

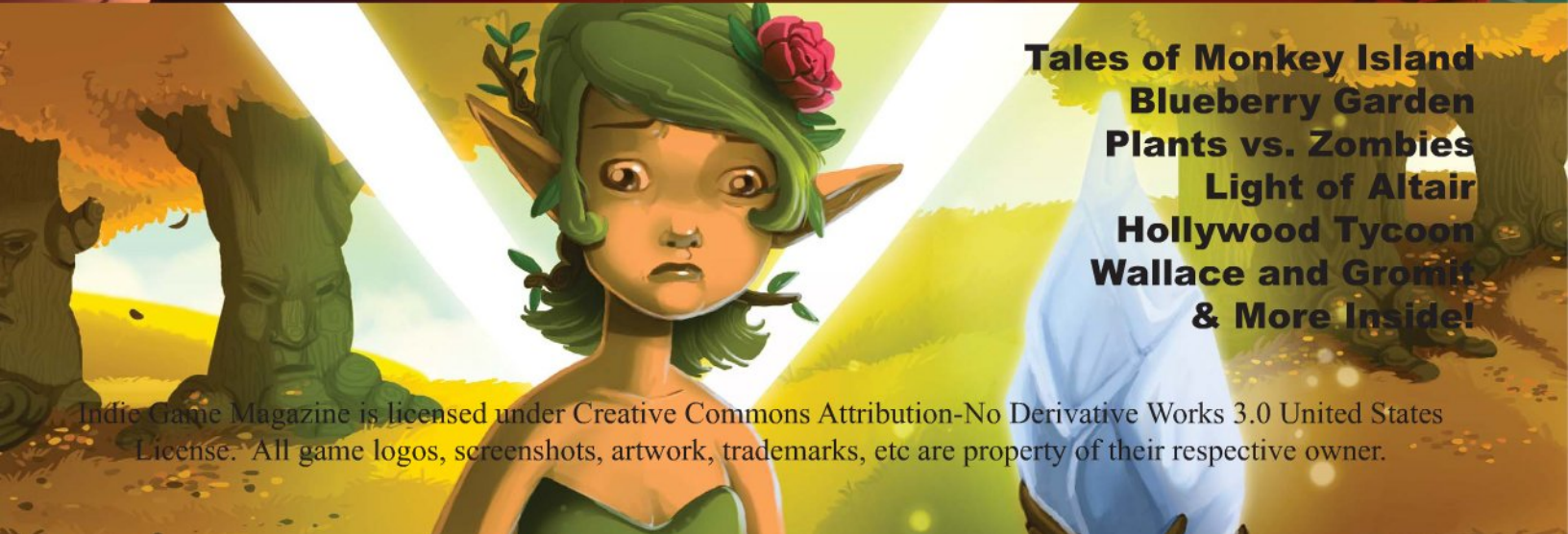
INDIE GAME MAG

Issue 6: September/October 2009

Faerie Solitaire



16 Indie Games
Reviewed including:



**Tales of Monkey Island
Blueberry Garden
Plants vs. Zombies
Light of Altair
Hollywood Tycoon
Wallace and Gromit
& More Inside!**

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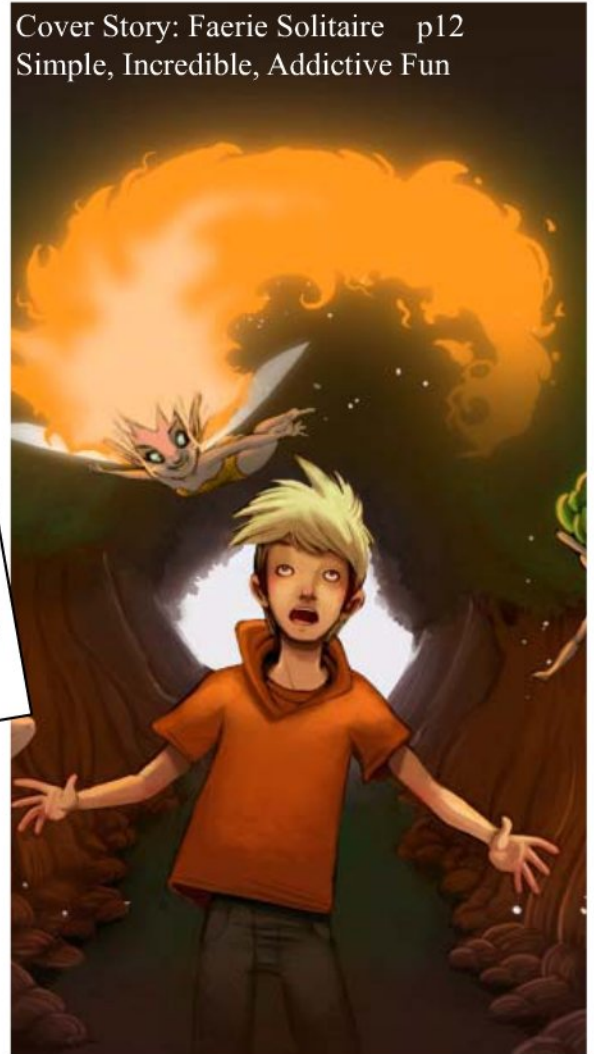


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Simple, Incredible, Addictive Fun



STAFF

Editor-in-Chief

Mike Gnade

Art & Magazine Design

Mike Gnade

Zak Gebelein

Until I Die Wallpaper

Leticia Vilela

Writers/Contributors

Taylor Hall

Caspian Prince

Mike Gnade

Zak Gebelein

Kayla McLeod

Nathaniel Edwards

Ben Montgomery

Colt Pakos

Andrew Groen

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IGM NEWS



The big news for IGM these past months is that we were invited as Press to GDC Austin. We're in the process of making all the plans and arrangements and can't wait to report and tweet right from the Exhibition Hall about all the Indie Lectures and Summits. Be sure to follow our tweets and coverage of GDC Austin in September.

In other IGM news, the website has a great new fancy look. We also have indie news submission, forums, and other great features. Check it out when you get a chance: www.indiegamemag.com

Finally, we're offering FREE subscriptions to IGM Digital through Trialpay. Basically, you sign up for something you want and we through in a free premium digital subscription.

That brings Season 1 of IGM to a close. Look for a new 6 Beginner's Guide to Indie Gaming next year.

Action Fist Preview & Interview with Beau Blyth

by Taylor Hall



Japan just got their lucky hands on "Contra:ReBirth", the 16-bit styled return to form for the series that hit WiiWare only a week after it was announced. It's a nostalgic delight for fans that remember when Contra's classic run and gun gameplay basically sold systems in the late eighties/early nineties. So when a little indie run-and-gun has me more excited than a return to form in one of my favorite series since childhood, you know "Action Fist" is looking good. Beau Blyth, developer of "Action Fist", was kind enough to give us a preview of what to expect in his hotly anticipated title.



How long have you been working on Action Fist?

Hmmm. A damn long time.

When did the main characters come about and who are they?

They were conceived when I needed a character sprite. They are the best of friends.

What are the controls going to be like? And please, don't require joy2key! When games like Spelunky have the joysticks programmed already it goes a long way towards making a game feel self-contained.

The controls will be customizable and the joystick functions are built in.

How will you be distributing it? What are you going to use to get the word out?

I will put it on my website, and most likely post it on trusty TIGsource.

I noticed in the trailer for "Action Fist", and in others like ARMED GENERATOR DOOM MACHINE, that you have some rocking bitpop. It's very Sunsoft and early Konami. Who does your OST's? The music is created by my brother Austin. He is an amazing guitarist and composer. Action Fist would be nowhere without his music inspiring me.

What is the weapons system going to be like in "Action Fist"? It looks like there might be some combining...

It is similar to that of Gunstar Heroes, but based on three variables. Color, Style, and Upgrade.

As a game that is very "early-treasure" what role does a story-line play?

I don't know what people are expecting for a run and gun game. It's more of yours to figure out.

Any customizing of characters or items?

Not really.

What engine do you use for your graphics and programming?

Game Maker by Mark Overmars

How long did you spend on getting that Cave Story/Metal Slug bullet look? (That's a compliment by the way. I hate the tiny bullets!)

Not long at all. With arrays, anything is possible. And yes, I love big colorful diverse bullets. But be prepared to encounter the trademark Contra marble bullet. It seems to be the only way to get people to notice them.

You seem to have the required Super Contra hover bike level in the demo. Every shooter and beat-em up has had a variation (most recently to my knowledge being Castle Crashers). What purpose do you think they serve and why have they become so expected?

Well, I guess it always comes across as the next logical step in developing a shooter. I really ought to have avoided it, but it's always good to add some variety.

On that note, can we expect an elevator level? I'm afraid not.

Will there be any teamwork aspect to the game. Holding up doors, anything like that?

No, just good old classic co-op. I think that holding up doors isn't so much teamwork as it is a 2 player checkpoint. I think teamwork is more apparent when you keep an enemy from shooting your friend than just helping him push a switch.

2D or 3D? Which is superior?

Neither. Each holds its own purpose. If your game doesn't demand an extra dimension, don't give it one. This reminds me of Klonoa II. It's a three-dimensional game but you are restricted to a two dimensional path. I always thought that was very innovative.

Your games are all 2-D. Would you like to make a 3D game or what about 2D attracts you?

Pixels are so sexy. Pixel art done well can be one of the most beautiful things. I really like low-poly 3d graphics as well. I have made a game using D3D called Sim War 5, But I have yet to make a full 3D game.

Where do you see action fist fitting in to your collection of games? And is this the start of longer games?

I don't really see it fitting in, seeing as though it is going to be the longest game I have made. I don't know if this is the start of longer projects. I think so. It's really rare that I will have an all encompassing idea of a large story driven game. I have attempted them in the past, but lack of planning, interest, and good programming led them to the crapper.

Any last thing you would like people to know about Action Fist?

I will do my best to not disappoint.

A hand is shown from the top left, with the index finger pointing down at a white keyboard key on a dark laptop. The key is illuminated and has the words 'MY PC' printed on it in green. The laptop is positioned diagonally across the frame. The background is a soft, light gradient.

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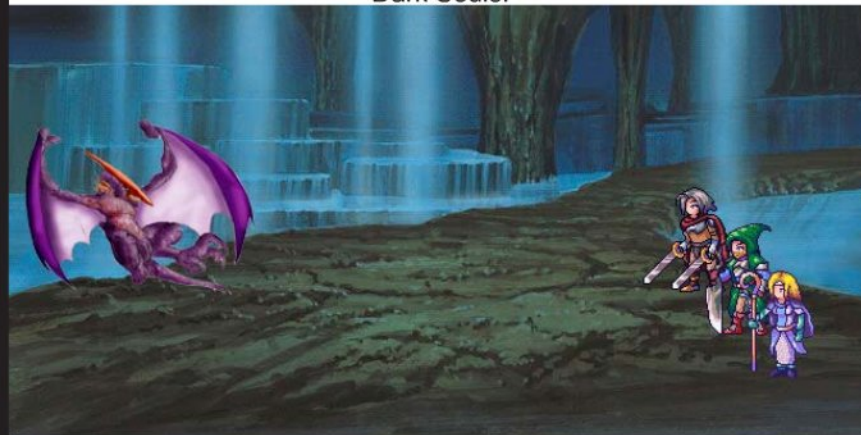
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Faerie Solitaire:



Dark Souls:



Gauly	Vallia	Ashley
HP 2083 / 2083	HP 2303 / 2303	HP 1353 / 1353
MP 139 / 139	MP 104 / 104	MP 195 / 195
[Normal]	[Normal]	[Normal]

Hollywood Tycoon:



About our Reviews

We rate all of our games based on their graphics, game-play, 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.

Blueberry Garden:



Kitten Sanctuary:



Light of Altair:



THIS ISSUE'S REVIEWERS

Caspian Prince

Cas is an indie game developer behind the critically acclaimed retro remakes over at Puppy Games (www.puppygames.net). Watch out for his next game: *Revenge of the Titans*.

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*

Andrew Groen

Andrew has been a game journalist for over four years. When playing games for review he always makes sure to read the game manual. That way, when people accuse him of getting paid to play games all day he can claim that it involves a lot of "manual labor."

Kayla McLeod

She's kinda a RPG Completionist. To the max. She also offers a new perspective on some things—a female can sometimes pick up on the things that men miss.

Ben Montgomery

Aspires to be a game journalist with his minty fresh journalism degree.

Nate Edwards

Nathaniel Edwards enjoys playing games and typing lot of words on the internet. He's been playing video games literally since before he could read, with *Super Mario RPG* one of his childhood favorites. Today, his favorite artists are Kubrick, Kojima, Van Gogh, and Pynchon, in that order. Nathaniel is attending Northwestern University, where he is majoring in Journalism and Animate Arts.

Colt Pakos

When I'm not playing Xbox or indie games, I read books by Erikson and McCarthy, watch movies by Cassavetes, and attempt to make music on Reason. I smoke cigarettes like a chimney and drink water like a fish. *Dwarf Fortress*, *Cortex Command* and *Persona 4* are the current games in rotation.

Sam Combs

An aspiring game designer and PC gamer, who's played a little bit of everything, at least for the PC. Since he spent his childhood without a TV, he was raised with a keyboard in his hands, starting with a Tandy 1000. His favorite games include *Half-Life*, *X-COM:UFO Defense*, and the *Fallout* series. He reads and writes short fiction in his spare time, when he's not studying or working on making maps for *Half-Life 2 Deathmatch*.

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

Is incredibly psyched about going to GDC Austin in September and is looking forward to finding some upcoming indie games to get excited about.



SCORE: 9.75



#1 GAME DEMO

Caspian: 10

Stroke of genius. I got completely hooked playing it. The pacing is perfect, the arrival of new things piques the interest constantly, and it expired on me right at the point that I was so hooked that I have to buy the game now. It is taking a monumental effort of will to keep my credit card locked away because otherwise I won't get any work done for several days.

This flawlessly presented gem abounds with a daft sense of humour, excellent playability, and great variation. There are all sorts of minigames and brilliant little touches. Go on, try it. I defy you not to love this game.

Mike: 10

Popcap is damn good at creating an addictive game and they demonstrate that once again with Plants vs. Zombies. Just writing the game's title makes me want to boot up the demo and play some more. I guess I would describe the game as a simplified Tower-Defense Game. You grow different plants that will protect you from crazed zombies. There is a decent amount of strategy in the game, the concept itself is hilarious, and the game is completely addicting. What more could you ask for?

Sam: 9

Plants vs. Zombies is basically tower defense with lots of polish and a novel theme. You place plants that shoot, eat, or blow up attacking zombies, keeping them from reaching your house. The difficulty ramps up nicely, and even if you've never seen a tower defense game before, you'll pick it up quickly. It might be a little easy for people who have played this type of game before, but there's still enough tension and variety to keep it exciting, and plenty of incentives to keep you playing. You earn new plants after the completion of levels, and you can collect coins used to purchase new plant cards. Having to choose which plants you'll be able to use in a level is a nice touch of strategy, and helps add some more depth. The resource collection, "sun" tokens that you have to collect as they fall from the sky or spawn from special plants, keeps you on your toes and gives you something to do while waiting for the next wave of undead. There are also different game modes, including one where you bowl down zombies with walnuts that were especially fun and a nice break from the usual. Like most PopCap games, this is highly addictive, and I wanted more when the trial ended. I'm not sure I would pay \$20 for it, but it's the best tower defense game I've played, and the demo is certainly worth a download.

Kayla: 10

This game is bound to be a favorite among casual gamers (and perhaps even those who dub themselves as 'hardcore'). Plants vs. Zombies provides a wide array of plants to choose from (around 45, I believe), plenty of feral zombies to slaughter with peashooters, a hilariously crazy neighbor and five different levels in which you must protect your yard from the zombie invasion. Strategy varies depending on the type of zombie and the level presented: for example, in the first level you collect sun in order to plant new foliage in your yard to help protect your house, but the next level is during the night. Since collecting sun is nigh impossible, so you have to utilize the vicious spores of special mushrooms and get what sun you can from sunflowers. A later level houses a pool in your backyard, forcing you to erect lily pads in the water so the plants can stay afloat.

My intent was to sit down just to play the game for a few minutes before skipping off to something else, and an hour and a half later I was still setting up potato bombs to keep the zombies at bay. The game is wonderfully addictive, the songs are catchy, and the graphics are original... what more can you ask for? I suggest everyone at least try it out.



#2: Tales of Monkey Island 8.50

Colt: 9

I was giddy to play the new chapter of Monkey Island from the moment the opening credits rolled. The Mighty Pirate™ is back, along with the sharp writing and clever puzzles the series is known for, along with a fresh graphical renewal and contemporary puzzles: combining breath mints and root beer for maximum fizz? Someone's been watching Youtube. The vivid locales and character models look great, and the keyboard-driven movement

is welcome as a laptop user, but the intro sequence with an incessantly rocking ship, along with a shifting cursor, is unnecessary. Really this is just quibbling; the voice-acting is great, the writing still punchy. Now how about some Day of the Tentacle Episodes?

Ben: 9

Tales of Monkey Island's greatest strength is still its fantastic writing. The short introduction's puzzles aren't particularly challenging, especially with the overly generous hint system (which can be turned off), but the jokes come frequently, and some of them are real knee slappers. The polygon count isn't very high, but Tales makes up for it with some stellar art direction and clever camera angles. On that note, Telltale Games' approach to moving Guybrush in a fully three-dimensional space is innovative, although occasionally clumsy; clicking and dragging Guybrush makes him move,

but he usually weaves left and right drunkenly. Actually, if the demo has one great flaw, it is interface. The pitching ship is a nice effect, but it makes clicking on objects near impossible. Included in the demo is a treasure hunting minigame separate from the main game, in which players find maps scattered across the internet, and use clues to find treasure in a large maze, which unlocks fun bonuses like wallpapers.

Mike: 8

Telltale Games is the king of point and click adventures and they continue their fine tradition of humorous episodic adventures with the continuation of the beloved Monkey Island franchise. My computer is a little on the low-end of things, but still ran the game fluidly after lowering the graphics quality. Even at the lowest quality, the graphics and animation in Tales of Monkey Island (TOMI) look great. The voice acting, music, and presentation are all top-notch with stellar production values. The worst thing about TOMI Episode 1 is that the demo is over in less than 20 minutes after downloading almost 200MB....c'mon!

Andrew: 8

Tales of Monkey Island is a revival of the classic series that does everything in its power to return as a faithful addition to the long-revered adventure classic. It succeeds in just about every way possible, providing fans of the genre the classic experience they've loved for years. However, if you're not already a fan of adventure games, Monkey Island will do little to indoctrinate you. If you don't like point-and-clickers then the snappy dialogue and solid voice acting will do little to assuage your boredom.



Sam: 7
Kitten Sanctuary is a Bejeweled type "match three" puzzle game, where you have to shift tiles around to make matches of three or more tiles, with the occasional help from power-ups. In this case, solving puzzles frees sickeningly adorable kittens from traps laid by aliens on an island populated solely by adorable kittens. Each puzzle unlocks a new kitten, which will frolic and play on the screen while you're solving the puzzles. The blocks in

the puzzles are supplies for the kittens that you have to collect to keep them happy, or coins that you can use to buy toys, decorations and extra supplies. I don't think I'm the target audience for this game, but ignoring the kitten theme, the puzzles are amazingly easy, even on the "Tricky" difficulty. On the default difficulties, the next available move is shown before you even have a chance to look for it, making playing the game a matter of clicking where the game tells you. The puzzles get a little more difficult, but I never felt like I had to hurry. And if I failed, the only punishment would be losing a kitten, and that's not much of an incentive. There's not much to do with the cats - you can play with them, but this just involves waving the mouse in front of them. I'm afraid even a devoted cat lover would lose interest after a short while. But, the game is very polished, with rich sounds - completing a combo feels rewarding. If you really, really love kittens and you haven't played Bejeweled or Puzzle Quest, or you want more of the same type of gameplay, this might be for you.



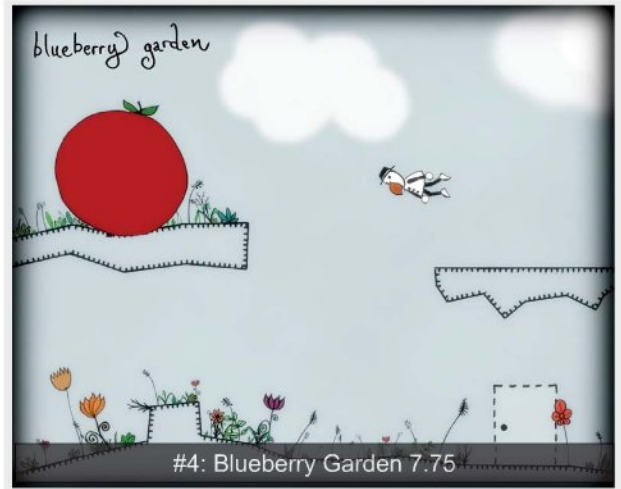
About "On Trial"

"On Trial" is a bi-monthly look at the latest Indie Game Demos. Our panel plays ten demos and rates each game on a scale of 1-10 based on the following scoring system:

Scoring System:

- 1 point if the game installs/runs
- 1 point if it doesn't crash or glitch
- 1 point if it's slickly presented
- 1 point if it's original
- 1 point if the graphics are good
- 1 point if the sound/music is good
- 1 point if the overall style is good
- 1 point if the game is fun to play
- 1 point if the game is addictive
- 1 point if we recommend buying it.

= 10 Total Points



Colt: 8
A Pelican man in a bowler hat and frisky birthday globs fend off the rising tide: winner. Blueberry Garden's gimmick is an open-world free-form journey, where the player is free to fly the sparse environment and interact with the objects therein, set to a wonderful soundtrack by Daduk. The aspect of discovery, transformation and "I can do that?" creates an excellent first impression, but my experience tapered off soon after from a combination of flying nausea and an irritable hardware compatibility. The joy of creation and freedom to explore is sustainable enough, but maybe I'm not cut out for High Art. Moving around rocks and red balls is fun, but sometimes I just want to rescue a princess. Still, Blueberry Garden is a breakaway hit, creating a wonderful environment where ultimately it rests on the player to create the adventure.

Ben: 6
Surrealistic, high-concept games like Blueberry Garden have flooded the independent game landscape in the past few years, and Blueberry Garden's pitfalls are all too familiar; lots of surrealism means scant gameplay. Players guide the game's protagonist through a garden to collect very large, inanimate objects using the aid of various power-granting edibles. Unfortunately, the puzzles protecting the objects are painfully obvious, with the necessary fruit almost always positioned right beside the object. The sense of exploration is exciting at first, but quickly dies when you catch on to the game's pattern. The most interesting aspect of Blueberry Garden is the large objects, which stack at the game's starting point as you collect them, and allow your character to glide higher and higher as you collect them. The burning question of "What is this tower going to become?" is almost enough to compel players to ignore the overly-simplified gameplay. Blueberry Garden would have been much better as a free Flash game, but as it stands isn't worth the admission price.

Mike: 8
Erik Svedang's Blueberry Garden was this year's IGF grand prize

winner. I had several problems running and enjoying Blueberry Garden. Despite the game's simplistic graphics, I had framerate issues and crashing problems (-1 pt). However, once I overcame the technical and delved into Blueberry Garden, I fell in love with the overall style of the game. The game is an open platformer which allows you to explore and interact in the garden at your own pace. AS you interact with fruits and objects in the world, you'll unlock new areas to explore. The gameplay is a little mellow with no enemies and only a small amount to explore. This game wasn't meant to be delivered in demo form. The full version is only \$5 and can be completed in a couple hours. If you like the uniqueness of the demo, it's a no-brainer purchase.

Kayla: 9
Blueberry Garden is pure, inspirational, artistic genius, but makes no pretentious claim to be so. It exposes the lackluster attempts that many main-stream production teams have when creating a platforming game and proves that there is still much, much more to offer the general public. Blueberry Garden is set in a wonderfully creative environment that promotes discovery and exploration. The music and sounds within the game are lovely. Everything has a subtle, yet fitting sound attached to it... but that's not the best thing. The piano...oh, the piano! It's always a background piece as you play, but it adds even more character to the game when it suddenly kicks in as you fly throughout your world, making the experience entirely different from flying in any other game. I bought this game, but was sorely disappointed when I played through it twice in one hour. It's small and sweet, like a blueberry, I suppose, but I have to say that it could be a detrimental factor when some consider buying it. That, and the instability that the game seems to have when downloading. It's entirely deserving of the awards it's won, and it's also a must-try. Be sure NOT to miss out.

Caspian: 9
This is possibly the most sickeningly cute match-3 game I've ever seen, wrapped up with the most sickeningly brilliant presentation I've ever seen. Seeing a game done like this reminds me why our own games don't make any money. Talking of money, I can't understand why PiEye have released Kitten Sanctuary at under \$10 - it's a premium title. If you don't own a match-3 and you want one, this is the game you should be buying at any price. There are enough little metagame additions to the core match-3 mechanic to make for a nice, fresh and original game. It's the BreakQuest of the match-3 world. Everyone else had better just give up on their own titles.

If you've got a little girl somewhere in your household and need a bit of peace and quiet, plonk her in front of this for an hour or two. She'll be able to buy all sorts of silly toys for her rescued kittens and it'll keep her busy for some time.

Kayla: 7
In an attempt to make the dreaded domestic cat seem 'cute', the developers of Kitten Sanctuary decided on making the little abominations into cuddly kittens that need rescuing from--of all things--aliens. It's set up as a cascade-style game, where supplies for your cats are presented and you have to match them with two similar tiles, both to earn points and supplies that keep your rescued cats happy. The game itself is simple, and there's no real sweat-on-brow challenges here...just mindless fun to keep you occupied for a few hours. Music within the game became somewhat repetitive after a few rounds, which caused me to delve into my computer and find some better tunes to amuse myself with. The plot is original, sure, but the oddity stems into the ridiculous. I have no idea why there's a cat sanctuary, or why in the world aliens want to steal the aforementioned cats, but they are. I learned to deal with it. Overall, the game is best suited for the younger crowd. If you're interested, try the demo out first before spending ten bucks on Kitten Sanctuary.

Mike: 9
The graphics and presentation of this game blew me away. While the gameplay is typical match-3 fare, the premise is incredibly original and the polish miles above most indie games. The game adds some nice metagames and tamagotchi style caretaking in the kitten sanctuaries. All in all a fantastic game if you're not totally bored with Match-3s. Even if you are bored of match-3s, Kitten Sanctuary is worth a peek.



#5: Hollywood Tycoon 6.50

Colt: 6

A relatively simple addition to the Tycoon and Sim genre, Hollywood Tycoon still managed to hook me. There isn't much strategy other than construct movie set, buy script, find compatible actor (according to the 4 starred attributes), then buy more sets and repeat. There are no worker strikes or external factors like earthquakes to compensate, so you won't find the depth of other management games. Still, I liked getting that little ego boost when my film was a hit. The interface and controls could use some polish, but the cheesy synth soundtrack and corny visuals add to the campy charm.

Kayla: 6

Hollywood Tycoon begins with your uncle dying and leaving you his studio. This would be amazing were it not for the fact that: A) your uncle is dead and B) his studio is mysteriously empty, leaving you with little choice other than to build it back up once more. As mentioned, you have the build the studio back up from scratch, meaning that you must build everything from actor's trailers to sound studios to a prop storage area. The way you choose to rebuild your studio is entirely up to you, as is the choice of what scripts to use, which sets to employ and what actors to hire. This gives you a wide range of tactics to utilize to become a tycoon which, in theory, this sounds rather marvelous. Reality soon struck, however, and I grew frustrated after wasting two months in-game waiting for just the right actor or plot type to scroll by. Also, the slow pace in which you earn money put a slight damper on my enjoyment level, but I assume it's because I was never meant to be a business manager. The music throughout is tolerable. It's not ambitious by any means, nor is it particularly horrid. The same can be said of the graphics—there's worse, sure, but I've also seen far better. The customizable avatar needs some tuning up. The game also skipped during every cut scene. Normally I wouldn't be quite so finicky about graphics, but if I'm to pay twenty dollars for a game, I would prefer its graphics be comparable to a game I can buy for seven. Even with all the drawbacks, Hollywood Tycoon was still entertaining, though I had no desire to buy the game myself. It was just another way to let an hour slide idly by.

Andrew: 9

It's the most fun I've had in a while. I created an explosion filled action flick called "Death Combat" starring tough guy superstars "Able Steel" and "Hunk McGiver." If that alone isn't worth the price of admission, I'm not sure what is. Unfortunately, the gameplay moves too quickly and prevents you from focusing on creating amazing films which is easily the game's biggest strong point. Still it's a delight to build huge sets and combine actors and scripts to make the perfect film.

Ben: 5

Hollywood Tycoon is great in its ability to admit the existence of a sci-fi romantic comedy, but little else. Hollywood lacks the depth usually found in a tycoon game, but tries to hide it behind funky pixelated graphics and a completely unnecessary avatar (or "avastar," ugh) customization feature. Scripts, equipment, and actors all have proficiencies in four areas: comedy, drama, romance and action. Purchasing and combining elements with the same traits makes for a lucrative picture. You can spend money to expand your sets and improve the quality of scripts, actors, etc., but the game ultimately boils down to waiting for the right actor or script card to scroll across the top of the screen.



#6: Light of Altair 5.75

Caspian: 5

Swimming with 3D polish from an ex-AAA game developer, Light of Altair is a nicely put together "Sim City" style game, where the objective is the timely construction and management of various planetary bases, the core of which is juggling space and time to get certain numbers to rise to required values. There's a slightly uncomfortable mish-mash of hand drawn 2D and polished 3D and simplistic GUI interface which spoils the overall style, and the music is shockingly bad Europop which mercifully can be turned off using one of the comprehensive options settings. Light of Altair is a good first effort, but suffers from a common problem with games of this genre in that games are very lengthy, and it may not be apparent where you're going wrong for quite some time - due in part to the fairly unclear interface and deep complexity - by which time you've probably already failed the mission but are unaware of the fact for ten minutes. Unfortunately this lack of reward for hard effort and steep learning turned me off wanting to play again.

Kayla: 3

For some reason when I downloaded Light of Altair, I expected more of an action game. Instead, I was surprised to see it was nearer to the Civilization series, where you're expected to create a colony and ensure that everything runs smoothly. You're placed on one of many spherical, 3-D planets, and thrown into the mix with little idea as to what is going on, how to maneuver, what the icons even mean, or even what in the world you're supposed to be doing. I figured parts out on my own as I ambled through it, but other things still remain a mystery. Mostly I just clicked aimlessly, hoping one click would be the right click. As a result, I failed my mission. Miserably. The lack of a decent tutorial made the game far more frustrating than it needed to be. The music and sound definitely need to be revamped. The game, set in our universe, had a singular techno song to listen, and that was it. Few sound effects were in the game itself, leaving nothing to distract from the rave in space. Compared to other games, the graphics weren't up to par. In fact, they were lacking. I got the feeling that there could have been a battle, somewhere, but repetitiously losing because I couldn't figure out how to increase my monthly trade earnings soon led me to give up hope of ever figuring out the vague plot. Light of Altair is better off being passed over.

Mike: 7

On the plus side, I ended up playing the demo a lot longer than I intended, but I kept waiting for the gameplay and strategy to click and make a lot of sense. It never quite came together for me. It reminds me a lot of Ninja Bee's Outpost Kaloki, but with deeper strategy. Everything about the game is slick: presentation, graphics, and sound. My biggest complaint is that the tutorial didn't teach me enough to not have to be sprung out of debt or use the speed up ability. Maybe I'm just a strategy buffoon. If you're more proficient or into strategy, the game will probably click for you.

Sam: 8

Light of Altair is a space colony building game. You have to build colonies and balance power, food, and happiness requirements while building up your industry and mining so you can build fleets of ships to conquer other planets, and build colonies there. The display can be a little crowded when you have ten different colonies on one planet and a rival faction has ten of their own, and it can be hard to tell one colony apart from another. But the developers did a good job of keeping almost all the necessary information at your fingertips: there aren't any menus to click through, no micromanagement, no sliders to move around, just placing buildings and building fleets, and any information you need is on the main screen. The demo only gives a taste of the combat portion - it requires a fully built up planet with tons of fuel to even think about building a ship. Once built, fleets are moved by the player from planet to planet, and combat is resolved automatically - the player can watch the battle from a birds-eye view, but not participate or move around individual units. So there's not really a focus on battle tactics, just on building and managing your colony so it can crank out more ships. All together, I enjoyed it, the demo only scratched the surface, there's a good game here. Most likely not a lot of replay value since there's only a campaign mode at the moment, but the developers have been discussing patching in a sandbox mode. The music is generic techno and a little grinding after a while, but the graphics are top notch, the planets are fun just to look at. Absolutely worth trying if you're even slightly a fan of management games.



#6: Enlightenus 5.75

Colt: 3

Enlightenus is a game of compromise: at its heart an staggeringly facile I SPY, the graphics are wonderful, the dialogue snappy, and the puzzle environments initially varied and fresh (they're recycled a few times). Your quest starts with a letter from your friend asking to help him sort out his disordered stories, promising a voyage of self-discovery. And what a voyage: straightforward memory games and condescending pixel-hunting await. Basically you pair up items in your inventory with items in the environment, each ones name frustratingly literal. Examples: carving knife, unfinished carving, wine for two, wine glass pair, hungry rabbit. Maybe this game is designed for kids? With likable animations and what I glimpsed of the clever writing, Enlightenus could make a great point-and-click. As is, Enlightenus successfully stomps out any flashes of inspiration.

Kayla: 8

Enlightenus is a stunning example of how to do hidden object games right. Between the slickly presented graphics and the many different environments available, I never once found myself growing bored with the game as I played it. In fact, once the one hour demo was complete, I found myself wanting buy the game for the small price of seven dollars. Before I've had the misfortune of wasting my spare time on hidden object games, but I didn't feel the same way about Enlightenus. Enlightenus requires logical deduction; something that's sorely missing from many games of the same type. Obscure objects aren't just thrown into the game for you to randomly click around and, by chance, figure out where it goes. No, everything here has a proper home...the only trouble is finding it. Many objects are presented within a level, and the one you may be looking for could be hidden between several other objects, or you must first solve other puzzles within the level first. For example, I was given a bug jar, but couldn't rightly use it, considering the fact that there were no bugs in sight. After several minutes of deep contemplation, I finally placed a fly in a web, and down came a spider...which just-so-happened to fit wonderfully within that aforementioned jar. One point for me! The graphics were wonderfully presented—some levels were bright and cheerful, like the toy shop; others were dark, dirty, and mysterious like the haunted mansion. The ambient music within the game was only slightly repetitive—in all honesty, I was so preoccupied scouring over the level to find objects that it didn't agitate me in any way. My only complaint about the game was that it lagged a bit at parts, mainly the cut scenes. Otherwise, the game was wonderful, and I even recommended it to a few friends. You'd be foolish to pass this one over!

Andrew: 5

Enlightenus is a simple adventure game which tasks you with helping a famous author find all of his novels after a mystical force rearranges his stories. It's a decent premise, and the gameplay and puzzles are decent with a good challenge curve. But the main gameplay unfolds as little more than a point-and-click objects search as you try to find things in a giant mess of objects. It's decent enough to warrant playing the demo, but I don't feel like many people will want to continue beyond that point.

Ben: 7

The hidden objects genre has long been a casual games favorite. Enlightenus takes the concept and applies it to a point-and-click adventure game. As a detective, you must track down your favorite author and his magical novels through the fantasy world of Enlightenus, a parallel universe where the author goes for inspiration. The casual nature means that the game isn't terribly challenging (and does out hints left and right). On the plus side, the game is beautiful and has a fantastic, whimsical feel to it. It'd be great to praise the sound design, too, as the first few minutes of the game are genius. Footsteps and door creaks echo through the old mansion, inviting you to explore. Unfortunately, all of this stops when you enter Enlightenus. If you're a fan of the hidden object genre, you'll enjoy this twist on it.



#8: Dark Souls 5.33

Sam: 4
 Dark Souls is a Japanese RPG along the lines of Final Fantasy, with SNES-style sprite graphics. The gameplay is standard JRPG fare: enemies randomly appear as you wander around, you're taken to a battle screen and fight by choosing attacks or spells from menus. Frankly, I wasn't impressed. The game starts with about ten minutes worth of dialogue to click through, which is riddled with spelling errors and poor grammar. The character portraits are terribly drawn, and don't match at all with the acceptable sprites and backgrounds. Through the cut-scenes, you learn that you are Gauly, a mercenary on the run from the law, who ends up taking an escort mission from a church. I'm not exactly sure why, Gauly was protesting the entire time, he seems to have a slight attitude problem. I understand that it's a JRPG, but there was no illusion of being in control, the game only gave me one path to take: I guess I'm more used to the Western RPG approach. The story seemed trite and clichéd: mercenary with a dark past, reluctantly taking a mission with the church fighting "evolutionists". Besides the poor character art and typos in the dialogue, there's nothing wrong with the game per se, but there's nothing here that hasn't been done better before, and the story isn't novel or interesting enough to keep my interest. Maybe a lover of JRPGs might find something here, but the demo was a grind for me. I'm sure it took some effort from the team that made it, but they need a bit more polish to make it worth the \$20 purchase price.

Kayla: 6
 Dark Souls is another turn-based, random encounter style RPG, but it fosters what appears to be a promising storyline that could keep players occupied for a good amount of time. Your antihero of a main character is Gauly, who is not, surprisingly, a spiky-haired teenager with a pompous attitude like one would come to expect. Instead, he's an older man with serious issues and a past that continues to haunt him. The other characters have their own unique personalities, some stronger than the others, and all of them have the potential to develop quite nicely. As mentioned, the gameplay follows the tried-and-true RPG mold, reminiscent of the older Final Fantasy games. Also, as with Final Fantasy, the music is lovely and changes with each area you enter. The art during battles was very well done: the backgrounds were breathtaking and the sprites were well rendered. A surprising amount of detail was paid to the smallest of things (if you play the demo, view the altar at the church). The drawings beside the dialogue of the speaking character could definitely use some work, as it detracts from the beauty surrounding it, casting a slightly negative shadow on all the effort placed in to designing the world for Dark Souls. Another detracting feature is the common grammatical errors, as well as the blunders made throughout the hour-long demo, one of the best being: "I know what you're passing through". Hilarious. If these minor issues were to be patched up, Dark Souls would be another solid RPG, which any fan of the genre would be quite pleased with.

Mike: 4
 Dark Souls is an archaic RPG with randomized enemies and SNES style graphics. The music/sound is exactly as expected and quickly wore on my nerves. The gameplay is typical old school Japanese RPG with all the same trappings. Overall the game lacks polish. Why does my character walk fast but have a slow walking animation? Why can't I use the mouse to navigate the menus? Dark Souls is a decent JRPG, but it follows tradition too heavily and I'm not playing on a SNES.

Caspian: N/A
 Wouldn't run with the message "RGSS Player has stopped working" on my up-to-date Vista 64 system.



#9: Soaped Up Air 5.25

Andrew: 4
 Soaped UP Air is a fun and simple game, but one that is ultimately too lacking in depth to be worth the trouble. It's not that the game is bad; everything that's in the game is solid. But I doubt even Miyamoto could make blowing bubbles around obstacles fun for more than five minutes. I have to give proper respect though, to this game's fantastic soundtrack that perfectly captures the theme of the game.

Colt: 5
 Soaped Up Air sounds like a NPR newscast, and is about as fun, depending on how you feel about Terri Gross. The physics engine plays well enough, but I can't think of a lamer protagonist than a bubble. As you guide your avatar through obstacles intent on ruining the fizzy fun, an understated score keeps any mirth in check, but remains a welcome addition. Soaped Up Air is definitely polished, with language selection, time attack and high score modes, but no keyboard support makes it a nightmare for laptops. Apparently later levels shoot you into space and snow regions, where you face black holes and angry wind currents, but I clocked out once I gained control of multiple bubbles. Good for a rainy afternoon, but hell, it's summer! With all the fresh-faced Monkey Islands running around, do you really want play with bubbles?

Mike: 4
 Soaped up Air is certainly a creative and unique game. The goal is to blow a soap bubble from point A to point B. Why? No reason. The game suffers from mediocre graphics and low production values. It doesn't help that Okashi Itsumo's (the developer) English is riddled with errors. The game plays pretty well, but it's production and overall value make it impossible to recommend at \$10.

Kayla: 8
 Soaped Up Air is one of those games that most will love and the rest will find it bash-your-head-against-the-keyboard boring. You play the role of a cute little soap bubble that, for whatever reason, is trying to get from point A to B without popping. Sounds simple, but, like always, there are obstructions blocking your way.

You propel the bubble by using your mouse, which acts as a fan to push the bubble in the direction you want it to go while avoiding anything dangerous. You're given the ability to recharge your bubble's health but, of course, it doesn't do you much good when it's pressed between two hard objects (spoiler: that kills your bubble).

Hiding behind the cutesy exterior and awkward typographical errors lay the surprisingly complex mechanics of the game. You're able to control multiple bubbles at the same time, allowing them to either move with your bubble or in the opposing direction to help offset the many traps within each presented level. Your poor bubble will probably be destroyed several times while you attempt to work out the best solution to each puzzle, but the ends justify the means...especially when you have unlimited lives.

The music, though, was one of my favorite aspects of the game. I don't know what it was about the simple formula of scales and arpeggios being played, but something caught my attention and I fell in love with it almost immediately. It suited the simplicity of the graphics and the complexity behind the game perfectly. Soaped Up Air comes highly recommended by yours truly. Pick it up and try it out—you might just thank me later.



#10: AI War: Fleet Command 3.66

Sam: 7
 AI War is a space-based RTS, with all the trappings of a regular RTS: resource collection, unit building, and destroying the enemy. The unique draws here are the immense scale of the battlefields and number of ships involved in combat - more than 30,000 units according to the website. The other potential draw is the cooperative multiplayer campaigns, which I didn't get a chance to try out. Just from the tutorials and an hour of the campaign, this is a demanding game, mainly due to the scale. Just finding your units to click on them is a chore, and you have to hunt them down a lot on the huge playing field. This might be helped by hotkeys, but those didn't come up in the tutorial. The text (and there's a lot of it in unit descriptions) is hard to read, and the interface in general is kind of painful. The developers say the game is "by genre veterans, for genre veterans" and I believe it. The tutorials do a good job of giving you the basics, but playing feels more like a chore than playing a game. It's too impersonal and distant, with too much to keep track of to be fun. It doesn't help that the battles aren't very exciting, with ships surrounding each other and blasting each other at close range without moving. When I imagine space battle, I think of something closer to Homeworld with 3D unit and generous use of the Z dimension, and there's none of that here. That doesn't mean this game isn't rewarding, but it seems like something you can pick up the basics fairly easily, and spend a few months mastering. But it takes a special kind of person to like games with this much to manage, and for those people, I think AI War has a lot to offer.

Caspian: 1
 A fiddly online installation for this one requiring far too many button presses and thinking. Honestly - just give me a massive download that installs with a double click and a simple tap-tap-tap on the next button. And screw your license agreements. I don't agree with any of them because I never read them. And while you're at it, don't hide your game in an Arcen War subfolder in my start menu. Put it in a top level folder. The sum of a thousand cuts costs you a point. Another incredibly complicated strategy game, which they claim will take at least 10 hours to complete a campaign, I couldn't really devote the time to explore fully what it has to offer. But that's fine - what I'm here to determine is whether it's worth "you" checking it out. The fairly detailed hand-drawn pixel graphics are from a bygone age, circa mid-90s, and the music once again is fairly torturous, the sound sparse, and there doesn't really seem to be an actual style. The tutorial is particularly dull, and highlights some issues that the developers might have easily picked up on, notably that their interface is pretty bad and unintuitive, despite the game essentially being the same fare as pretty much any other RTS. Why break convention? It's as if absolutely no external testing managed to provide feedback to the developers. The tutorial stages can't even be skipped. And so it goes on. I expect you'd have to be an extreme fan of space based RTS games to enjoy this game. Imagine Homeworld, but flat, fiddly, unintuitive and with a lot less polish. It gains a single solitary point from mere not crashing.

Mike: 3
 The game started off bad by having a list of prerequisite downloads and installations. The fact that it took over 30+ minutes to get to playing the game was quite annoying. It also required a restart. All of this hassle for lackluster pixel graphics and annoying music? Oh and there's also three extensive tutorials for me... Honestly, I was so fed up with this tactical game that I didn't give the gameplay much of a chance...it's very involved and hardcore and will only appeal to the very strategic. If you're not a strategy fan don't even think about going through downloading and installing this demo.

Kayla: N/A
 As I loaded the game, I came up with the error message. This was quite disappointing, as the game looked marvelous. I'm assuming this is more of an issue with my computer than the game, though.



Faerie Solitaire by Subsoap is a version of a linear adventure style card game similar to Fairway Solitaire. The story goes that a bunch of faeries from all the areas of Faerie Land have been captured by an evil wizard. Surprisingly, playing solitaire rescues them. To be honest the story didn't rope me in and at times I wished I could skip some of it to play the cards. Now playing the game was another story. I was simply addicted to the gameplay, graphics and innovative additions to a classic card game. I found myself returning to the game night after night until I completed it.

There are three different gameplay modes to Faerie Solitaire: the adventure mode, a free play mode, and a challenge mode. In the adventure mode, each level presents you with objectives that must be completed before continuing to the next stage. Each level lays out a number of cards arranged in different patterns. Your ultimate goal is to clear the screen and receive a perfect score. Card combos and meeting level objectives result in ridiculous amounts of money and power-ups.

The gameplay is similar to Solitaire in that the usual suit of cards are provided and you have to clear the card arrangements by flipping cards from your "stock" pile and pull cards from the "tableau" either one above or one below the target. The suit of the card doesn't matter, just the number (be it higher or lower). Each stage is

broken into nine hands or levels and each level has its own objective (i.e.- number of perfects, combo size or amount of cash). Sounds simple, right?

The beauty is that clever variables are slowly introduced. I'll admit I was denied more than a few perfect completions by frozen cards (unlocked by a fire card) and cards ensnared by vines (accessed by a rose card). The variables tend to alter how a player approaches a hand. I found myself almost obsessing over unlocking these cards and foregoing larger combos. If the player doesn't meet all the required stage objectives, they are sent back to repeat the entire stage.

During the progression of the game, the player collects eggs and other resources. The players can then hatch and evolve these eggs with the resources collected. It's a fun feature, but doesn't drastically affect the gameplay. They do add to the achievements that can be unlocked by the player, of which there are many.

The free mode allows players to return to different parts of the story and replay levels. It definitely adds to replay value that cards are randomly generated each time the level is started. However, both the adventure mode and free mode weren't the most difficult to play. The challenge mode addressed definitively addresses the lack of difficulty in the other more casual modes. Some of the level objectives are down right insidious (I still can't complete a level in under a minute).

Faerie Solitaire has solid graphics. The game is beautifully designed and each level is well incorporated into the overarching theme of the game. For a low budget game the hand-drawn backgrounds and cut-to storyboards really dress to impress. Card animations, lighting effects and particle effects were used without being overwhelming. I was especially impressed with the thought that went into all aspects of the game. For example, there were different

graphics for all the different pets, faerie land and the un-lockable content. It's not the top of the line in the graphics department, but it is a fantastic experience.

The Subsoap guys did a good job coming up with a full voiceover for the storyline segments of the game. I admit I wasn't enthralled by the storyline and the cliffhanger ending but the voiceovers added a little something to the storytelling experience. The levels had some great ambient music in background (I can still hear it) and the card sound effects were good. I love the fireball sound.

Story aside, Faerie Solitaire has lasting appeal going for it. The simplicity and strangely addictive qualities found in the game provide for hours of entertainment. Insidious objectives in the challenge mode and the randomness found in the hands dealt, provide for quality replay value.

I'll admit I didn't discover the Faerie Land feature until I played the game full through to completion. Having said that, I wish I had. During the adventure mode, the player collects money on each level. I enjoyed watching my cash add up, but had I known, I would have been banking that money in Faerie Land on upgrades.

Between the levels, the player has the opportunity to visit Faerie Land and purchase buildings that grant power-ups, such as: multiple undos, additional time and cards being playable at the start of the hand. I've since built up my Faerie Land and returned to the challenge mode. I had a significant advantage in my favor after the upgrades.

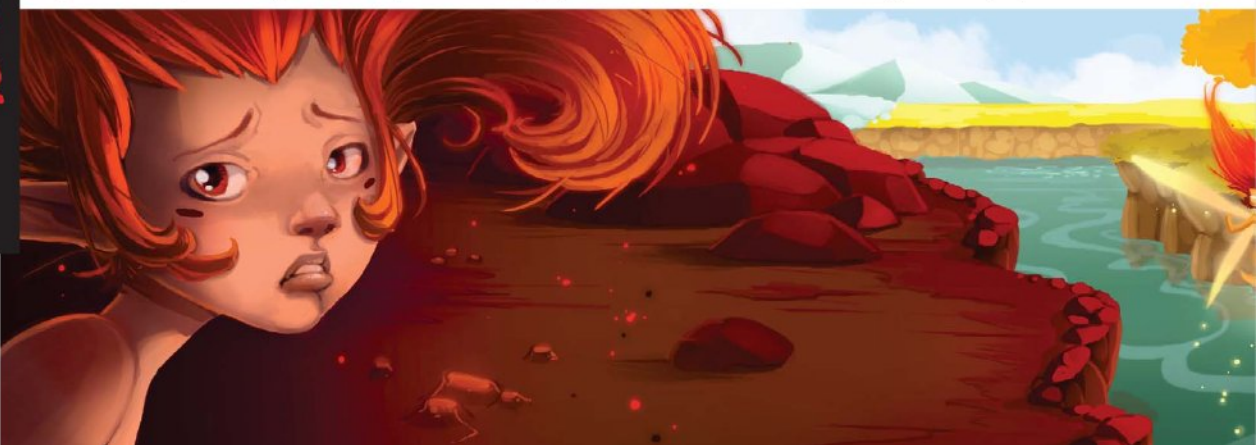
The ever random card tableaux along with smooth gameplay and challenging objectives keep the lasting appeal fresh and endlessly (almost frightfully) addictive. It just goes to show that a little magic can be created without all the hype of a major production studio.

Faerie Solitaire Review by Zak



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

Final: 89%
Grade: B+





Faerie Solitaire



Fairway Solitaire

VS

Let's start out by expelling all the bad. Faerie Solitaire by Subsoap is a blatant clone of last year's Fairway Solitaire. The gameplay is nearly identical and there's even a dubious similarity in the game's name. While the game is not a unique concept, the execution is absolutely sublime. I guess the moral of the story is: If you're going to copy a game, do it better.

Last year Fairway Solitaire took the already simplistic card game and adapted it for the casual game space. The gameplay in Fairway Solitaire (and now Faerie) doesn't have much to do with Solitaire. Instead of alternating suits and arranging cards from high to low, you simply click away cards based on the active card at the top of the deck. It's more like counting than Solitaire. If a two is active, click 3, 4, 5, and then back down to 4... It's all explained in both games better, but hopefully you get the idea. While the gameplay is simplistic, it's also utterly addictive. There's something about getting that long combo that is very satisfying and each level challenges the player to rid the field of ALL the cards.

So what makes Faerie Solitaire better? Faerie Solitaire has superior graphics, effects and beautiful cutscenes that tie into a cohesive story. The single player is comprised of an adventure mode that progresses through a wide range of different locales. There are also a plethora of additional features which keep players utterly addicted to clicking cards. There's a Tamagotchi-esque minigame that involves collecting eggs, hatching pets, and evolving them. Not to mention the upgrade store, achievements and appropriately named 'Challenge Mode'. While I vastly prefer the Fairway Solitaire golf motif and scoring system, Faerie Solitaire outshines it in presentation, features, graphics, and music.

Faerie Solitaire is a shining example of how to make a successful indie/casual game. The developer found a successful portal game online, copied it, improved it, and cast it with fantastic production values. Both Fairway and Faerie Solitaire have the simple, fun and addictive card gameplay, but Faerie wraps it up in a much tighter and feature packed game. The game is simply enchanting.

Head to Head
Review
by Mike

Gameplay: Fairway Solitaire



While the games play nearly identical, Fairway Solitaire came up with it first and Faerie doesn't really mess with their original formula. Plus Fairway's golf motif and par scoring system is great.

Graphics: Faerie Solitaire



This is a close one, but ultimately Faerie edges out Fairway. While Fairway has a great cartoon look to it, Faerie's cards are significantly more detailed and its locales vary a lot more than the greens of a golf course....not to mention the highly detailed cutscenes.

Sound/Music: Fairway



This is another really close call. Both Games music feature laidback and unintrusive music, but Fairway's golf sound effects give it a slight edge. Maybe it's just the golfer in me.

Lasting Appeal: Faerie



Faerie's magical creatures, story, and challenge mode and Faerie Land upgrade store means there's a lot more game than Fairway. The challenge mode is especially difficult and fun.

WINNER: FAERIE SOLITAIRE





Pahelika: Secret Legends

Developer: IronCode - Players: 1 - Website: www.ironcode.com

Pahelika Review by Kayla



Gameplay: 7
Graphics: 8
Sound: 9
Appeal: 4

Final: 73%
Grade: C



Pahelika: Secret Legends is a first-person point-and-click puzzle adventure, much along the lines of the Myst series. You're in the shoes of an unnamed character, seeking the truth behind the old tales passed down through the generations of his family: a demon king had been defeated using an ancient, magical tome, which had since fallen under the protection of Monks of the Old Order. One day the main character uncovers a strange book from his attic that acts as a teleportation device, delivering him to six separate and unique challenges where he must use his intellect to progress onwards to the next level, and ever towards discovering the location of Pahelika..

Gameplay: It should be noted that I am not, by any means, a fan of the puzzle/point-and-click adventure games. Usually, for me, the puzzles are either so difficult that I can sense the developers plotting against me or there's so little variation to the game that it doesn't hold my interest for long. Pahelika, however, is a different story.

Like most other puzzle games, Pahelika is very linear. You cannot, and will not, do anything out of order. Puzzles presented within the game were quite creative and it seemed fairly obvious that the creators spent a good deal of time on them. The difficulty of the puzzles, though, varied greatly--many were easy, a bit too much so, and as a result the first third of the game was completed in less than an hour. After that point, the answers to some puzzles became so inconspicuous that the game verged on being frustrating at points. More than once I was completely and utterly bewildered on how to progress, such as when I couldn't figure out a code to open a puzzle box. Knowing full well that I must have missed something, I spent nearly twenty minutes retracing my steps in an attempt to discover what the code could be. Little did I know that the code was, seemingly, entirely random and without any clues, and there was no way I ever would have assumed it to

have been the right answer. The graphics, too, played a part in the difficulty of some puzzles, but that will be mentioned later.

The creators put together a free walk-through for the users to revert to if they found themselves dumbfounded, but even within the walkthrough there was little instruction at parts. For example, when I was presented with a puzzle of five levers that needed to be pulled in the correct sequence, the walkthrough just mentioned something about trial and error. Well, that's dandy, but, last I checked, that's 120 different possibilities. At least provide some clue within the game, please, about what the answer could be.

The overall interface of the game was quite smooth and very easy-to-use. There were ample instructions on how the game operated, and on some occasions, if I was unable to discover the correct answer to a puzzle, the game would grant me a hint as to what I should do next. If you needed to return to a previous location to complete the puzzle, you would know so by the arrow in the top right. When only needing objects within the room you were currently standing within, there would be no arrow to take you back, leaving you with the understanding that everything you needed was right in front of you.

Graphics: Overall, the graphics in Pahelika were exceptionally well done, but that doesn't mean it's without imperfections. As mentioned earlier, some puzzles were made difficult in a manner that never was intended—at some points it was quite difficult to tell a usable item apart from the background. I needed an arm for a robot, but was unable to find where it was because it blended in far too well with the machinery it was lying on. When playing through the first portion of the game, I thought the graphics were far too dark and made it hard to see some necessary items, but as I advanced to areas beyond I discovered areas

brighter, more lively, and with more detail contrasted to the first. With this being said, though, the colors were still rather drab.

Pahelika's story is defined through cut-scenes done in a fashion similar to a comic book, with a voiceover narrating the scenes as they pass. The art in each panel is well rendered, and manages to accomplish its goal of making the game appear realistic while still in the realm of fantasy. On the downside the cut-scenes are lengthy and without the ability to skip through them. Normally I wouldn't mind this, but when the cut-scenes between each level are exactly the same, I became slightly aggravated...but only slightly.

Music/Sound: I was surprised by the quality of the sound and music within the game. The ambiance created by the sounds was realistic and appropriate for each situation. Personally, I thought the voiceover could have been more enthusiastic about his job, but I suppose it could have been intentional in order to maintain the realism that the creators wanted. The sounds changed with each area, ensuring that nothing became too monotonous as you played.

Lasting Appeal: Overall, Pahelika: Secret Legends was a fun adventure that provided some creative, fun challenges, but with little replay value. Pahelika's linear gameplay means that there is no variation beyond what is presented the first time through. The ending left me feeling cheated: I made it through the six levels, only to be told that the remainder of the story is for another game? Seriously?

Despite its downfalls, Pahelika is still a solid puzzle adventure which many will be sure to buy and enjoy. \$19.99 is too steep a price to pay for a 3-hour game in my opinion, so be sure to play the demo before deciding to buy it. Who knows? You may just get hooked yourself.



REVIEWS

Wallace & Gromit: Episode 1

Developer: Telltale Games- Players: 1 - Website: www.telltalegames.com



Wallace and Gromit's Grand Adventures is another season of humorous adventures from Telltale games. Episode 1: Fright of the Bumblebees follows the loveable duo starting their own honey business and getting into some trouble along the way. The game is short but sweet, so as Wallace would say, "Let's Get Cracking."

Gameplay: 7/10

The gameplay revolves around visiting different locales, collecting items, interacting, and solving puzzles. I didn't find any puzzle particularly challenging. I wish that more of the puzzles revolved around the construction or repair of Wallace's crazy gadgets, but perhaps they are saving that for future episodes. While the gameplay is typical of a point and click adventure game, the Story of Fright of the Bumblebees will keep you playing till the end of the episode.

One of my biggest complaints about the Xbox version is that the framerate is terrible. Animations pause and the game just chugs along at certain points. There's no reason the Xbox should struggle with this relatively slow paced game. I also ran into a few bugs that completely froze the game. Surprisingly, this was entirely the game's fault and I was still able to access the Xbox Dashboard and exit out of the game. This poor port to the Xbox does cause needless frustration and affects the enjoyment of the game.

Graphics: 8/10

The graphics of the game do an excellent job of capturing the claymation that Wallace and Gromit are known for. It's a shame that the graphics weren't done entirely in clay, but for the sake of time I guess it is ok. As mentioned earlier, some of the technical difficulties affected the otherwise brilliant animations.

The characters that populate West Wallaby street may all be top-notch, but some of the environments in the game were a little sparse. While Wallace's house has an excellent attention to detail, I felt that some of the other environments could have used a little more attention. I found the road to the town square especially jarring. This pulled me out of the delightful British world of Wallace and Gromit and made me feel like I was looking at polygons rather than a quaint world of clay.

Sound/Music: 8/10

The voice work in the game is top-notch, well executed and captures the tone of Wallace and Gromit. While a seasoned Wallace fan will notice that Wallace is voiced by someone else, they do a pretty good impression and it doesn't really detract from the game or story. The music is varied throughout the few acts in this first episode and fits each troubled scenario that Wallace and Gromit face.

Lasting Appeal: 7/10

Let's get the bad out of the way... there is pretty much zero replay-ability for this game. Half the fun of a click adventure game is learning how to solve a particular puzzle. The other half is experiencing the story. While the Xbox version has a few achievements you may need to replay a particular act to get, the gameplay of these types of games will never be their selling points.

That being said, the story of Fright of the Bumblebees is excellent. The game serves as an extended Wallace and Gromit episode, so if you're a fan of any of their TV specials or movie you simply must experience this game. Despite all the technical hiccups and shortcomings of Fright of the Bumblebee as a game, I can't help but look forward to playing through and experiencing the next game. Not because I want to solve puzzles and play it, but because I want to watch and enjoy the story.

Wallace and Gromit will certainly satisfy any adventure gamer out there yearning for a new point & click adventure, but what the game does best is serve the fandom of the claymation cartoon. If you are a fan of Wallace and Gromit, make sure you don't miss any of these new episodes (I recommend the PC version over the XBLA).

Wallace & Gromit
Episode 1: Fright
of the Bumblebees

Review by Mike



Gameplay: 7
Graphics: 8
Sound: 8
Appeal: 7

Final: 75%
Grade: C





Foosball Maniac

Developer: Cybertron CT - Players: 1
 Website: www.foosballmaniac.com

Foosball Maniac is probably the best video game adaptation of foosball you'll ever play. But is it worth the asking price of \$10? No.

That's not really the fault of the small two-man team, Cybertron BT, but this game simply doesn't give enough to be worth \$10. There is nothing to the game besides a simple single-player mode, with computer opponents of increasing difficulty unlocking one after the other as you beat them in 5-point games. Were it not for the game's technically impossible difficulty level, (more on that later), the game might only take you an hour to beat. Without any modes or added value beyond the single-player campaign, the game isn't worth playing as much more than freeware.

Foosball is not a computer-friendly game. The game was meant to be a physical way to play soccer (football) inside your home, and it just doesn't work very well with video game controls. In real life, you have to use both hands, spinning and switching between the control rods, which is already awkward to coordinate for many people. The rod-spinning dynamics don't map well to a keyboard, joystick, or even console game controller, so in any video game version of foosball, you're left either barely able to hit the ball, unable to switch between rods well enough, or in the case of this game, still handicapped by the fact you can only move one rod at a time. This game does the best job of any foosball video game I've ever played at letting you control things, and yet it's still frustrating. My typical foos-

ball strategy is to keep one hand on the goalie rod to bat away any sudden strikes on my goal, and that's just impossible in this or any other foosball game.

Each computer opponent is introduced through a glumour shot and a three-sentence bio, all of which boil down to "This opponent is slightly harder to beat than the last one". The two-level demo gives you possibly all you'll ever need of the game, given just how difficult the computer opponents get after that. The first two or so opponents will hardly touch the ball, and yet they can still beat you through your own goals alone. This breaks the typical game design maxim "Look hard, but play easy." The computer plays like a toddler, and yet it's still difficult to beat, even in the first levels. The game's website even says that no one has apparently ever beaten the final level, so I guess they can advertise that you could spend an eternity on this game and never beat it, which is actually good.

There's not much more to the game. It looks fine, and plays better than any other foosball video game I've seen (more than one song would have been nice, though) but there's not enough content and the base game isn't very satisfying. This is probably why EA is making all of its money off of FIFA and not ITSF (look it up).

Review by Nathaniel

Gameplay: 6
 Graphics: 7
 Sounds/Music: 6
 Lasting appeal: 5

Verdict: 60%



T.W.T.P.B.

Developer: Spell of Play - Players: 1
 Website: www.spellofplay.com

They Want Their Planet Back is an old school vertical shooter through and through. It offers a substantial challenge and some decent bullet candy.

Gameplay: 8

TWTPB's strongest design choice is the use of the mouse. While this might put off some of the retro hardcore players, it adds an ease of playability to the game and makes your ship incredibly agile. The upgrade system and new power moves every weapon keeps the gameplay interesting and above average. My biggest complaint about the gameplay is that the first boss is too hard and that it is very hard to tell when you get hit/damaged since there is no special effect or explosion.

Graphics: 6.5

The enemies in TWTPB are nameless geometric shapes. These shapes feel a little lazy, especially in light of the 3D rendered ship that the player controls. The presentation of the graphics makes up for some of this monotony with excellent bullet effects and explosions. More variety in enemies and explosions would have been nice, but the package still comes together well.

Sound/Music: 6

There's really nothing to say about the sound effects and music. They're perfectly sufficient, yet instantly forgettable. The music is a pulsing rock/techno type soundtrack and the sound effects are minimal. The enemies apparently are made of glass or crystal, because that's what all the impacts sound like. That's a shame since I would like to think that all the bullets flying out of my ship had some power to them.

Lasting Appeal: 5

Earning new moves (especially the slo-mo move) each mission keeps things fresh, but it's absurd to think that this game's 10 missions should be valued at \$20. TWTPB is a good but short vertical shooter with limited lasting appeal. I hate to recommend down-pricing in Indie Gaming, but this game is clearly overpriced.

Ultimately, TWTPB is a good shooter which shines because of its special moves and upgrades. It's ridiculously overpriced and a nuisance to download since the developer requires the install of a "Steam"-like Game hub.

Review by Mike

Gameplay: 8
 Graphics: 6.5
 Sounds/Music: 6
 Lasting appeal: 5

Verdict: 70%





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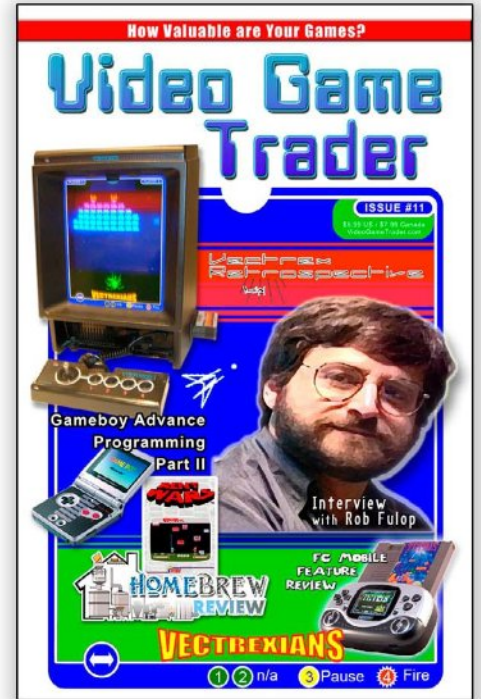
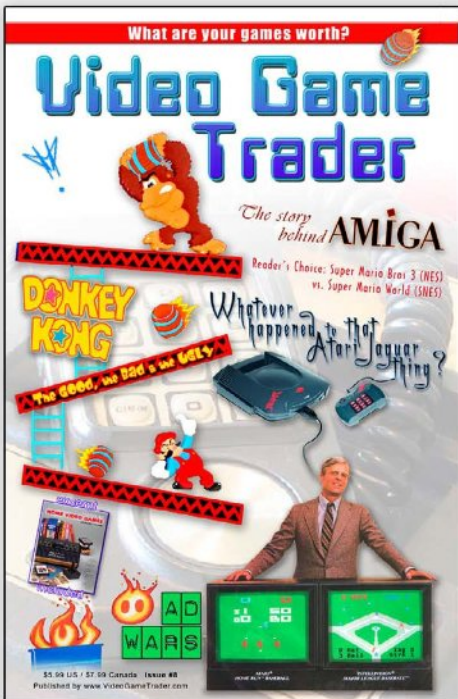
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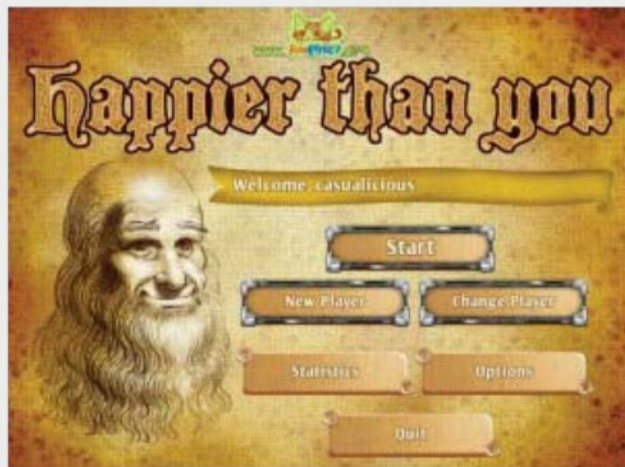
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Happier Than You

Developer: Fun Effect - Players: 1 - Website: www.funeffect.com

"Happier than you" is a game wrapped in a message of peace and happiness, hidden under bad graphics and unique gameplay.

At its core, HTY is a game designed to teach empathy. Managing the needs and delights of multiple people and sharing resources for the common good. It is also, however, a game of "graph management" as players try to keep all graphs (and thus their avatar happiness) equal. But doing so is complicated by each graph having their own sub-graphs to manage.

It starts off simple enough, pick three colors to build an invention for one of your three people. Each person has a few favorite colors, and if you choose their colors as one of your three choices, an invention is built. Building inventions increases the happiness of the chosen avatars - something you want. This is soon made complicated by sub-attributes like "jealousy" that have their own colors to keep down. And as you progress, there are more colors to choose, more people to keep happy and more attributes to juggle. During all this, you must keep up with the prices of each of the colors, buy more when they're in low demand, and sell when they're in high demand, in order to increase your points as a merchant (awarded at the end of the level, along with inventor and diplomat points). I enjoyed this sub-game, but in the long run it became one of the most monotonous parts of the game because of the ease of trading.

The game rewards a job well done with trophies. These trophies give you keys and those keys open up the higher difficulty, but somewhere along the line, it became conflicting. While the game was interesting, the gameplay wasn't compelling enough to play for more than an hour at a time. Though if you like the resource-management of RTS without the RT, then HTY is the scratch you've been itching for.

The game also suffers from "XNA Syndrome", an indie game with bland graphics and textures that make it look like a Mac game from the emac-era. The people (avatars) to keep happy are represented by voodoo looking heads on a line graph; it works, but is very utilitarian in its delivery. The only problem with the graphics is that text boxes don't have a background color to separate them from the game graphics. You have to constantly move the text box around to read properly or it blends in with the words in the game. It would have been nice if the developers had put more effort into making their game visually-unique, but HTY isn't a graphically dependent game anyway.

The music is delightful. Using free-license classical music, the game sets a mood that is very in-hand with the gameplay. Mostly calm and soothing pianos, there are a few orchestrations involving creepy tunes that add tension, but I personally felt they were out of place. Some may see free-license as a cop-out, but I found the

music to be one of the better parts of the game, particularly the song that accompanies the level victory - a very melodic and transcendent piano score.

The opening of HTY showers you with text, and not just any text - religious text. You start off with a quiz about the Ten Commandments to which you choose either "innocent" or "guilty". I choose guilt for eight of the ten, to which the game told me that it was OK and frankly who hasn't? Personally, I prefer a theology-less game, but even as it dissuades me, this might be one of the areas HTY shines.

You can tell that the developers didn't start the process with a set genre that they were trying to fit their message into. They took the issues that were important to them and tried to represent that in a fun yet educating way. Finding an interactive way to represent the quest for human happiness is a lofty goal and one in which HTY mostly succeeds, and ultimately will be absorbed subconsciously by many that will play it. However, HTY is a polarizing game. Its gameplay, graphics, music, and potential theology, mix in a way that is unique to the game. Getting past the socialist and religious undertones, players will find a fun game and a unique experience, but ultimately not a very compelling one.

REVIEWS

Happier than You Review by Taylor



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

Final: 63%
Grade: D



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