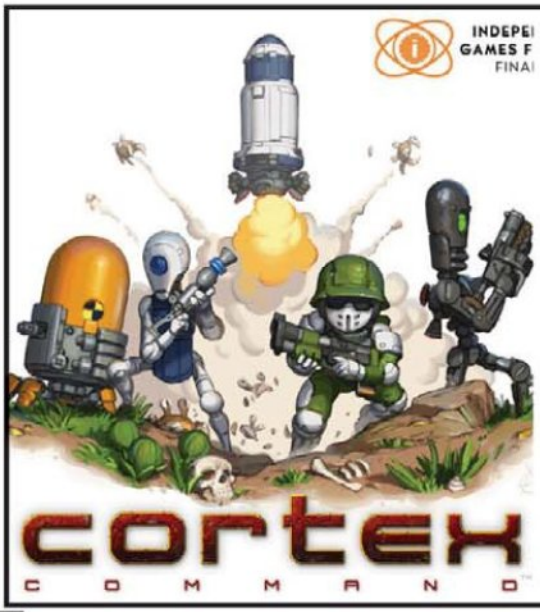
A fairytale made out of play, set in an ever-changing ecosystem. Fly away through the clouds, explore a strange world and uncover the mysteries of Blueberry Garden – your presence could make all the difference.

Why?

Erik Svedang's Blueberry Garden won the Seamus McNally Grand Prize at IGF this year. Other IGF Grand Prize winning games include Crayon Physics Deluxe, Aquaria, Darwinia, and Gish which all turned out to be pretty great indie games. In addition, the concept and visual style to Blueberry garden certainly looks to bring something new and unique to the table.

What?
Snapshot is a game that revolves around the ability to change the world through photographs. The camera captures objects and you use your photographs to change the environment.

Why?
Did you just read the description? Snapshot takes a unique concept and mixes it with some sweet retro pixelart and classic platforming.



Cortex Command
www.datarealms.com

What?

Cortex Command is a 2D deathmatch game where you play a human brain in a bunker that can remote control cybernetic minions.

Why?

Primarily because the game's a blast to play (there's a free demo online). It's like playing a SNES game on tech steroids. The pixel art is fantastic and did I mention it won technical excellence and more importantly the IGF Audience Award - that means people really like it.

Cletus Clay
www.tunasnax.com

What?

Cletus Clay is a humorous action platform game about a farmer who fights off an alien invasion.

Why?

All of the game's graphics are made entirely out of clay. I've always found claymation & stop-motion pretty cool. Who doesn't like Wallace & Gromit? It's especially cool in games. Remember 'The Neverhood'? It's unique story and use of clay created an amazing world.

Wolfire Games
www.wolfire.com

Who?

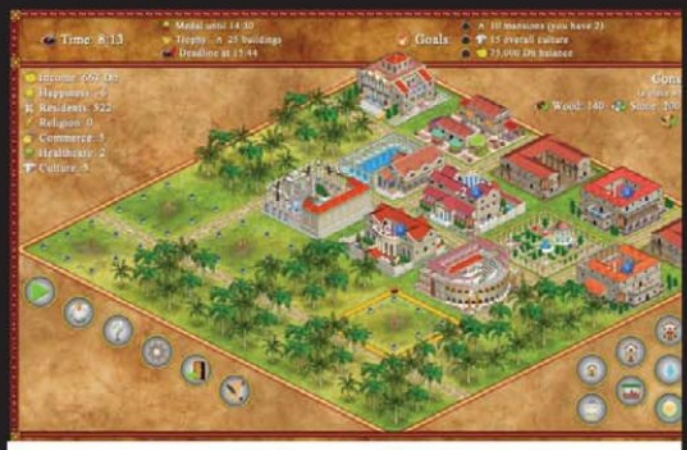
Wolfire Games is behind Lugaru and the highly anticipated Overgrowth. It was founded by David Rosen.

Why?

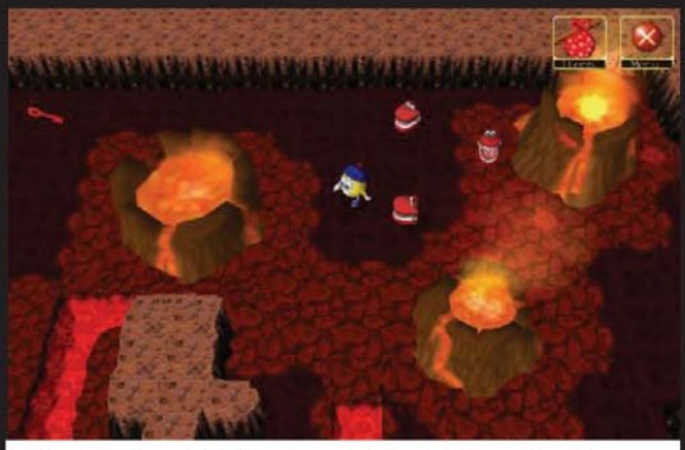
Wolfire has built up quite a following for their upcoming sequel, Overgrowth. Plus it looks to have fantastic art direction (check out the art to the right). More importantly, Wolfire has emerged as a vocal indie game community member with a great blog that regularly discusses indie topics.

NEXT ISSUE

Ragdoll Cannon



Romopolis



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www.indiegamemag.com