INDIE GAME MAG

Issue 7: November/December 2009

TALES OF MONKEY ISLAND

Also Inside this Issue

A Guide to Indie Game Development

Gratuitous Space Battles
Wallace & Gromit
Larva Mortus
Slide Colors
Mithra Episode 1
Gravity Core

Indie Game Magazine
Issue 7 - Nov/Dec 2009

Games of GDC p5

Cover Story: Tales of Monkey Island   p10
Adventuring has never been Funnier
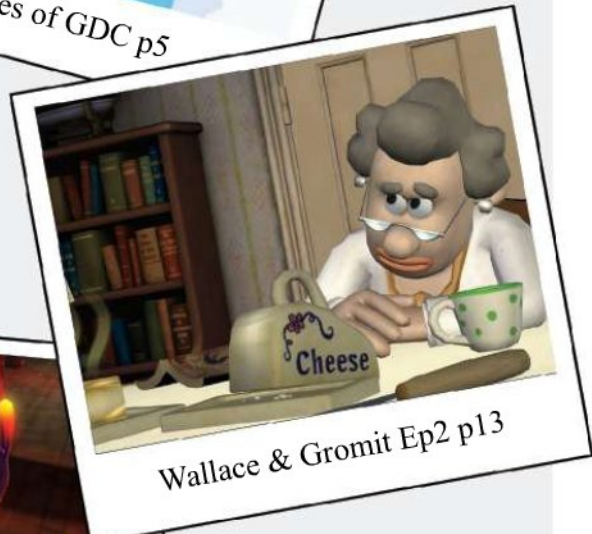
Wallace & Gromit Ep2 p13

Mithra Ep1 for Xbox p18

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

FRONT END

REVIEWS

CONTENT

NEXT ISSUE

Gratuitous Space Battles - Positech Games - PC

If Ascendancy, Star Control 2, Dune II, Starcraft and/or Command & Conquer mean anything to you, then Gratuitous Space Battles (GSB) from Positech Games is probably a game to start getting excited about. GSB, like Positech's other offerings, is a deeply strategic game about space ships blowing each other to bits. The gameplay focuses on designing ships, created their formations, giving them orders, and then watching the battle ensue with plenty of eye candy.

Action fanatics will love watching the visceral battles, but may be a little miffed that they cannot make any real time decisions, but strategy fans will quickly become deeply involved in tweaking every aspect of their ship and formation to earn more honor and unlock new ship parts.
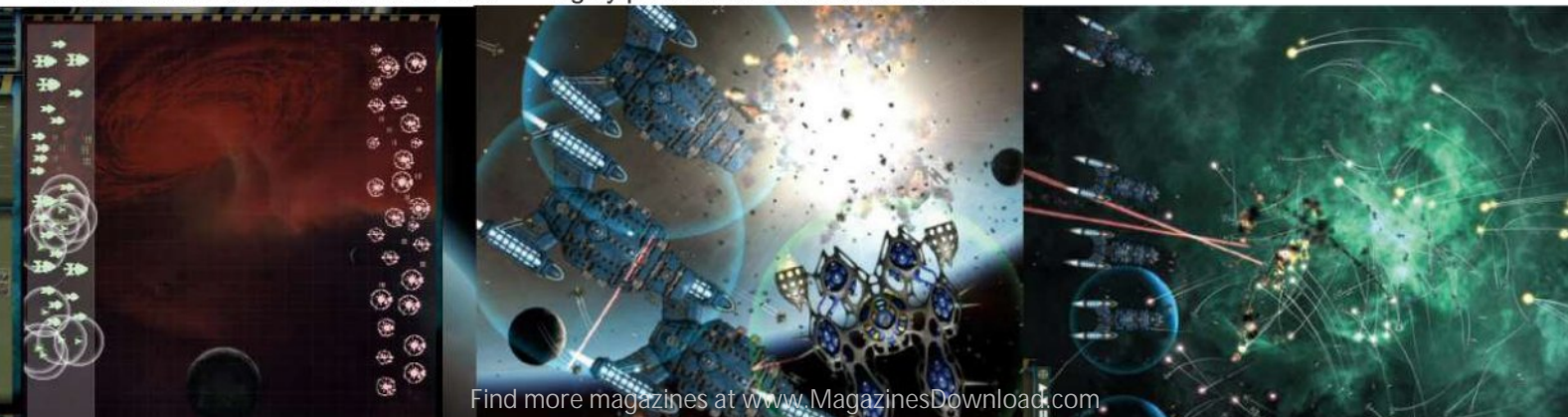
The first attempt at defeating an enemy is usually a crapshoot since you only know the enemy's formation and ship types - not their weapons and defensive abilities. This is where the strategy really comes in; watching a space battle is not just about the explosions and special effects show, it is important that player's pay attention and learn from everything that is going on. Figuring out why you're getting your ass kicked is crucial to altering your strategy so that you get a victorious outcome.

The game is definitely one to check out. If you don't have total ADD, you'll quickly become engaged in one of the game's aspects. The game is already highly polished and balanced in beta form and well worth the admission price. I cannot express how thoroughly impressed I am with the battle sequences, they are simply riveting and remind me of something out of Battlestar Galactica (the new one not the old one) or the new Star Trek movie. Strategy games aren't my thing, but I enjoyed designing some badass ships and plodded through setting up my ship formations in order to see shit blow up. I never paid attention to all the stats at the bottom - not my thing. Trial and Error has never been this much fun.

GSB can be preordered for $20 and will give you access to play the public beta.

- Mike Gnade

FEZ

And Yet it Moves

Time Donkey

SUPERBROTHERS
ALPINIST

Glumbuster

The Alpinist

'Splosion Man

STOP

Step and build contraption (Space)

Fantastic Contraption

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BitTrip

GAME

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4   4 $500

Spelunky

Aquaria

Bunni

World of Goo

Captain Forever

Canabalt

Overgrowth

Beginners Guide to Indie Game Development
Part 1 of 6

LESSON 1:

Your Game Idea Ain't so Great

By Mike Gnade

It came to you last night. You're sure it's the best idea for a video game ever. You're so passionate about your idea and so sure that it's going to be huge that you're willing to quit your job and learn to code from scratch in order to get this game made. Put simply, it is genius. It will change gaming. You're passionate about making the thing yourself. You're ready to become an indie game developer and make this game a reality.

Wakeup call, every developer thinks their game idea is genius. As confident as you are in your game concept, new indie developers constantly make the mistake of thinking they can produce, code and be successful with a unique game concept out of the gate. Have you even considered how you are going to market and sell this innovative game? What's your game's demographic? How long will it take to produce? How much will art, music and other assets cost? What platform will it launch on? What engine will the game run on?

If you don't know the answer to all those questions, it's time to cool down. I've never met a game developer who doesn't have hundreds of game ideas. The question becomes, which of these ideas will be the most profitable. The reality is that your innovative and groundbreaking game idea is expen-

sive and risky to make. The hardest thing about making an indie game isn't coming up with the concept; it's executing and finishing it. Many aspiring indie game developers never finish their great game idea because it was too grandiose to start out with. You're not going to come out with the next "World of Goo" if you're new to the industry. If you've never worked for a big game publisher, table your great game idea till you get at least 1 profitable indie game under your belt. The innovative and risky game will always be there for later.

This advice has been given ad nauseam on so many indie game forums. Regardless, the noob is stubborn, doesn't listen, and never completes their gaming opus. The other common scenario is that they do finish and the game is mediocre (at best) and could use a lot more polish. Trust me I've been there. It sucks to finish a game and have lackluster sales. Everybody wants to sell hundreds of copies that first day of release, but you're not releasing the next Halo, Warcraft, or Nintendo title.

Unfortunately it's tough to pay for all the art, music and assets that go into an indie game. And that's not even taking into account all your blood, sweat and tears. Convinced yet? Are you so passionate about your game idea that you're willing to pay thousands of dollars just to have it made? If you are,

go for it. You may break-even or even luck out and make some money, just be prepared for the loss.

If you want to be a lasting indie developer, you need to make money. So now that you've let go of your illustrious game, what do you do? The next step is finding an established game genre that you're passionate about or enjoy. Visit one of the casual portals, play some free demos and find a game that's really fun for you. If casual is not your thing, check out Steam or Direct-2Drive for some of the more hardcore indie titles. Casual's the easier route if you ask me, but there's a good niche with hardcore strategy titles, RPGs, sims, etc. as well.

Do your homework. Find that game. Study it and prepare to copy it. It sucks, but cloning an indie game is an excellent way to get some experience, learn about developing, and assure that your game has potential customers. Go for a subtle tweaked clone or original spin on a proven game concept rather than your ambitious, risky and expensive game idea.

HOMEWORK ASSIGNMENT:

Download and play a ton of indie and casual games. Find a core game mechanic that you enjoy.

REVIEWS

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.

THIS ISSUE'S CONTRIBUTORS

Ben Montgomery
Ben Montgomery is a small-town newspaper reporter who moonlights as a video game journalist.

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."

Meg Stivison
Meg Stivison has been a computer gamer since discovering text-based PC games as a little girl. She is a freelance writer and English teacher, currently based in Raleigh. She blogs at www.SimpsonsParadox.com

Benjamin Hayhoe
Benjamin Hayhoe is a media student specializing in video game theory at Edge Hill University, England. A lover of anything innovative and deeply interested in any games music related, he aspires to write for a magazine full time one day.

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.

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
Mike got married in September and is now under the careful and watchful eye of his wife. He is only permitted an hour of indie games a night and is forbidden to enjoy them. Congratulations?

TALES OF MONKEY ISLAND

Tales of Monkey Island | www.telltalegames.com | PC | WiiWare

The point and click adventure games were all the rave for pc gamers back in the 90s, but with fancy 3D graphics cards came new, exciting pc games. Lucky for us, Telltale games has kept the adventure genre from fading into obscurity with its episodic games. LucasArts Monkey Island franchise is fondly remembered and treasured by its fans despite the franchise not having a new release since Escape from Monkey Island in 2000. That is until now.

Resurrecting a franchise is tricky business and can bring with it equal parts delight and regret. While Monkey Island has changed over the 10 years since the last game, it is with great pleasure that I assure fans that its wit, humor, and core gameplay remain intact. Tales of Monkey Island is a triumphant and hilarious re-launch of the classic LucasArts series and it all starts with the "Launch of the Screaming Narwhal," but more on that later.

Like the previous games, the protago-nist of the game is Guybrush Threep-wood, Mighty Pirate. Guybrush can be controlled with the mouse through a frustrating click and drag system or with the keyboard. The movement system with the mouse is one of the most obvi-ous blemishes on an otherwise highly polished and enjoyable interface. Trust me when I say stick with the keyboard.

Tales of Monkey Island (TOMI) doesn't have an interesting game mechanic; it's a point-and-click adventure game, pure and simple. What matters most in an adventure game are the characters and stories and to a lesser extent the puzzles. Each episode of TOMI (so far) has delivered memorable and enjoy-able characters, hilarious moments, and some stand out puzzle sequences (see Episode Mini-Reviews). The most shining triumph of TOMI is still the fantastic writing. Jokes, puns, witty snipes, and all around tomfoolery pour out of every scene and interaction of the game. This superb writing and humor is what makes Monkey Island so enjoy-

able; Tales of Monkey Island keeps you playing and laughing. I can't think of a game, indie or not, that surpasses the dialogue in this series. Telltale games' writers deserve a round of applause.

These humorous moments wouldn't be possible without some hilarious situations and amazing voice acting. Surprisingly the writers do a good job tying all these situations into a compel-ling overall narrative. The story and situations of Monkey Island far exceed expectations and SitCom standards. It's consistently funny and well voiced, which is more than I can say for most television shows.

While it's important for an adventure game to have a good story, it needs puzzles to give the player something to do besides simply watch the onscreen antics. The inventory system adds some depth to puzzle solving since it allows for items to be combined, but for the most part the puzzles are not exceed-ingly hard or frustrating to solve.

As long as you visit each locale and pay attention to the dialogue, you shouldn't get stuck (plus the Telltale forums always have help). Like other adventure games, you can't die and spend the majority of the game clicking on things in the environment. If you hate point-and-click adventures, TOMI won't sway you.

Tales of Monkey Island is great sequel to the LucasArts classic. The adventure gameplay hasn't changed much, but neither has the excellent writing and storytelling. The production values are still superb and while the graphics don't have the highest polygon count, clever camera angles and quirky art direction make up for it. The characters are charming and the game is witty. What more could you ask for?   -Mike Gnade

REVIEW

Gameplay:	8.5
Graphics:	9.5
Sound/Music:	10
Lasting Appeal:	9
Score:	91%
Grade:	**A-**

Episode 1: Launch of the Screaming Narwhal is one of the best episodes thus far. This episode introduces the main conflict: Guybrush botches a voodoo spell and releases pirate pox across the Caribbean, but focuses on Guybrush washing ashore and being stranded on Flotsam Island. There's a memorable puzzle in a crazy French man's lab and a rather large island to explore. I was especially a fan of Flotsam's jungle which brings back some of the old screen mazes found in old adventure games such as Zelda. Screaming Narwal serves as a great introduction or refresher back into the world of Monkey Island.

Episode 2: The Siege of Spinner Cay seems to be one of the shortest episodes thus far, but I loved that from the very start the player was allowed to explore several locales in any order they so choose. Episode 2 reunites Guybrush with his beloved bride, Elaine in the Merfolk town of Spinner Cay. Pox-stricken pirates are blockading the city and it's up to Guybrush to find some ancient artifacts to summon some helpful sea creatures. Despite the freedom to explore the Jerkbait Islands, Episode 2 feels easier than the first. It's great that Monkey Island avoids reusing locales from the first, but ultimately Episode 2 is a little disappointing.

Episode 3: Lair of the Leviathan does not really address any of the control or interface issues, but continues the overall narrative with new locales and characters. Episode 3 is more polished than the last and story-wise is one of the best vignettes to date. Lair of the Leviathan starts with Guybrush, Winslow, Morgan LeFay, and their ship getting swallowed by a huge Manatee. Like the other episodes, antics ensue inside the belly of the beast. Highlights abound in this episode with a Pirate "Face Off", Manatee mating game, and a captive 'newlyweds' dialog puzzle. My only complaint about Lair is that it is much more linear than the previous two episodes and lacks exploring. Regardless, Episode 3 puts Telltale back on the right track.

Wallace & Gromit Episode 2 | www.telltalegames.com | Windows PC | XBLA

Telltale's Wallace and Gromit: The Last Resort is a hilarious adventure game. In this installment, Wallace and Gromit plan a holiday at the seaside only to be derailed by some bad weather. Not only is the holiday off, but Wallace and Gromit's basement is flooded by plumbing problems. In true Wallace fashion, the underappreciated inventor schemes to open a beach resort in the flooded basement. But it won't be Wallace and Gromit without things going horribly awry. For Wallace and Gromit fans, it's sure to please.

If you are a fan of the Telltale series, you will be happy to know that the gameplay is the same as the previous installment, Fright of the Bumblebees. Like other adventure games, the gameplay of The Last Resort involves interacting with elements of the environment to collect items and clues to solve puzzles. The player is once again transported to West Wallaby St. to gather clues by interacting with familiar residents (and some new ones) to solve the abovementioned puzzles. This definitely showcases the great job the animators did on the characters. The puzzles themselves aren't that difficult and you won't find yourself horribly perplexed or at a loss. With generous hints provided by the characters, many of the puzzles can be straight forward (this can be changed with the "hint-o-meter").

Like the previous installment, The Last Resort is broken into chapters with a particular goal (i.e.-collecting items to set up a beach resort) and the player takes turns playing as Gromit or Wallace to complete each chapter. Once the "resort" is established, the action moves to keeping the "patrons" happy with their beachside holiday. The chapter, Hounds of Horror, was also a nice departure into the realm of mystery and added a new

dimension to an otherwise run of the mill point and click adventure game.

My only criticism on gameplay is that at times the dialogue/story dominated over actual gameplay, that's the only area where The Last Resort fell short for me. I found myself playing more to see where the story took me versus the mental challenge. For a casual game audience this works and I didn't think it took away from the experience. Also, I wish I could have seen more of the Rube Goldberg type machine puzzles as in Bumblebees. Challenge aside, the colorful dialogue and humorous story will keep you engaged in the game. Telltale made this episode standalone, so don't worry if you haven't played episode 1.

With The Last Resort, Telltale has continued the precedent set by Fright of the Bumblebees with their top of the line animation style. I'm still impressed by the way the animators have captured the claymation feel and even the facial expressions of Gromit. In this regard, the animators did a great job on the characters. The outside environment could use a little more work. Some of the environments seemed a little drabber this time around, but I think that's the point - with a beach resort in a cellar and all.

Telltale continues to impress with the music and sound effects. Hats off to the top-notch voice acting, I felt like I was instantly transported to West Wallaby St., which is to say, subtitles were helpful at times. This is an essential component in Telltale's objective of making a playable Wallace and Gromit episode. I only experienced some minor interruptions in the dialogue, but it didn't ruin the game for me. Since much of the puzzle solving revolves around the characters interactions, it's important to get these little

things right. And Telltale got this one right – Spot on!

The Last Resort is a good additional to the Telltale Wallace and Gromit adventures; however, both games lack a certain replay value. Fans of Wallace and Gromit are sure to be happy with the latest installment, but it's hard to see the fun in solving the same puzzles over and over. Additionally, the action is limited to a few environments which also cuts down on some replay value. On the positive, the player tends to feel injected into an episode of Wallace and Gromit and it's great to experience the franchise from an interactive perspective. So far, Telltale has done a great job bringing the Grand Adventures home.

- Zak Gebelein

REVIEW

Gameplay:	8
Graphics:	9
Sound/Music:	8
Lasting Appeal:	6
Score:	78%
Grade:	C+

Slide Colors | www.taycron.com | PC | Mac | Linux | XBL

Slide Colors by TayKrOn is a new puzzle game reminiscent of a 2D Rubik's Cube, made up of sliding colored tiles into a goal location. Each row or column, which wraps around the back of the gameboard grid, can be rotated to slide game tiles into groups of other tiles or placed in its assigned goal. The challenge comes, just like the Rubik's Cube challenge, from the interactions between the tile you're bringing home, and any other tiles on the now-moving row. It's the type of puzzle that would lend itself well to a break-time distraction or to a MegaTouch console in my local bar.

I should admit that I had some technical issues with the game. I couldn't get the game window to maximize, and the game froze on me more than once. I tried installing it on a second computer, in case it was just Vista misbehaving, but that didn't fix all the problems. Also, there was a moment's delay before the game responded to my clicks, just long enough to be frustrating.

Gameplay:
The first few levels of the puzzle mode in Slide Colors are dully simple, leaving you plenty of time to look at the screen and spot room for improvement. All the text is awkwardly translated, with common ESL mistakes. Slide Colors could use some editing, but if you understand all your base are belong to us, it's not too hard to understand what the game presents to you.

Stick it out for a few underwhelming levels -- and only writing this article kept me playing -- and the challenges are no longer lining up a couple tiles on slideable rows with a couple goal squares. With more boxes and targets, the placement of each box interacts with with others becomes a challenge. After several dull levels, Slide Colors reaches the brain-tickling mix of excitement and frustration that marks a good puzzle challenge.

In addition to puzzle mode, you can play a match-3 version. Sliding a row of tiles, instead of swapping adjacent tiles, adds a nice twist to the popular cubicle slacking game, Bejeweled. In match-3, a sliding move is only valid if the new location creates a set of three, while in puzzle mode, all moves are valid. Oddly, this game doesn't seem to register combos... if you match and eliminate three tiles, and the refill tiles form their own group of three, nothing happens.

The different play modes keep players engaged by using essentially the same rules and interface for a different challenge.

Graphics:
TayKrOn took a simple, clear grid and added bright candy colors. Besides bold color choices, each colored tile also had a shaped icon, so it was extra easy to tell the different types of tile apart. You'll still need to differentiate between the colors to find the right box in the puzzle mode, but the match-3 mode can be played using colors or icons to make groups. I'm not colorblind, but I do spend a lot of time squinting at MMO icons, so I really appreciate the extra accessibility for any visually impaired players.

Sound/Music:
The background music became annoying after just a few levels. Still, the game doesn't rely on sound, so you can mute it and continue to solve puzzles without any disadvantage.

Lasting Appeal:
This is a solid breaktime puzzle game, and the different puzzle styles help hold players' interest. But any new puzzle game needs to distinguish itself in a very crowded genre, and unfortunately what made this game stand out from other puzzle games was mostly the English usage mistakes and the technical frustrations.

- Meg Stivison

REVIEW

Gameplay:	7.5
Graphics:	7
Sound/Music:	3
Lasting Appeal:	5
Score:	75%
Grade:	**C**

"Their eyes are wide open,
Yet their unable to see
The beauty they possess,
Is unbelievable"

Thoughts of a Beautiful Mind

El-Sharieff Kirkman
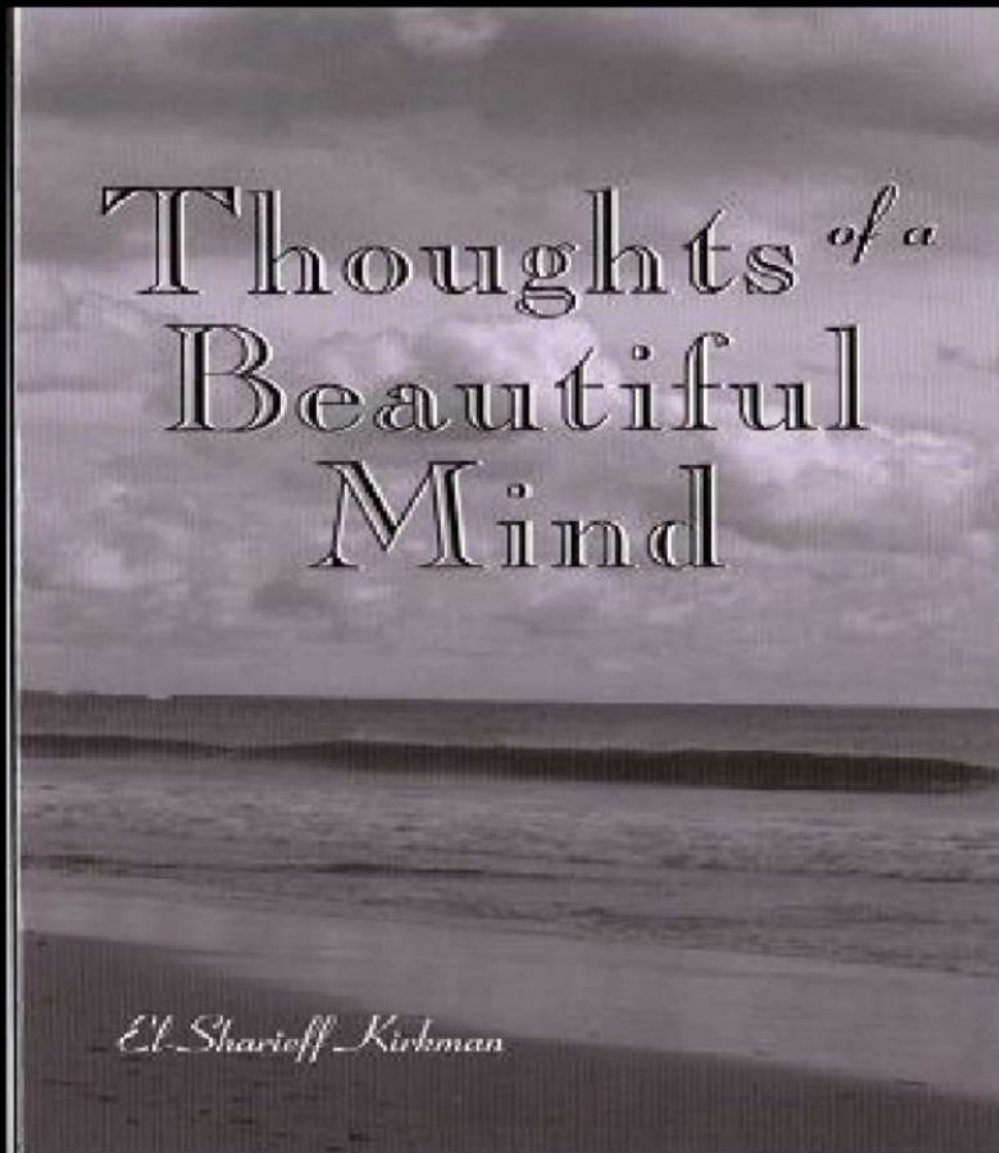
**"Debut" book from award winning poet
El-Sharieff Kirkman
"Available now at Amazon.com and
wherever books are sold"**

REVIEWS

Gravity Core | www.suisoft.co.uk | Windows PC

Founded by Gary Marples, Suisoft have released their début product. Gravity core, a gravity based shooter similar in style to that of the classics "Thrust" and "Oids". You play a mining pilot who's mission it is to protect the Mars Jupiter asteroid belt from an unknown force. You do this by liberating asteroids in order from these oppressors. Each "boss" asteroid is surrounded by five or six smaller asteroids which result in over 50 levels in total. Your main focus to begin with is to rescue stranded miners, but you'll also be destroying production plants, peculiar gravity generators and collecting intelligence spheres just to name a few. The story seems to play little importance in the game however. The unique selling point is the gravity based movement and the immense difficulty of the gameplay.

Winner of Bytten's Most hardcore game award, it's easy to see most people struggling with the steep difficulty curve of this game. Initially it's very difficult to learn how to successfully manoeuvre your one man ship through the intricate tunnel systems that make up the levels. The controls feel a little unnatural to begin with. I tried using both the keyboard and a wireless controller and found that the controller felt far more suitable, but still difficult. It's also difficult to stop your ship once you pick up any momentum which results in flying straight into the cavern walls more than a few times which inevitably causes extreme frustration.. You'll find yourself begging for some miraculous transition into a geometry wars style control system. This feeling will pass. After a couple of solid hours coming to grips with the thrusters and learning braking distances, the fun finally kicks in. You start flying through the tunnels at high speeds, taking part in intense dog fights with the first enemies of the game which - after a couple of weapon upgrades – aren't difficult. This is short lived. The enemies soon grow to match your ships capabilities and surpass them. The pure number of ships that can be following you at one time is daunting and the A.I being as good as it is makes them difficult to outsmart. To the casual gamer this may seem a little too much, but those looking for a real challenge won't be disappointed. There are so many things that you need to be thinking about at one time. Whereas most games of this genre focus primarily on the combat aspect, Gravity core is always having your mind split between the combat, the most direct route to your objective and of course making sure you don't sway into the walls which is always the main concern. It has to be said that really getting to grips with the inertia and finding your way out of the most difficult situations does fill you with a great sense of "I'm awesome." It's a good feeling.

The game does lack some variety. The missions can become a bit too familiar and the objectives repetitive. The upgrade system is hit or miss. Some upgrades don't seem worth bothering with and others are absolutely essential to be able to progress through the game. I found myself upgrading my weapons and shields to the maximum rather than bothering with anything else because the game was so hard without these essentials covered. It didn't help matters that the upgrade menu was hidden away in the options menu so I only actually found it after I went about altering my controller set up, resulting in spending the first five or so levels unaware that an upgrade menu even existed.

The game lacks sound. Aside from a very short piece of electronic music in the main menu there is no music. The only sounds are that of the gun fire, thrusters and crashes. For a while it's okay. It does add to the sense of desolation across the asteroids that you're navigating through, but soon I found myself growing tired of this emotionless lack of soundtrack. It was simply disappointing. The graphics were clean and simple. Basic layered backgrounds and some pretty stars, but no particular detail in them. The level design itself was also a little bland. The rocky levels didn't change in their appearance at all. There were some details that were paid attention to . The explosions were very nice, illustrating debris spiralling off into different directions. There's also a nice little dust cloud that forms when your thrusters get close to the asteroids surface which brought a side smile to my face. The enemy ships and turrets look excellent and had enough differences in their appearance to be able to estimate which they were before they were close enough to shoot you so you could formulate a quick plan of action against them. Everything that played an importance to the game looked good.

The game is long. With over 50 levels you aren't going to be disappointed with the $11.99 or £6.99 price tag and with a randomly generated campaign you will be able to come back to the game again and again. I wasn't able to find any multi player internet matches, but the game does offer a multi player experience. I was able to try it across a LAN network and it worked just fine. The co-op play provides more campaigning fun and the PvP can provide entertainment for 10 minutes here and there.

Overall this is a solid game and an excellent début from a small developer. A fine incorporation of shooter with inertia based game play and providing you're up for a serious challenge then this is worth giving a shot.

- Benjamin Hayhoe

REVIEW

Gameplay: 7
Graphics: 4
Sound/Music: 8
Lasting Appeal: 8
Score: 75%

Grade: C

16

Larva Mortus | www.rakeingrass.com | Windows PC | Mac

Larva Mortus is a fast-paced atmospheric monster hunting game developed by Rake in the Grass. It's developed in the same "point-to-shoot" style of the Alien Shooter and Zombie Shooter games, although unfortunately it just doesn't pack the punch, polish, or panache to rival those games. However, if you're a big fan of those types of games and you're begging for more, Larva Mortus isn't a bad bet.

The major problem here is that Larva Mortus is currently selling for $10, but is usually $20. With a price point that's literally double that of the superior Alien Shooter series, this is a hard one to recommend unless you're begging for more of that type of action.

Larva Mortus is the story of a monster hunter of the 19th century who travels around the globe seeking out evil and purging it where ever it is found. It's an intriguing concept, and for the most part this involves the player venturing into labyrinths full of zombies, skeletons and other ghouls and shooting them in the face.

It seems like it should be a rock solid formula that could make any game entertaining, but one big problem remains. The levels are virtually all exactly the same. Whether you're in a dark foreboding forest or deep in cobweb-ridden catacombs it's all just about the same thing except with new wallpaper. The one big plus to the level design, though is that all levels are procedurally generated.

This means that every time you venture into a level, even if it's one you've been to multiple times, you've got to stay on your toes. Here Larva Mortus succeeds brilliantly. There are no monster closets, or planned surprises to scare you out of your boots. Only the stomach-in-knots tense atmosphere that can only be created by knowing you're stuck deep in a dungeon with low-health, limited ammunition and a horde of demons desperate to rend your head from your shoulders.

The difficulty range is also a success. Levels run the gamut between very easy, and viciously challenging, and by the time you have a full host of weapons at your disposal, the harder levels are very fun as you attempt to forge a strategy not only to survive the next room, but to leave yourself enough ammo (and from the right gun no less) to survive the next eight or more rooms.

Visually the game is a bit of a mixed bag. As mentioned before, the level designs are very basic, and offer little variety. However, there are some good monster models here, and the things you kill generally look good and scary. There are even some nice effects thrown in there once in a while.

In terms of audio Larva Mortus does a mostly superb job. I say, "mostly" because a lot of the sound effects that the monsters use will often loop over and over again rapidly which can be slightly annoying. However, everything else is magnificent. There are wonderful ambient sounds being used throughout that echo whispers of beings in the shadows. Guns all sound convincing as well, although a few of them lack some punch. Nonetheless, the audio represents some of Larva Mortus' best achievements.

The setting for the game offers a unique angle that very few video games ever take a look at, save perhaps for CastleVania. It's rather refreshing, and if you're intrigued by the whole 1800s Van Helsing-style monster hunter adventures then Larva Mortus will certainly appeal to you as it's well-animated, if low-budget, cutscenes provide an entertaining glimpse at the world around the dungeons.
                                  - Andrew Groen

REVIEW

Gameplay:	7
Graphics:	8.5
Sound/Music:	9
Lasting Appeal:	8
Score:	82%
Grade:	**B-**

Mithra:
Copyright 200

Mithra: The Calling
Copyright 2008, Afiction Games

Mithra Episode 1 | www.afictiongames.com | XBL

Mithra: Episode 1, Chapter 1 is short, but sweet.

But way, way too short. The introduction to this action-adventure series lasts just under an hour, if you're a clever player. But, the handful of puzzles are fun, thoughtful, and even innovative in a couple of cases.

Players guide Tag, an anthropomorphic alien, on his quest to escape a spaceship where he is being held prisoner and learn of the impending doom his tiny newfound friend Vee warns of. The plot is whisked along by actual voice acting and cut scenes, and the dialog is witty, creative and helpful. Tag's voicing is just a little flat, but Vee's flutish tones are charming, and fit right with his cartoonish demeanor. The sound design is just generally good; one particularly great sound effect is the gutturally brutal sound of the guard robot's laser blasts. It'll make you jump every time. The game's atmosphere does an excellent job of conveying a sense of danger and foreboding

The graphics are also impressive, even

if this first chapter's setting is a bit dull (brown metal walls is about all you'll see here). Of particular note are the lighting effects. An early puzzle has you controlling Vee in a dark ventilation shaft, which is softly lit by his illuminated body. The character models are inspired by some impressive, whimsical artwork that is sampled on the title screens and as collectable bonuses scattered throughout the game world. The jumping animation is oddly sloppy, leaving both characters rigid in the air and floating unnaturally back down to the ground. It even hampers gameplay a little, although the game never presented any major platforming challenges. But, it could offer some great action with a little improvement.

The shortness remains the biggest offense. Games divided into episodes makes sense on some level, but dicing those episodes into even smaller chapters is going to make the story telling awfully choppy, and that's going to make players lose interest in Mithra. It's going to be especially irritating if developer Afiction charges for the individual chapters (this first download is 240

points, which comes out to about three bucks; it was reduced from 400 points). But bite-sized gameplay could have its merits, too. The game could be described as a casual adventure game that doesn't look down on its audience. The puzzles gently encourage players to think outside the box. The game isn't too head-scratchingly hard, nor does it hold the player's hand, instead finding a happy medium that should really appeal to the casual crowd, although the hardcore should revel in this contribution to the rebirth of the adventure genre.

Even though it feels like a tutorial level, Mithra looks like it's worth getting invested in. Here's hoping those updates get here soon.

- Ben Montgomery

REVIEW

Gameplay:	7
Graphics:	8
Sound/Music:	7
Lasting Appeal:	9
Score:	78%
Grade:	**C+**

You did not think I would leave you here; did you? I'd never ever do such a thing

Getting Paid, Earning a Living in a Free World
Modern Models: Indie Gaming's path to riches and success

Part 1: Sponsorships

Indie gaming has certainly gotten attention as the next important step in gaming's evolutionary process. Though while there is a virtual maelstrom of talent and ideas clashing and merging in the scene, the developers of such have yet to beget a method of supporting themselves on their endeavors. For many it is, rightfully, a thing of passion and commitment on which money is now a secondary consideration. And yet, there is growing insecurities that by giving out so many products for free, the scene itself is seen by the outside world as something akin to fan fiction – work by talented individuals that holds no profit potential and thus, limited growth in the long run.

The problem lies in getting big numbers out of a small scene. The systems that would work in the T.V. world with millions of fans wouldn't be viable enough for indie developers. Whatever system becomes widely accepted will be so because it works for a multitude of platforms and genres and pays a developer – who may only have a few thousand fans – a livable wage. And would anybody mind if a Sports Locker commercial came on in between rounds of Soldat? Or after saving in Cave story?

Indie gaming must eventually become united under some form of central distribution method and price point. What would the movies be like if every movie costs a different price? Or if only Capcom games were available at EB, while Konami games were only available under Gamestop? It frustrates the consumer and cuts into the potential for the developer. The following list is hopeful attempt to document alternate ways for developers to market their game, aside from just selling it for a set price of course.

As "Today I die" and "I wish I were the moon" creator, Daniel Benmergui put it, "We are on the dangerous border of a forced business model change. So while we still can, we must figure out ways to make money that are not based on charging for software or slinging ads (at) our players. Not that I have an answer yet, though."

And with that, the method Mr. Benmergui uses brings us to number one…

Sponsorships

The good . If it's well enough for little league and alcoholics, it's good enough for you. A sponsor can take the weight off of a developer either by giving free stuff, webspace or funding. In gaming, this usually dictates that the game will be exclusively (usually) playable on only the sponsors site. For "Today I Die", Benmergui found a non-traditional sponsor which allows TID to be, according to Benmergui, "self-hosted in a quiet page, with no ads around it."

But… Sponsors like the one for TID are the most common type in indie-gaming. A sponsor will rarely cover the entire costs of production, which, if they did, would include the cost of living for the developer during production – meaning: food, rent, utilities, internet, what have you. That high costs put supporting a game by anyone less than Pixel a huge risk. As it is though, a sponsor will usually just offer a small up-front payment and provide the ads around a game, making a majority of the game's cost still the responsibility of the developer. To cap it off, a sponsor also limits the future revenue potential for a game, since future platform releases or direct ad placement now have to be negotiated between two parties.

Save our indies?
Unlikely, unless larger supporters step up to the mound able to pay more to developers, or indies suddenly start becoming more in-demand than in-vogue. This would only save a small portion of developers from a day job, leaving undiscovered talent to rise the ranks as it currently does….[continued in Issue 8]

- **Taylor Hall**

NEXT ISSUE

And Yet It Moves

Time Gentlemen, Please

Fat Princess

Lunnye Devitsy

www.indiegamemag.com