



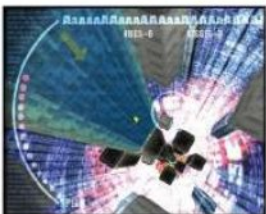
INDIE GAME MAG

independent game reviews, news, + more

Issue 9: March/April 2010



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Aaa! Reckless Disregard



Lugaru



Euforia



Critter Crunch



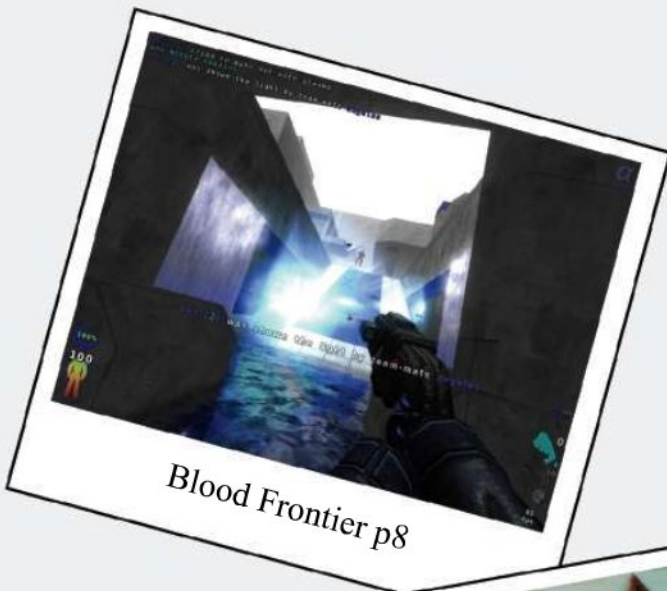
Wildhollow

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Indie Game Magazine

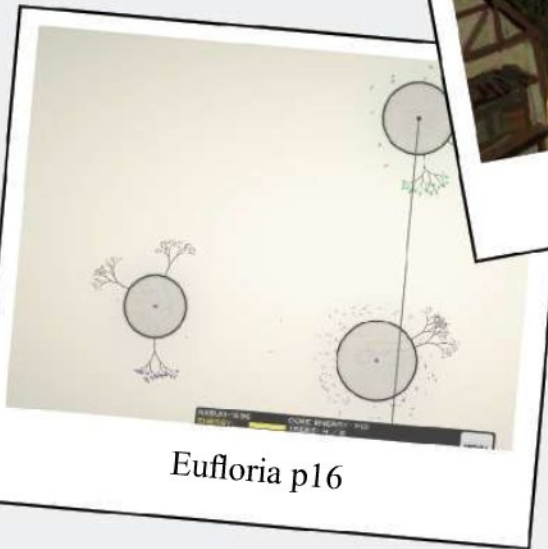
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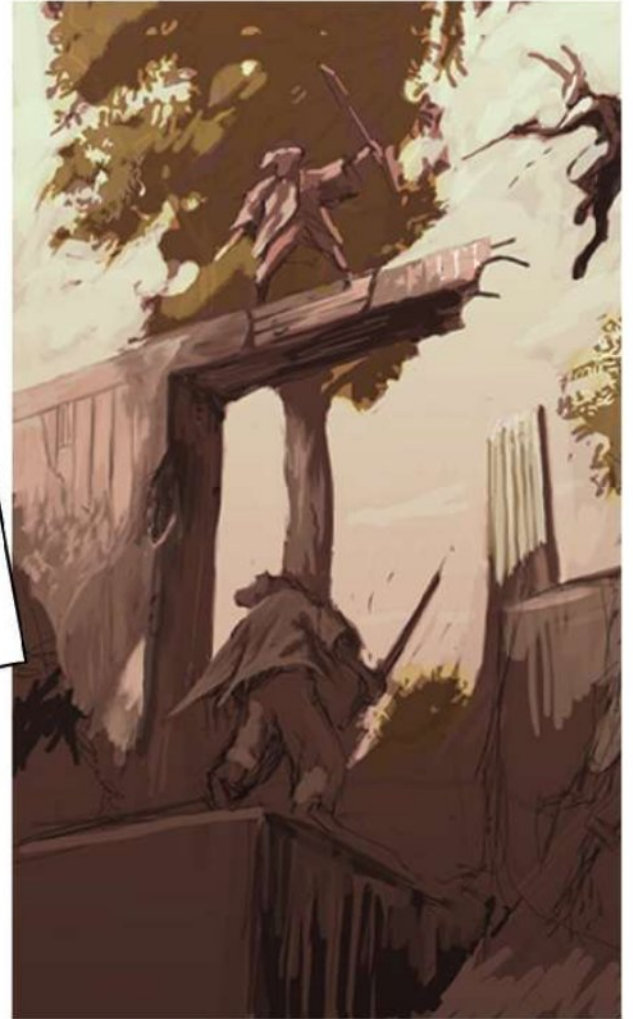


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Rabbit Combat is on the way in Overgrowth



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About our Reviews

Most game demos are content or time limited and only contain about an hour or so of gameplay. We rate these indie game demos on a quick 1-10 scale:

- 10: Perfection - Buy this Game NOW!
- 9: Fantastic - Buy it
- 8: Great - Download Immediately
- 7: Good - Try the Demo
- 6: Average - Solid but Forgettable
- 5: Mediocre - Below Average
- 4: Pretty Bad - Has Major Flaws
- 3: Bad - Not worth the Download
- 2: Terrible - A Chore to Play
- 1: Abysmal - Barely Playable

Beginners Guide to Indie Game Development Part 3 of 6

LESSON 3:

Picking the Platform and Engine

By Mike Gnade

Whether your game fits into an existing genre or is something entirely unique doesn't really matter. What matters is that you think about your potential customer before you write a line of code. You'll also want to take into consideration your coding experience. The good news is that if you're already a proficient coder, you can start writing your game and pretty much port it anywhere. But this is a beginner's guide and most Indies aren't really hardcore assembly line type coders.

Most indie game developers use some sort of engine or software to code and create their games. There are tons of choices and they all have their pros and cons. Here is a breakdown of some of the most popular choices starting with the platforms considered to require the least amount of programming language up through the most technical and programming heavy choices:

RPG Maker: Free

Pros: Free and gets you designing the game quickly

Cons: Windows PC only, RPGs Only, Lack of Flexibility

I've never used RPG Maker since I've never made an old school Japanese style RPG, but it's very proficient at creating a unique RPG. RPG Maker is free and makes creating maps, characters, and events very easy without any real gameplay coding. Obviously the

drawback is that it's not very flexible – it makes only RPGs and you don't have any control over the gameplay mechanics. If you're thinking about an RPG, this tool does substantially streamline the process though.

Game Maker: Free, Pro Version \$25

Pros: Cheap solution, Easy to Use interface, Great for 2D games

Cons: 2D games only, Only Windows PC Platform

Game Maker is a great choice because it's cheap, great for 2D games, and offers a nice and easy point & click / drag & drop user interface. You don't need to code a thing and can make any type of 2D game. Plus GM has some great flexibility in the optional advanced mode. This solution focuses on Game Designing rather than Game Coding, which is really nice. The major drawback for Game Maker is that it builds games for Windows PC only and is restricted to 2D.

The Games Factory 2 / Multimedia Fusion 2: \$59 - \$369

Pros: Great for 2D Games, Easy to Use Interface, Java/Mobile enabled, New Features in Development

Cons: Developer version is expensive, Originally Built for Windows Only Development, Framerate Issues

Multimedia Fusion 2 is very similar to Game Maker in that it has an easy to

use point and click user interface and event editor. You can pretty much make any type of 2D game with MMF and there's a ton of 3rd party extensions that can be added into the engine. Multimedia Fusion has also recently been Java enabled, allowing you to create games for mobile devices and allowing you to port to Mac and Linux. There's also Hardware Acceleration and Flash Export in the works. The problem with MMF2 is that to get the full set of features, you have to shell out for the Developer version. It can also be difficult to develop for Linux and Mac since MMF was originally built for Windows Only Development.

Adobe Flash/Air/Flex: \$699+

Pros: Online standard, 2D/3D Games, All Computer Platforms, Other Revenue Streams Available, Great for Animation, Tons of examples/resources

Cons: Expensive, Coding/Scripting Language must be learned, Steep Learning Curve

Flash is the standard for online web games. Flash is incredibly flexible and allows an indie developer to sell their game as a downloadable for PC, Mac or Linux or generate cash thru licensing, sponsorship, or online advertising of a web-based game. If you make an ad-supported flash game there's great opportunities to get it onto a ton of free flash game portals. Marketing a free flash game is somewhat viral and

relates to the quality of the game. It's relatively easy to get your game on a ton of flash game sites, so if people like it and keep playing it – you can earn some nice advertising loot. You can always sell the game online at places like Flash Game License. Flash is an excellent animation tool and offers the flexibility to do 2D or 3D games. The problem with Flash is that there is a learning curve and its user interface and scripting language almost guarantees that you'll be purchasing some books. Flash takes a significant monetary and time investment to get the hang of before your game will hit the top spot on Newgrounds. However, I believe it to be one of the most flexible tools available to an indie developer. Adobe Flex and AIR just further enhance Flash's set of features.

Torque 2D/3D Engines: \$100 - \$300
Pros: Incredibly powerful, Impressive graphics, Flexibility, 2D or 3D Games, Content Packs (\$), All computer platforms and can port to iPhone, Wii, Xbox, and more, Good Level and Graphics Editor
Cons: Documentation is poor, Must learn TorqueScript, Helpful to have C# or C++ Knowledge, Separate 2D and 3D versions

Torque is really the solution that sits somewhere between the strictly coding options below and the point & click options above. You'll need to learn TorqueScript in order to actually code your game and take care of all your events, but you'll be able to drag/drop game objects and design levels in a pretty good and intuitive user interface. Best of all, once you code your game you can pretty much release it on any platform – iPhone, Wii, Xbox. Torque is very impressive graphically and has built in particle effects and other graphical goodies. It's annoying that the 2D and 3D versions are different and that you have to pay more for the source code, Torsion editor, content packs etc. Object Oriented Programming Knowledge is certainly helpful and can give you unlimited flexibility with the engine. The biggest downfall of Torque is that the documentation is poor. There are some decent tutorials to build specific

games, but none of the documentation lays out everything about TorqueScript's idiosyncrasies very well. If you want to learn how to code, but want some visual assistance laying game objects out, Torque is a good solution.

BlitzMax / Blitz3D: \$60-\$100
Pros: Built for Windows, MacOS, and Linux, 2D or 3D Games, Cheap Multi-platform Option, module customization, GUI package (\$), Streamlined coding/debugging
Cons: Have to learn Blitz BASIC coding language, No visualization of graphics, levels, etc.

I have tried out the BlitzMax Demo but never really used the program. There are a lot of Indies out there that swear by it though. It is certainly flexible and offers a nice streamlined coding and debugging platform, but you'll have to learn Blitz's scripting and BASIC coding language. BlitzMax is the first solution on this list that has no visualization of the game space, your graphics, levels, etc. It's purely a coding environment and that will make it difficult for beginners.

XNA Game Studio: Free – Creator's club \$99/year
Pros: Xbox and PC Platforms, 2D & 3D Games, Easily get on Xbox Community/ Indie Games, Cheap, XBLA sales are Great!
Cons: Requires C# programming knowledge, Microsoft Only – absolutely no Mac or Linux, Xbox Community Games Sales have been Poor, Microsoft Certification can be expensive for XBLA

XNA Game Studio Express is free from Microsoft and has some decent tutorials, videos, forums, and documentation to get you started coding your very own Windows or Xbox game. Like BlitzMax, XNA Game Studio is pretty much all code – there are no game visualizations to help you along the way. If you're considering doing a hardcore action type game, this is certainly something worth downloading and trying out. You'll need to be dedicated since you'll need to learn Programming in C# to use XNA, but you can make any type of

game that you can imagine 2D or 3D. It's great that you can make a game for Windows with the software for free and then sign up for the Creators Club and work at getting your game on Xbox. The bad news is that PC games require a lot higher requirements when made with XNA and additional installations (.net framework, C# redistributable, etc) which can frustrate customers. There's also no way that Microsoft is going to support Mac or Linux OS in the future. The good news is that your game is easily ported to Xbox! Well, you can easily get on the Community/Indie Games Channel, but games have been selling poorly there...the most popular downloads being controller massage programs. If your game is really well produced and of a high quality, you can attempt to go the Microsoft Certification route for XBLA, but it's expensive and time consuming. It is where the money is though.

There's really way too many options to list here. Unity recently went free and Unreal Engine has adjusted its pricing too. There's certainly the pure programming route (C++, Java, etc.) too. If you're not a programmer, you'll certainly be more successful staying near the top of the list, though Flash is an excellent starting point. Ultimately, whichever coding platform you choose will affect where you can take your game when it's finished. Mac and Linux are consistently ignored by developers and Indies have seen that they have significantly higher sales and conversion rates from these users (though there are less of them). If you're just starting Indie Game Development, it's probably best that you stick to computers and keep the flexibility of some of the other choices in mind.

HOMEWORK ASSIGNMENT:

Pick a Platform/ Game engine, start learning it and get to work.

INTERVIEW WITH JON PAUL KEATLEY



"Run Away" is the latest in Jon-Paul Keatley's design whims. To design a pure game experience and release it via XNA. Well, he did it. "Run Away!" is a cartoon-y sidescroller with a punishing difficulty. No shooting, no side-missions. Just run. Run away. Keatley shared his thoughts on game design, his proudest gaming moment and what makes 2D so damn enjoyable.

Check out Run Away!

Yes. I have always wanted to create a game entirely on my own so when I found myself with some free time on my hands I jumped at it. I did however have an excellent group of friends who played the game through out development and gave me very valuable feedback.

You call it an 'on-rails platformer', is that fancy talk for 'Left to Right Jumper'?

Haha, 'on-rails platformer' was a bit of creative marketing. While developing Run Away I started to question what kind of category the game would fall into and I hit upon the idea that it could be classed as a quick time even game. This idea scared me greatly as I am in no way a fan of quick time events. So I coined 'on-rails platformer' as a vein attempt to mask this fact.

How long was production on the title?

Including the time in which it was in peer review the whole thing took 5 months to create.

What is your proudest moment in the game?

I would say it was the nice things people said while my game was in play testing. After four and a half months of development I started to question whether anyone would get Run Away or if it was even fun to play. So when I started receiving really nice feedback from people who I had never met it hit me with the power of a thousand Pixar movies. It effectively melted my rugged manly heart, I feel capable of love now.

The game has a rather difficult curve to it, (one hit!) what is your favorite, 'one-hit = death' game?

That would be Another World hands down. It is based in a truly beautiful world and has a great story, all told without a single word. In fact, thinking about it makes me wonder why we are not all playing it right now? It's amazing.

Who handled the soundtrack?

That would be me again. The hardest thing to create for the game was the music and the sound. I simply have no musical talent at all. I did have aspirations of creating some great music for the game at first (there was even a song!) but after a few days locked in my bedroom with a guitar and xylophone I soon realized it was not to be. So I switched my focus to making music and sound that would annoy the player.



What is it about 2D that seems so pure for gaming?

This is a hard question; I don't think I have a strong enough command of the English language to truly express the feelings a well-executed 2D game can invoke. I think you can be more expressive in 2D as it is more abstract. 3D games seem to march towards greater and greater realism for reasons I do not understand. I don't think greater realism is equal to greater fun at all. I feel there are still plenty of ideas unexplored in the 2D realm.

I like the style, but I have to ask, how long did the graphics portion take?

The simple answer is too long. The art took about 60% of the development time. This is mainly because I went about it in totally the wrong fashion. I didn't plan things like the sizes and scales I just drew what I wanted. This led to a lot of issues when I started importing the art into the game.

Was XBL always part of the plan? Were you counting on it or did you know it would be accepted when you started.

The XBL was always the plan. I was confident that if I could create the game then I could get it onto the market. I already had an Xbox and knew C# so when I heard about XNA I couldn't wait to start a project

How difficult is it to get a game into the XBL these days? And about how long did you have to wait for the go-ahead?

It is fairly difficult. I think it took 3 – 4 weeks in total to get through the review process. I have to take my hat off to the people who tested my game, the tests they came up with were amazing, things I would have never thought of. The good thing about the review process is that everyone is really helpful and kind. It can be very frustrating when you fail it though.

Any indie titles you are looking forward to?

I saw a video yesterday of Toki Arcade by Golgoth Studio I am very excited about that. I loved the original and this new version looks unbelievably beautiful. I am also looking forward to Fez and the next Behemoth game.

What is your favorite game that you have developed so far?

I would have to say Lineboy. It is a little game I put on Kongregate that I did with my old flat mate Andrew Smith. He returned home one-day claiming to have designed the best game ever. When he showed me the design it turned out to be a line with an arrow to it saying you and a dot with an arrow to it saying bad guy. I should mention that Andrew is a professional games designer of Flock fame. So I decided to make it as a joke. We tried to remove every element from it other than the game play. It was liberating to break our own rules, I felt very punk!

Anything else upcoming?

I have two projects that are going ahead at the moment. One is a scrolling beat-em up which I am working on as part of a team of five. The other is an on going mystery project which I am working on with two other people. With the speed that the beat-em up is progressing I would expect to see that on the market first. There may also be another personal project before the end of next year as releasing "Run Away" has been an amazing experience.

- Taylor Hall

BEEAPPI INTERVIEW WITH KAREN JIRAK



Karen Jirak of the new BeeAppi games is not your typical games developer. A ten-year veteran of the software development world, Jirak was burning out and looking for a creative outlet.

"I wasn't even an Apple person," Jirak says, but after spending her tax return on her very first Mac, she turned her programming skills towards an iPhone game. Her first creation, CyberWord, is a candy-colored casual game, Bejeweled-meets-Boggle on the iPhone. Jirak doesn't consider herself a gamer, although she admits to playing hours of that non-gamer's favorite electronic game, Guitar Hero, and unplugged Boggle.

"Most word games simply ask the player to look at the screen," Jirak says, "but CyberWord adds a more interactive dimension by asking players to touch letters, swipe words, and shake the phone."

Jirak turned to her sister, Julie Schaffroth, a graphic designer, for the sweet anime-eyed animals that cheer players' progress, and other design work. She also brought on boyfriend Jeremy Cid, as marketing director. (That's right, the girl built the game and brought the guy on as booth babe. Told you this isn't your typical dev team.)

I've said before that the best games use simple rules for various challenges. CyberWord keeps the play mechanic extra-simple, the better to introduce this game to mothers-in-law, co-workers and any other potential wordgame players. After mastering the basics of the word formation – touch to swap letters, swipe to make words, shake to rearrange the letter tiles – you have all the skills to play several different playmodes.

Challenge mode asks players to form 12 words from letter tiles before time runs out, with increasingly difficult levels. I didn't

actually make it to max level, but I imagine it's an entire screen of Vs and Xs, like a bad Scrabble draw. Infinite mode adds a bomb, a familiar mechanic from match-3. Different colored tiles represent different point values, and a new Facebook Connect addition allows CyberWord players to show off amazing scores to their Facebook friends.

It's hard to add anything new to the word game genre, but puzzle does a great job of mixing up the speedy, point-scoring word creation with a more strategic style. The untimed Puzzle mode asks players to turn as many letter tiles as possible into words (leave up to four behind to progress to the next level), without receiving any replacement letters. Jirak says that "there are no new ideas, just new combinations of ideas," and the playstyles of CyberWord blend some of the best parts of Scrabble, Megatouch's Wordster, match-3 games and Boggle.

With a low pricepoint (\$0.99, or try the ad-supported CyberWord Lite free), an easy mechanic, and with the convenience of the omnipresent pocket platform of the iPhone, CyberWord is attracting fans of offline word-games. CyberWord is built for a quick round while waiting for the train or the dentist, but the brain-tickling word formation quickly becomes addictive. Jirak and the rest of the BeeAppi teams are downloading new games and considering their next project, but we can be sure this is the first of many BeeAppi iPhone games.

- Meg Stivison

Rocket Santa | www.roocketsanta.com | iPhone

Christmas stuff gets a little leeway when it comes to quality; just think about how many crummy Christmas television specials we get excited about. Rocket Santa is a little late to the Christmas party, though, so it loses the Christmas veneer and is revealed to be what it actually is: boring and unremarkable.

The reindeer fall ill, forcing Santa to strap on a jetpack and deliver the presents solo. Tilting the iPhone or iPod Touch left and right steers Santa, while touch buttons fire his thrusters and drop presents into sparkling chimneys. The game is technically sound, and the visuals are nice (aside from too much repetition and one terrifying elf), but the game gets old really quick. Plus, the challenge is almost nonexistent, with little replay value; you'll figure out how to do a perfect game your third time through.

Now comes my ax to grind. I've played too many iPhone games that had little to no music or sound design, and Rocket Santa is no exception. The title has no music and sound effects that would make a Commodore 64 sound like the London Symphony Orchestra. An iPod is designed to be capable of producing excellent sound quality. Not incorporating that feature into game design is inexcusable.

Rocket Santa only costs a buck, and it might have been worth it at Christmas as a festive diversion. More replay value would help too. If you're jonesing for a Santa Claus game for iPhone, play A Christmas Santa instead.

- Ben Montgomery





#1: Blood Frontier - 7.75

FPS and features what is now my favorite shotgun of all time. More shooters should have shotguns that reload automatically when not in use. But I digress, a shotgun is no reason to play a game and Blood Frontier has plenty better, entertaining single and multiplayer games, challenging AI and a wealth of maps being just a few. The play modes and weapons are a bit standard, but offer solid variety. One could criticize the sub par visuals, but they're really a boon. You can pretty well guarantee it will run on anything. Besides, with the game being fun and free, you'd have to be a real jerk to complain.

Peter: 8

This free, community developed FPS feels a lot like Quake III Arena with added movement controls. The weapons are balanced, and you can pick whichever one you like when you join a game. But my favorite is the plasma pistol, because the secondary fire unleashes a huge, player-eating plasma ball. Sure it takes up the whole clip and leaves you vulnerable, but oh the destruction. I also love the double jump, something that seems to improve every game it's added to.

Erika: 9

BOH is a retro-themed game full of exploration and action. Aesthetically, the game is incredibly minimal but its subtly complex gameplay makes the game stand out from most top-down shooters. Rather than walking around the screen, the world rotates around you. With your vision limited to ninety degrees and your flashlight illuminating a small portion of the screen, enemies can easily remain hidden from view. Even so, these enemies are the least of your worries as level design can prove to be more cumbersome and, at times, just unforgiving. Despite these minor nuances, BOH is an immersive top-down shooter worth every minute of your time.

Sam: 7

BOH is a top down shooter where you have to fight your way to the exit, with enemies and locked doors standing in your way. It's like a top down Doom. Aiming is done with the keyboard, which can be cumbersome. The maps are challenging to navigate, but there are power-ups that give you an expanded range of vision or a mini-map that make it easier. The demo includes two missions, one easy and the other frustratingly hard. Old school graphics and sound, with a tense atmosphere. Certainly unique.

Stew: 8

Alone in the Dark would be a great name for BOH were it not already taken. You play a single, vulnerable, pixelated fellow working your way through poorly lit mazes populated by infinite hordes of baddies. This concept, built around simple yet addictive gameplay and a nice retro look, make BOH a fine title. There are a few rough spots. The first few levels introduce you to a few of the game's mechanics. That said, they

Erika: 8

Blood Frontier has got to be one of the best open-source FPS games I've played. A modification of the Sauerbraten engine, the game supports both single and multi-player and maintains a general theme of tactics and low gravity. For an open-source FPS, Blood Frontier has some nice graphics, fun gameplay and a helpful community. Made for the people, by the people, Blood Frontier is completely free and definitely worth checking out.

Sam: 6

Blood Frontier is a free open source first person shooter in the same vein as Unreal Tournament and Quake, with single player (against bots) and multiplayer. The bots are competent, and there seems to be quite a few maps of fair quality, although most are dark and generic. Movement is a little floaty, but the designers say they're trying for a low gravity feel. Wall, double and strafe jumping are all included, and the running speed is insanely fast, allowing for some pretty crazy trick jumping with practice. Nothing stands out as terribly original, but it's a pretty good deal for free.

Stew: 9

I was impressed by Blood Frontier. Bare bones as it is, it's a solid



#1: BOH - 7.75

don't inform enough and really grasping the gameplay requires reading the manual. Aiming is also a pain. You have little visually to aid you and just shooting straight can be hard at times. Even so, it's difficult to slight BOH. It's a well crafted game that shows a level of care I wish others would shoot for.

Peter: 7

This top-down shooter made me a little dizzy with its odd control scheme. Your character always faces up, and you rotate the screen around him. This novel approach does make you feel like you're playing a top-down FPS, but it's usually impossible to turn around fast enough to defend yourself if something is coming up behind you. It's a shame, because I liked the upgradeable items and the map, and the atmosphere is surprisingly creepy for a game that runs at 320 by 200. But the lack of a way to turn 180 degrees really turned me off.



3: Ziro - 7.00

Erika: 7

Who would have known that a puzzle game involving dice, ice and blocks could be so much fun? Ziro is, indeed, an interesting puzzle game in which players must direct sets of dice in order to match like-numbered pairs. The casual gameplay makes Ziro easy to pick up and play, but its difficulty level quickly ramps up to excruciating. Even so, this difficulty does not take away from the experience. My one gripe would be the lack of direction in the game. Gameplay instructions are limited and only appear before the first level. This is frustrating if you're like me and want to have a second look while playing. Ziro may be fun and easy to pick up, but at \$9.99, you're better suited at playing the demo.

Sam: 7

Ziro is a unique puzzle game with lots of polish. You match blocks with the same value by sliding them together and combining them, removing them from the board. More points are rewarded for removing all the blocks in fewer moves or less time. The puzzles in the demo were straightforward, with only a few taking more than one attempt on Medium difficulty. The blocks have heft and weight, making satisfying clinks as they move about the board. The music is upbeat and the graphics are bright and cheery. The puzzles got somewhat repetitive, but they were entertaining the first time.

Peter: 8

I'm not sure that I really want to learn about global warming while playing a game, but at least the gameplay in Ziro is pretty solid. The point of the game is to clear a board of dice. Equal dice cancel each other out, while nonequivalent dice combine to become larger or smaller. That would be challenging enough, but the dice slide in one direction until they hit a wall, so you have to work pretty hard just to get the dice close enough together just to combine them. It's challenging, but not too frustrating, and it's worth a try.

Mike: 7

The graphics and presentation are solid in Ziro. It has a pretty slick 3-D engine that allows you to rotate the world and shows off the game's polish. The great attention to detail and production extends to the game's music and sound, but ultimately the sliding dice thing just wasn't for me. Ziro is a unique puzzle game for the casual market with a decent core mechanic and excellent production quality.



4: The 3 Musketeers - 6.75

Stew: 5

The 3 Musketeers follows the adventures of D'artagnan as he endeavors to join the ranks of the titular musketeers. Unfortunately, describing the game is leagues more interesting than playing it. Musketeers is little more than a glorified point and click. You're sent on a quest, usually just to speak to someone, and after several minutes of walking you're sent to go speak to someone else. Sword fights occur occasionally, but are almost entirely hands off. You click on a foe and watch as D'artagnan duels them. The visuals aren't unattractive but offer little in the way of variety. The music while pleasant becomes repetitious fast. In short, Musketeers takes the Alexander Dumas' classic and douses it in shades of bland.

Peter: 8

The familiar tale of d'Artagnan is neatly wrapped in an easy-to-digest RPG shell. Though I was apprehensive about playing a game with such dated graphics, I pressed ahead and was the better for it. The story moves along pretty quickly, and I really liked the sword combat -- which happens everytime someone slights d'Artagnan. My demo ran out right after I got the gun, so I wonder what that would have added to the mix.

Erika: 8

3 Musketeers is a very strange concept for an RPG. Even so, the game is a faithful adaptation for the PC with an excellent narrative and well-defined characters - quite the surprise! Three Musketeers does, however, have some weak graphics and a less-than-stellar combat system. While the game is still playable, these factors detract from the overall experience. Luckily, the story and characters are interesting enough to hold their own. This RPG may not boast a complex story or spectacular graphics and combat, but the game does have a lot of charm.

Sam: 6

You are d'Artagnan, a young Frenchman who leaves home to join the Musketeers of the Guard in Paris. The game seems to follow the story of the book fairly closely, with major scenes illustrated in comics. Duels are handled automatically, but you can make critical hits by clicking enemies when they're sweating. It makes me want to actually read the book. The recommended path is marked by yellow footprints, but you don't have to follow them. A fairly expansive world and an interesting format for storytelling make this game worth a look.



5: Wild Hollow - 6.50

Erika: 9

In this light-hearted RPG/Adventure/Simulation game, you play the role of a young boy/girl returning home after studying abroad. Unfortunately you arrive home to discover your parents are missing and your ranch partially destroyed. Your job is to find your parents and rebuild the ranch. Outside of that, very little of Wildhollow should be taken seriously. The game is very tongue-in-cheek making for an incredibly charming experience. The game progresses primarily through conversations which unlock new areas to visit. Wildhollow was a fun experience and definitely worth checking out. Considering how much there is to do in this game, it's definitely worth the time and money.

Sam: 5

Wildhollow is a fantasy adventure game where you raise animals. Your parents disappear and their ranch burns down, so you set out to rebuild and find your parents. You earn the money to rebuild the ranch by doing quests, most of which involve finding an item or completing a mini-game. Quests run out pretty quickly, so there's a point where you'll have to grind the mini-games so you can buy items you need to progress in the story. The tone is campy - lots of the dialog is composed of jokes or cheesy puns. There's not much interaction beyond the mini-games, so I'm not sure it's worth \$20.

Peter: 5

While Wildhollow has pretty gorgeous hand-drawn backgrounds, there isn't much to do in the demo. It seems to be half adventure game and half animal-raising simulator, but the adventure part is all one-step fetch-quests, and the animal herding is simple and tedious. I spent as much time fishing and picking up apples as I did exploring the world, and I didn't feel like I was getting anywhere because making money seemed to take forever.

Stew: 7

I will give Wildhollow one thing, it entertained me. Unfortunately, it had little to do with the gameplay and more to do with amusing writing. The gameplay isn't bad, it just lacks the kind of meat I look for in a game. While the fantasy setting, and questing elements all but scream RPG, it generally falls into the overly simple, point and click adventure category with a few pseudo mini-games for good measure. Despite this not being my style, I could see others enjoying it. Wildhollow doesn't do anything overly wrong; its graphics are colorful and attractive, its soundtrack is solid and it has a nice sense of humor. It's just more of a light snack when I'm looking for a steak dinner.



6: PutUp - 6.50

Stew: 8

Put Up is another entry into the straightforward puzzler genre, but it's fun so who's complaining? Each level of Put Up is split into two stages. In the first, the goal is to match trios of different colored candies while racing against a time limit. In the second you need to catch said candies while they fall from the sky. The second mode isn't bad, but the first is definitely more entertaining, especially in the more challenging levels offered toward the end of the demo. All of this is wrapped up in an attractively simple, autumn/Halloween themed visual package. The audio track is limited to a few beeps and bleeps, but it fits. There are a lot of games out there like this, but Put Up is one of the better ones.

Peter: 5

PutUp is a mindless match-three puzzle game with adorable art but little depth. Like a simplified game of solitaire, you match three pieces of the same colored candy by drawing pieces from the bottom of each column. After clearing the board, your slime has to catch falling candy. Neither mode is challenging or new, and the scoring is off. Whether I got every piece of falling candy or purposely let rocks and leaves fall on me, I ended up with three white stars. I don't know if that's good or bad because I got it on every stage of the demo.

Erika: 6

While PutUp doesn't offer anything too inventive, the puzzle game is definitely a fun experience. Each level consists of pulling down candies and moving them to other columns with like-colored sweets. In addition, players must glide their little ghost protagonist towards falling sweets in your Halloween bag. Oddly enough, this game sounds quite similar to Capybara Game's Critter Crunch (reviewed on page 17), but without the food-chain system the game excelled at. Unfortunately, PutUp is not quite there in its performance. While the puzzle game is simple and fun, the game lacks a definite focus in both gameplay and visuals. The game is more of a, for lack of a better word, grab bag of ideas and lacks a sense of identity.

Sam: 4

Put Up is another "match three" game, where the same rule of match three or more of the same color objects apply. The twist here is that each level has a rule change. One gives you a time limit, another only lets you match the color they tell you, and so on. Once you beat the "match three" portion, you have to catch candies as they fall, avoiding rocks and leaves. There are a few cute touches, and I get a World of Goo vibe from the graphics and sound. Different enough to be worth a try.



7: Trio - 6.25

Erika: 7

TriO: The Great Settlement is yet another title implementing the physics-based puzzle concept. In the game, players are expected to free magical creatures called Orbics by dropping them to combine three of the same colour. Instead of landing squarely on top of another Orbic, physics will make columns topple and lean so some strategy in where to drop your Orbic is required. Let me just say right now, Orbics are really freaky looking creatures. They are living, breathing emoticons full of magical energy. They aren't the cutest of creatures, but somehow I was compelled to save them and play through each increasingly difficult level. While the game takes few risks, the gameplay is rewarding and is, at most, deserving of a free, one hour download.

Sam: 5

Trio is a "match three" game, where you drop blocks on other blocks of the same color, trying to form groups of three or more. What makes Trio different is that blocks have a simple physics model, with gravity and friction, so you can hit another block to make it drop down and make a match. The blocks are Orbics, little trapped colored spheres that you free by matching them. Once they're free, they will wander around a clearing where you can build houses and amenities for them with the money you earn completing levels, but there's no real reason to. Trio adds nothing that hasn't already been done before.

Peter: 7

If you can get past the creepy faces on the orbic people you're saving in Trio, there's a deceptively clever match-the-color puzzler here. While these kinds of games aren't my cup of tea, the sticky, physics-based maneuvering is comfortably predictable. Because the blocks are a little slippery, and three of a color only have to be near each other to be cleared, it's possible to force the caged orbs together, which feels pretty good. And the town building you do between stages is a nice break from the main game.

Mike: 6

Trio is a match-3 game with a physics twist. The presentation, graphics, and music are good, but forgettable. The only problem here is that unlike most games, physics negatively impacts the gameplay when it comes to match 3. The way the boxes stick to each other and fall over makes it difficult to setup long chains and combos.



8: Labyrinthica - 6.00

Mike: 6

When I visited Labyrinthica's website, the screens immediately reminded me of the Legend of Zelda. Ultimately, the game is a more generic hack and slash game. The hand drawn cutscenes and in-game characters look nice, but the dungeons themselves are sparse and boring looking. I realize they're randomly generated, but there could've been more done to spiffy them up. The gameplay is solid, but the game could've been better if it followed more in Zelda's footsteps. The game has a good core, but could use some more play testing to make it less repetitive and more polished.

Erika: 8

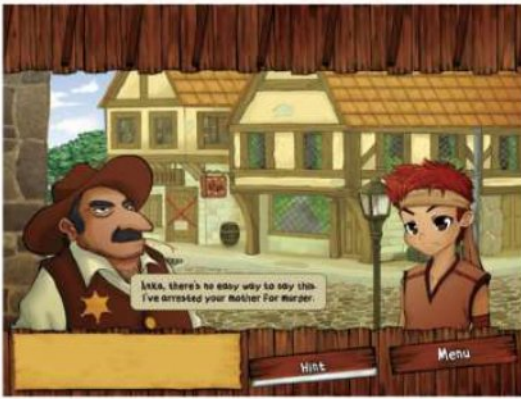
Labyrinthica's relatively simple concept masks complex and elaborate gameplay full of items, monsters and the occasional, albeit clever, boss battles. The game is easy to get into despite the absence of instructions; in fact, this makes for an interesting experience trying to figure out Lima's attacks. Consisting of thirty levels and fun gameplay, this action game is well worth \$9.95. Labyrinthica may not have taken any risks, but it's still a solid indie title worth checking out.

Sam: 5

Labyrinthica is a hack and slash action game, where you run around and melee enemies in randomly generated mazes, killing a certain number of enemies to advance to the next maze. The mazes are graphically repetitive (just trees, grass, and enemies) with little variety. There's a leveling system, but I didn't feel like my character advanced any. The combat is shallow, just circles foes and click to attack. If you want a better hack and slash experience, get Torchlight. If you want a Rouge-like game, download Nethack or Dungeon Crawl Stone Soup. There's not much original or new here, other games have done the same things better.

Peter:

I couldn't get this to run on Windows 7. The music that played on a black screen sounded nice though.



9: Anka - 5.75

Erika: 7

The story begins with our young hero, Anka, whose goal is to free his mother from a crime she did not commit and find his missing father. In between this story, players are asked to solve brainteasers in order to progress through the game. Simple enough, but what this adventure-puzzle game lacks is focus. The need to repeatedly visit people and locations in order to gain certain items throughout the game adds to more frustrations. Despite there being some good ideas, Anka takes a lot of missteps in gameplay. You're better off simply playing the demo.

Sam: 5

Anka is an adventure game. You control a young boy doing everyday chores, like finding the door handle that you tore off and threw on the roof, or finding the 40 eggs you hid in and around the house. These Basic tasks require mini-games. Want to read a recipe? Solve a crossword puzzle. The other tasks are more like traditional adventure game puzzles. They involve a lot of pixel hunting and combining unlikely objects. Trying to fix a hole in a boat? Use a frog, a broken bottle of honey, and bees. The puzzles range from obvious to illogical. However, the environments are detailed, and none of the items are too hidden.

Peter: 3

Anka is a point-and-click puzzler with well-drawn, anime-style characters and various minigames. The first thing I had to do was search the pixels for 40 eggs, which was frustrating and boring. Then I did a tile puzzle and a word search. While the art is well-executed, neither it nor the puzzles offer anything new or challenging. It seems like the target audience is children who can't handle simple game mechanics, and I guess there is some appeal in that.

Stew: 8

In spite of myself, I liked Anka. A sickly sweet tale of a chipper lad occupying an equally honey toned world, it's the sort of game that would usually make me puke. That said, at its core Anka is less about some brat's "adventures" and more about playing mini-games and solving puzzles. The mini-games especially impressed me. While none are especially groundbreaking or complex, they are all fun and well done. I could actually imagine several being sold as standalone products and to its credit, Anka has them all under one roof, available for play whenever you like. In short, Anka is an attractive package for casual gamers, if you can get past the Care Bears sentimentality.



10: Vitamini - 5.25

Stew: 5

Vitamini's website describes it as "Tetris with physics." That's giving it a bit too much credit. The core mechanic of the game can be described as bashing floating, spinning blocks into one another. The closest visible resemblance to Tetris is that blocks fall from the top of the screen and land on the bottom. After half an hour of play time, I had no clue what I was doing beyond the basic controls. That said, I can't say the game is without any entertainment value. The rudimentary thrill of knocking things around is fun for a bit. While there are hints of a good game here, the current product is just mediocre.

Peter: 4

This is relaxing and stylish, and the way the sound effects mesh with the music is cool, but I don't really see the point to Vitamini. There's no tension and no fear of losing. I played for a while, wondering when the challenge would come, but it never did. I even had a hard time getting to a game over screen. My blocks kept disappearing, whether I wanted them to or not.

Erika: 8

Three words can sum up this this puzzle game: Tetris with physics. Not to say that Vitamini is a straight-up Tetris clone, but the premise itself hints at this despite the developer's desire to create a unique puzzle title. However what makes this game shine is the ability to dictate the pace of the game, and thus manipulate the level of difficulty to further customize the experience. This casual puzzle game is, indeed, relaxing and definitely worth the \$2 asking price.

Sam: 4

Vitamini is a game where you match colored blocks as they fall and bounce around. You can control the most recent one that dropped to try and match colors, but this seems pretty optional. I had more success holding down the Space bar and letting block clusters shower down rather than trying to herd them where I wanted. They seemed to match themselves without my help, so it got bored pretty quickly. The game calls itself the easiest ever, but it's barely a game. Make colorful blocks fall down, move them around if you want, score points. It's certainly colorful, but that's about it.

This Issue's Contributors

Peter Rambo

Plays stringed instruments, wrangles headlines for a newspaper, and writes and talks for gameosaurus.com.

Andrew Groen

A full-time video game freelance writer based in Chicago, Andrew Groen's life is completely consumed by video games. After spending long hours during the day playing video games and writing about video games for work, Andrew likes to unwind by playing video games. In his spare time he works with a local indie studio developing their first video game.

Erika Szabo

Erika Szabo is a freelance writer and publicist currently living in Toronto, Canada. Her life consists of videogames, sushi, writing, films and more videogames. She currently has an undying obsession with side-scrolling shmups.

Sam Combs

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

Stew Shearer

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

Ben Montgomery

Small-town newspaper reporter who moonlights as a video game journalist.

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

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.

Mike Gnade

A Delawarean who loves all things video games. Working and writing to spread indie gaming to the masses, Mike spends his free time putting together this magazine.

WOLFIRE

GAMES



Wolfire Games has managed to make quite a splash in the Indie Community with their Open Development philosophy and marketing approach. Taylor Hall had a chance to interview John Graham about Wolfire's origin, future, and his opinions on indie game development.



When did Wolfire start?

David Rosen created Wolfire in 2003 as a web site where people could find and download his major game projects. Though the original Wolfire site only featured David's later work, he had actually started developing games in 1992 when he was in second grade.

Because David and I went to the same elementary school, I had the opportunity to watch him create his first masterpiece. It was a black and white, choose-your-own-adventure, stick figure war game he designed in a programming language called Hypercard. He even created his own gunshot and explosion sound effects by recording the distortion that occurs from blowing into a microphone. David's game quickly became more fun than it's closest competitor (the hunting section of Oregon Trail). It spread around the school computers until the administration overheard explosions and gunfire coming from their computers and promptly banned the game.

By the time he hit high school, David was making games in his own 3D engines like his procedural first person shooter Black Shades and the classic ninja rabbit fighter Lugaru. After turning down recruitment offers from companies like Crytek, he finished college and decided to assemble a team. Now David is joined by our lead artist Aubrey, his twin brother Jeff and myself and we're making a sequel to Lugaru on steroids called Overgrowth.

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Where did the name Wolfire originate?

Many years ago, David and Jeff decided to adopt a stray dog that was following them home after a vacation in the mountains. The dog looked fairly wolf-like, so they decided to call him Wolfenstein or Wolfie for short.

When David was thinking of a name for his video game company, Wolfie sprang to mind but he realized that if you add an 'r' you get Wolfire. Wolves are awesome, fire is awesome, so why not Wolfire?

What was it like in the early days when Black Shades first came out? Both in the indie scene and within the company.

When Black Shades came out, Wolfire was just David working all by himself. He had entered his procedural FPS in a uDevGames contest and Black Shades won some awards and earned him a reputation with indie gaming enthusiasts. The scene was smaller then. So most of David's peers were also hobbyists as opposed to people trying to make a full time living by developing games. Recently though, it's been very inspiring to see games like World of Goo, Braid and Castle Crashers break into the mainstream industry a little bit.

What is the feeling or image you want people to think of when they think of Wolfire?

Aside from the sweet Wolfire Logo which David and Aubrey made together, another classic

Wolfire symbol has become the Whale Man. Whale Man represents fun, outside-of-the-box thinking and he is not afraid to stomp things that deserve it in our Whale Fail posts.

Has development from Black Shades down to Overgrowth been a continual process for the team?

Wolfire has been David's one-man company until he decided to bring the rest of us in to work on Overgrowth. For David, it has been a continuous learning process. Each iteration has expanded his game development vocabulary. From black and white war games in Hypercard; to FirePong in QuickBasic which needed fire and lightening particle effects along with paddle damage modeling; to GLFighters which David made in his own 3D engine and custom built forward kinematics animation editor; to Black Shades which used procedurally created levels and inverse kinematics; to Black Shades which used procedurally created levels and inverse kinematics; then to Lugaru which had seamless transitions between complex skeletal animations and ragdoll physics; it's been quite a whirlwind. And remember these were all games David made before he went to college. Now that he has graduated and has a team backing him up, Overgrowth is going to be totally awesome.

After David created Black Shades, what inspired him to make Lugaru?

David had been playing Rune and Oni and realized he wanted to express his own vision of intense 3D melee combat. While both games provided David with some initial inspiration, he managed to carve out a fast-paced, intuitive, combat system that is unlike anything else in the gaming industry.

What was the inspiration for the art direction in Lugaru and how will that change in Overgrowth?

David had many reasons for his choice of setting for Lugaru: avoiding the uncanny valley, leveraging species-related stereotypes (How hardcore is a rabbit that dares to fight wolves?), immortalizing his faithful dog Wolfie in the context of a video game plus he also wanted to create devastatingly realistic combat without having the damage inflicted on human characters.

Overgrowth will be inheriting the essence of Lugaru but because we have been building our brand new Phoenix Engine from scratch, we will be able to achieve a much more photo-realistic experience. We're also going to be adding more characters (dogs, cats and rats in addition to rabbits and wolves). From Aubrey's beautiful 2D concept art to his carefully sculpted character meshes, you can already get a good sense of just how immersive Overgrowth is going to be.

Was the reaction to Lugaru's release what you were hoping for? How has that affected Overgrowth?

Lugaru was basically a hobby project that David put together in his free time. Despite the fact that he didn't have time to promote it much, it became an organic success and sold several thousand copies. The community even went so far as to reverse engineer his code to unlock the map editor. Today there are now 5 total conversions of Lugaru which rival the quality of the original game with more announced and on the way.

For Overgrowth, we decided instead of hiding the editor tools we should just bundle them tidily with the rest of the game. We now have a map editor, decal editor, sky editor and even an animation editor built right into our Phoenix Engine and we've already seen fans construct their own cities and levels.

How is Black Shade doing on iTunes? Was the conversion a hard process?

Henry Kropf was the developer that brought Black Shades to the iPhone for us. Black Shades iPhone hasn't done super well, as it has barely broken 1000 sales. We had a few complications with our launch on the App Store which hurt our chances of making the top lists. But there aren't too many first person shooters with skeletal animations and ragdoll physics on the iPhone, so at 99 cents, BSi is a steal.

What was the most difficult time for everyone? Personal reasons or otherwise.

We're fortunate enough to have a really awesome team. We all care a lot about Overgrowth's development process and while we don't always have identical opinions on how things should go, we've never had a situation we couldn't figure out with a brief chat and a brainstorm session.

Personally, the most difficult time for me was when the Organic Indie Preorder Pack sold over 1000 sales and I was forced to fulfill an agreement with the fans to dye my beard pink. Going out in public with a pink beard can be a bit disconcerting.

Proudest moment yet?

The success of the Organic Indie Preorder Pack combined with David's post about why you should use OpenG which landed on the front page of Digg, Slashdot and Reddit was probably our proudest recent moment. However, the most exciting things are yet to come so I recommend staying tuned to the Wolfire Blog!

What went into the development of the Phoenix Engine? Will you be selling it independently?

Our main goal is to make Overgrowth an awesome ninja rabbit fighting game and we decided building our own engine would be the best way to do this. Although it's a lot of work, it allows us to maintain direct control over the project and we can easily build and modify our editor tools to optimize our level creation workflow. A huge side benefit of building our own tools is that we can bundle them directly with the game and give them to fans without worrying about licensing complications. Though it's been some extra effort, we're strong believers that it was the right choice.

We've definitely had a lot of people ask us about licensing our engine or pieces of it for third party projects. That would be very cool but supporting a developer's kit for third parties would be a ton of work and we might prefer to spend that time working on a game instead.

Does the Phoenix engine translate to XNA or Unity? Will you be converting Overgrowth for either of these platforms as well?

The Phoenix Engine is powered by OpenGL which means it will be easily compatible Mac, Linux and PC. This cross platform compatibility has been a huge boon for Wolfire. While we would definitely like to get Overgrowth onto consoles as well, we haven't come up with a formal plan for how to do that yet.

How long has Overgrowth been in development?

Overgrowth has been in development for just over a year. We've spent the whole first part of our development process working on our core engine technologies. However, since David just laid the foundation for scripting last week, we are dangerously close to being able to start crafting the game itself.

With the webcomic and the youtube channel there appears to be transparency between fans and the developers. What does that do for Overgrowth and Wolfire? Is this a direction for future branding for the company?

We've been advocating our practice of open development quite heavily. Rather than try to make a game in a cave and then walk out one day and say "Hello world, here we are love us.", we've been showing people every step of our process. This has not only helped us raise early awareness about Overgrowth but also gives us valuable feedback on our game as it develops. I don't think the Organic Indie Preorder Pack would have been a success without our efforts to reach out to the community from day 1. We were asked to speak at GDC Austin about open development and we were invited back to speak at the main GDC in San Francisco.

When can people expect Overgrowth to be finished?

We don't have an official release date for Overgrowth because we want to be able to spend enough time to get the game done right. However, as part of our open development process, you can already preorder Overgrowth and get access to our weekly alpha builds. Rabbit recently died so now there's a real looking rabbit running around in the engine.

What is the best way to monetize a game? Sponsor? Straight price? Donation? XBL (NA)?

I don't think there's one right answer to the question. However, I will say that with our indie peers experiencing 90% piracy rates for games and the democratization of distribution and marketing via the ever growing power of the internet there's no reason to think that the best way to monetize a game today will remain the best way to monetize it tomorrow. In fact, for small developers that don't need that many sales to turn a profit, there is more freedom to try things that are a little crazier but fairly likely to generate you some serious pr. Our fear is that a lot of indies just think that if they make a great game, everything else will fall into place. While this is certainly possible, we think it's a lot better to develop openly from day one.

- Taylor Hall



Lugaru | www.wolfire.com | PC | Mac | Linux

Lugaru: The Rabbit's Foot is nothing if not an aesthetically odd game. It's strangely anthropomorphic rabbit-like characters come dangerously close to earning this game the nickname "Battle Furrries." Freaky art design aside, Lugaru is a surprisingly intense action game that features a fighting system that is surprisingly deep and remarkably precise. It's too bad that a few frustrating design choices taint the experience and prevent Lugaru from transcending to a must-buy, indie classic.

As mentioned before, Lugaru is a fighting-focused action game starring a human-shaped, bunny-textured...thing...named Jack as he seeks revenge for the slaughter of his peaceful village. It seems amazingly contrived, but some scenes, particularly when Jack returns to the destroyed village, are oddly poignant. Perhaps we've grown weary of feeling bad for humans, but when that village was covered in bunny blood I was sad. Lugaru squanders this opportunity though, and the rest of the game proceeds as a run-of-the-mill revenge story and takes little advantage of the uniqueness of its characters. The promise shown in the first act is gone minutes later.

Story is not the reason you're going to be playing this game, though. The piece de resistance of Lugaru is the unique and free-flowing combat system. Combat is simple in that there are only a few different moves to master, but also infinitely deep as the true depth comes from timing and skillful execution. There are standard punches and kicks, but the real innovation is in the great counters which easily allow the player to grab an enemies limb during an attack for a quick riposte.

In one-on-one situations, the combat works

great. It's a fast-paced game of timing and prediction as you try to figure out when your opponent is going to strike next. When things get more intense, though, the combat doesn't hold up as well. With two enemies at once, it's quite difficult to survive, and with three enemies it's borderline impossible. Maybe that's the way it should be, realistic, but in a game it's extremely obnoxious to get 75 percent of the way through a level, picking off enemies one-by-one only to get ransacked by the last three remaining. Because when it happens, it's all over.

Thus players have to make very sure to be discreet and careful when choosing their battles. Lugaru becomes something of a stealth game when more difficult levels come up (it reminded me a bit of Tenchu) with players quietly circling the level looking for some lone prey to pick off quietly.

To help you stay quiet and take enemies out quickly, Lugaru has a few different weapons which can aid you. The most useful is the knife, which can be used as a slashing weapon, and also as a thrown weapon that can often kill an enemy instantly. Leading to a morosely satisfying conclusion as you walk up to your fallen enemy and pull the knife out of their chest.

When played casually, Lugaru's faults are easy to overlook, and it's hard not to enjoy this unique actioner. Any play session that lasts longer than twenty minutes though is likely to end in keyboard smashing frustration as you get slowly pounded to death by multiple enemies.

Lugaru has a solid premise going, but ultimately doesn't live up to its potential. The combat lacks fine-tuning, and the story is a

limp excuse for gameplay, but the framework of a great game is here. Lugaru: The Rabbit's Foot isn't quite there, but I will say that I hope we see a Lugaru 2, because I'm eager to see what a few refinements to the system could add.

- Andrew Groen

Screenshot



Lugaru

REVIEW

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



Wolfire is hard at work on the sequel to Lugaru, titled *Overgrowth*. They were nice enough to provide me with access to their weekly alphas of the game to see how it is progressing. The game is still very early. In fact, there's no real gameplay in there to talk about...yet. Wolfire has stated that *Overgrowth* will take place a few years after *Lugaru*, use a similar combat system, and once again feature Turner the rabbit as the main character. Turner will be battling wolves, cats, rats, and dogs (at the very least) but Turner isn't even in the game yet. In fact a few weeks ago, there was only 'Rabbit'. Rabbit was a sort of rabbit stick figure placeholder. Rabbit was just recently replaced with a real rabbit named Robbert. Wolfire isn't saying much more about the story, but they do have a fantastic comic that may shed some more light on the world and story potential.

Check it out at: <http://www.wolfire.com/comic>

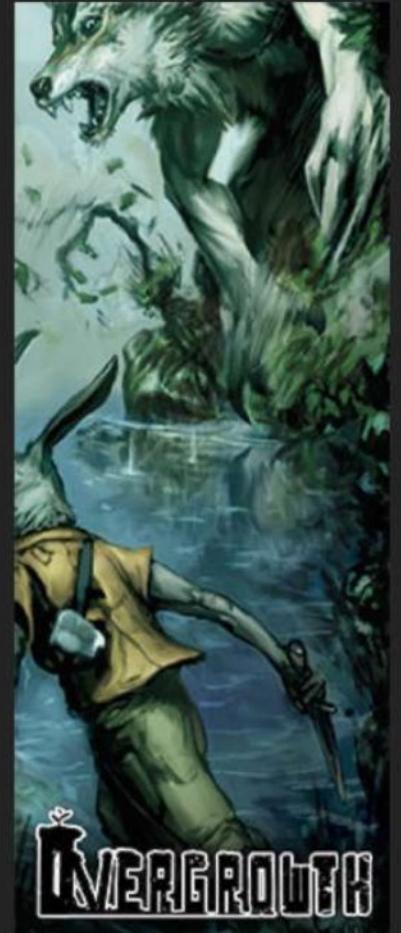
Right now, *Overgrowth* features some amazing tools to play around and experiment with. If you're looking to kick some wolf butt and just enjoy a game, *Overgrowth* is not yet ready for you....try *Lugaru* instead. If you're a Modder, game developer or technically savvy, *Overgrowth's* game tools will be easy enough

for you to pick up and enjoy. Even if you're not that tech savvy, there's still some fun that can be had in the *Overgrowth* alphas. You'll just need a little patience. If you need help, the *Overgrowth* forums and blog have tons of great resources and videos to help people get the most out of their game tools and engine. Personally, I had the most fun throwing bunnies and seeing the game's ragdoll physics engine in action.

I'm pretty confident saying that *Overgrowth* will be a beautiful atmospheric game. The environments already look fantastic. The Wolfire team is spending a lot of time on every texture, lighting effect and minute detail and the orchestral and ambient music is already atmospheric and impressive. Wolfire breeds confidence in its game with its already impressive tools and their ongoing updates on their blog. I can't wait for more combat and game scenarios to leak into the alphas.

So is *Overgrowth* going to be any good? It's hard to say at this point, but Wolfire's dedication is inspiring and the improvements over *Lugaru* are already apparent in the game's engine. *Overgrowth* is certainly worth getting excited about.

- Mike Gnade

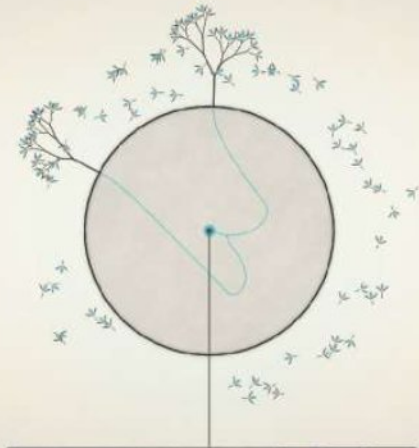


Comparison



Overgrowth





Euforia | www.euforia-game.com | Windows PC

Euforia tasks players with growing trees on small asteroids and expanding your seedling empire across the universe. Your empire quickly encounters a collective of diseased gray seedlings and rival empires, and must discover the link between them.

Euforia is obviously an RTS, although almost nothing about it is conventional. Instead of turning one element of RTS gameplay on its side and slamming you over the head with a hook, it quietly and subtly presents many new approaches to the genre. Also, the game rarely ever presents the innovations to the player; rather, they realize them one at a time as they discover the strategic layers in Euforia.

Each asteroid can support a preset amount of trees, usually three or four. Players can use ten seedlings to either plant Dyson trees (named for Freeman Dyson, a physicist who theorized that a tree-like plant could grow on certain comets), which create more seedlings, or defense trees, which drop homing bombs to ward off enemies. The seedlings are also your fighting force, hopping to asteroids, destroying enemy seedlings and trees, and "capturing" the planetoids by planting themselves in their cores.

Play long enough and you'll discover your first innovations the seedlings aren't really your units, but rather the asteroids. Trading seedlings between asteroids balances offense and defense just as much as building the trees does. The final wrinkle is flowers, which seem to grow randomly on Dyson trees, which can attach to a tree and either enhance the seedlings growing from it or cultivate a powerful but slothful seedling destroying laser mine.

And that's it. That's the extent of the arsenal at your disposal. The game is deceptively simple, but encourages out-of-the-box strategizing. Low on seedlings and need to cultivate? Set up a "trap planet" full of defense trees in the middle of your enemies' flight paths. Or send one of your defense mines to thin out enemy seedlings. The "aha!" moments are great.

Unfortunately, the campaign's 25 missions are really all there is to the game. There is a good deal of replay value with some unlockable skirmish maps, a higher difficulty setting, and some randomization in the regular campaign missions. There is an option on the main menu for "custom maps," but I couldn't find a level editor.

What the game is really missing is multiplayer. The game is so perfectly set up for it, and it feels like there's a gaping hole in the experience. The developers say they didn't put it in because they didn't have much experience with multiplayer. It's understandable that indie developers don't exactly have the resources to maintain multiplayer servers, but to not include a game feature because you didn't have the guts is inexcusable.

That's not to say the main game doesn't make this worth a purchase. The campaign consistently throws new and interesting challenges; one mission tasks players with protecting a planet-full of the diseased seedlings for ten minutes while the mysterious narrator studies them. Another starts the player on a lone asteroid surrounded by enemies that immediately attack, forcing the player to flee and regroup to take over the map. The pacing is a little slow, though. Occasionally you'll find yourself sitting for

as much as ten minutes just watching your trees sprout seedlings. Even speedier seedlings crawl across your screen slower than molasses.

The game's graphics are painfully dull, consisting mostly of gray circles with colored dots floating around them. Zooming in on a single asteroid shows off the detail of the trees and the seedlings (each with a unique look depending on the asteroid they sprouted from), but there's no practical reason to get up close since there's no micromanagement options. The music is nice and ambient, even if it gets a little old in some of the longer missions, and the melodious sound effects blend nicely with it.

Even if it's missing a few features, Euforia has a level of depth and polish rarely seen in low-budget games. This game is great, and hopefully it'll be the developer's ticket to a high-budget game.

- Ben Montgomery

REVIEW

Gameplay:	9
Graphics:	4
Sound/Music:	7
Lasting Appeal:	8
Score:	85%
Grade:	B





Critter Crunch | www.capybaragames.com | Playstation Network

Critter Crunch is a stellar PSN puzzle game with enchanting music and graphics. I dare anyone to find as highly polished and addictive game at the \$6.99 price point. Capybara games has made Critter Crunch impossible not to recommend.

Critter Crunch is an interesting twist on match-3 and similar puzzle games. It's a much more polished version of Capybara's 2007 iPhone game of the same name. It may appear cutesy and seem to rely on simple color matching, but the game is much deeper. Critter Crunch is a humorous tale of Biggs and the strange ecological system that he lives in. Biggs eats crystals and barfs rainbows (literally), but all of this is really a humorous spin on the innovative "food chain" gameplay found at the core of Critter Crunch.

The player controls the rotund Biggs with the D-pad or Left Stick and uses his long tongue (the X button) to move critters around on the vines above. Just like nature, larger critters eat smaller ones. If a critter is overfed, it explodes into a crystal which Biggs can eat. There is a humorous national geographic type documentary that tries to explain the ecosystem of the game. This goofy narrative actually gives the game more charm. You see on the island of Krunchatoa, Biggs is at the top of the food chain. Creatures hang on vines above him and he overfeeds them and darts to collect the crystals

and powerups critters drop. These tasty crystals fill Biggs hunger bar. The goal is to fill this hunger bar before the creatures mosey their way down the vines to Biggs.

The gameplay has all the elements that make a great puzzle game. The game is simple to pick up and play but has a ton of smaller features and slight variations that keep things interesting and provide a great deal of depth. The game centers on the food chain mechanic, but there are also color matching elements which help you setup big chain reactions and combos. The adventure mode does an excellent job of introducing new gameplay wrinkles such as "Power Foods" and Poisoned Critters. Power foods include things like watermelons that let Biggs spit seeds to destroy critters above or Garlic which allows him to repel critters back up their vines.

The graphics of Critter Crunch are stunning. The hand-drawn 2D graphics are bright, colorful and have excellent animations. Everything pops really well off of the soft muted watercolor backgrounds. With the game's excellent and anime-inspired character design, watching Critter Crunch has as much appeal as an episode of Pokemon (ok, let's be honest... more appeal). In a Cute & Cuddly Pageant, Biggs could even steal Pikachu's crown.

The visuals are coupled with great music and sound effects, but the big shocker of the whole package is the price. At only \$6.99, Critter Crunch is an absolute steal. With the stellar graphics, core gameplay, and features, Capybara games could easily justify a \$15-\$20 price tag. The game's adventure mode is littered with optional challenge and puzzle stages, not to mention the multiplayer offerings. Critter Crunch will give any puzzle fan hours upon hours to enjoy with Biggs and company. All of these features add up to make Critter Crunch one of the best values on PSN.

- Mike Gnade

REVIEW

Gameplay:	9.5
Graphics:	10
Sound/Music:	9
Lasting Appeal:	9
Score:	93%
Grade:	A



A hand is shown pointing at a white key on a laptop keyboard. The key has 'MY PC' written on it in green. The laptop is dark grey and is shown from a top-down perspective. The background is a plain, light-colored surface.

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Aaaaaa! A Reckless Disregard for Gravity | www.dejobaan.com | PC

I can offer only one piece of advice to you. Stay clear of tall buildings for at least a week after playing "AaaaaAaaaaAAAAaAAAAaAAAA!!! - A reckless disregard for gravity." You WILL have the urge to climb to the top and leap to an oh so bloody death. I've said my piece. Now do as you wish. But doing so wouldn't be half as fun as this game. It may look like a silly name, but I'd bet my belt loops that you scream like that countless times before it's over. I hope so anyway or perhaps I'm just a sissy.

This is Dejoban games' thirteenth release. A prolific producer since 1999, they have a few titles you may know of, most notably the Beautiful Katamari style "The Wonderful End of the World" which is available on Steam.

This game is focused around base jumping. You have to leap from tall buildings and score the highest you possibly can using a variety of scoring methods before you reach the bottom. Of course none of this matters if you forget to deploy your parachute, which happens more than you'd think. Your brain will be calling out "HIT THE SPACE BAR." Instead you'll scream at your monitor and run downstairs to hide in a cupboard. Trust me.

The bulk of your score will be made up of "hugs" and "kisses" which are scored by getting to and staying close to buildings without actually flying into them. You have to balance this with trying to smash through scoring plates, spraying graffiti, flipping off protestors, giving the thumbs up to supporters, smashing into birds and racking up stunt scores by taking the most difficult routes. There's a hell of a lot to remember, but you're lowered into this slowly and with tutorials that help you get to grips with what eventually becomes a multitasking nightmare.

There are eighty levels in total which are unlocked using a currency called "teeth". The higher your score on a level, the more teeth you will receive. This is based on a star rating system. There's no getting around going back and perfecting levels in order to be able to afford some of the later ones. The levels are really designed to make you rethink your approach. Which way down will allow me the most kisses? Am I missing an available stunt by not taking that way? Where are the protestors hiding? Oh yes.

That one will pop up regularly. Where are those damn protestors?

The levels progress from simplistic designs that seem to have a specific purpose about them - for example, two designed specifically for score plate smashing - to the last set of levels which put together all the different skills you have learned from the start. The outcome will be based purely on your skills as a player. You'll no longer have time to think, just react. It's simply Fantastic.

If this wasn't enough for a player, there are also unlockable mini features. And these aren't your typical "concept art" or "commentary". These are unique and absolutely hilarious comedy sketches worthy of an award. I won't list them all and ruin the surprise for you, but a couple of my favorites were "How to deal with accidental time travel" and "Grandma". You wait and see. These are all narrated by some rather excellent voice actors which only amplify the humor. In fact all the voice acting in the game is good. The only gripe I have is the newscaster will occasionally start speaking in an apathetic manner on something completely off topic. I can see what they were trying to do, but after some time he just stops being funny and grows irritating.

Luckily this wasn't the case with the soundtrack. I cranked my 5.1 Dolby up and sucked it all in. A wide variety of excellent instrumentals ranging from techno to surfer rock. They help get your heart racing along with the momentum of the gameplay. The sound effects don't fall short either. The wind whistling past your ears throws you into the driver's seat with even more realism and the smashing of glass as you pound through score plates or the final squawk of a bird as the feathers fly grabs you by the ears.

The graphics aren't mind blowing, but the game does have a unique charm about it. It's incredibly colorful. There's plenty of attention to detail and more indication of Dejoban's humor with electronic billboards put up sporting various funnies. There's traffic flying about the place which helps remind you that this is set in the future. Sometimes it's easy to forget that and just assume you're in a virtual reality suite. Sadly, I can't see a significant leap in graphical standard since their 2004 game "Inago Rage." A little more

development would have been awesome, but everything is still pretty, none the less.

Most of the levels have at least some degree of replayability. But once you've finished the game, I don't know how much you're going to want to play the levels that you have exhausted by trying to obtain those 5 star ratings. I can see me picking this up again in a few weeks time when my blood pressure goes down. A leader board would be great with the concentration of the game being on scores, but this is a minor blemish, as are most of AAAaaa's problems and with a level editor in the works, this really is worth the wonga at \$15.

It's quite clear from playing AAAaaa that the folks at Dejoban games are brilliant fun! And I can't help, but wonder why this game hasn't been made before? I do cast my mind back to playing Pilot Wings on my Nintendo 64 and see some similarities, but I don't remember enjoying that anywhere near as much as this.

- Benjamin Hayhoe

REVIEW

Gameplay:	8
Graphics:	8
Sound/Music:	9
Lasting Appeal:	7
Score:	80%
Grade:	B-



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