JdeJuegos e-zine

March 2012

Indie Edition

Editorial

What all Independent, Indie, game developers have in common is that they don't work for a large publishing company. As far as business models go they qualify as self-hired workers. They own their small company and they work in it, they succeed and fail together with the few with whom they share it.

The Indie industry has always been there. They have surprised us with many a game that has become a hit. There are many examples of such companies, that from one moment to the next they have upgraded their business model thanks, in great part, to the success of their product.

We always tend to associate Indie with tiny, most such developers are companies made by less than a dozen members but not all of them. What truly makes them Independent is being able to follow their dreams, their own goals, their own path without anyone attempting to steer it. Force a road into them, set their goals and mark their calendars.

It sounds like a dream job but, like most things Sandman, there is a catch. Freedom has a price, following your own path requires personal strength to not deviate; there is as much if not more effort that needs to go into what you are trying to achieve. Some succeed. Many aren't heard of again. Luckily, technology today provides them with more tools for their craft, more opportunities and better chances, and over the past five years we have seen them blossom. Grow. Reach ever further and higher. And it is just the beginning.
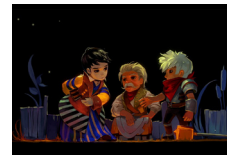
it seems that plumbers have had all the fun in the world of videogames, not anymore, it's time for the team that keeps everything tidy, DUSTFORCE

most games where you hear a voice in your head are considered spooky, but not in this particular case where he is the all important narrator of the story in BASTION
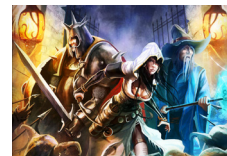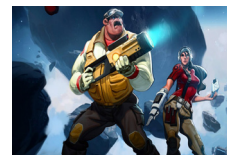

three are better than one, and although in this case we can usually only have one of them active all three help move forward in TRINE 2

when exploring outer space there is always the problem of somebody tracking back, like in UNSTOPPABLE GORG

graffiti is usually seen as an urban form of expression, but sometimes it becomes a battleground like in SIDEWAY: NEW YORK

no one said that asteroid mining would be easy, who really knows what is out there? I guess, ROCHARD and his team do

the fight against "piracy", the bother of DRM, they might even be nothing but another dispute born because of a semantic misunderstanding

not only game developers qualify as Indie, there are also those making films, or writing novels, like the author of the highly enjoyable ZERO SUM

DUST

FORCE is the new team to watch out for, more so if you are among those making the mess. It is a game about perfection, gaining rhythm, obtaining recall of each level and then going through it in one continuous acrobatic swipe.

The dynamics of Hitbox Team's game are arcade and straight forward. In each level we have to go through the scenery cleaning the mess and in the process free the dirt controlled creatures or objects we find.

We collect a combo score and also race against time. Maintaining the flow allows us to increase our combo rating which in turn helps fill up a bar that will enable a super-dusting.

The characters have to move through the scene like they are in a parkour contest. Slide, jump, hit, climb, bounce from walls, let the momentum (and game rules) allow them to walk on roofs and go around curves without stopping.

This process can be as entertaining as it can be enervating and frustrating. It is about grabbing the rhythm and flow of each level, s y n c h r o n i z i n g

properly with the controls and the next move in order not to lose our combo, time or the flow.

Perfect scores, or the best ones at least, require quite a bit of practicing along with being familiar with the level and having acquired a good reflex with the controls. Going through a level with little or no disruption in the flow is quite nice and qualifies as a personal achievement in itself, even if it doesn't make it to the Top 100 in the global score list.

Dustforce is fun and entertaining in its own right but it has that particular gameplay style that will bring out the compulsive obsessive side of some and infuriate others.

Although at first sight all characters seem to behave the same, it isn't so as I was able to gather from the Hitbox Team. Dustman (blue) is the main
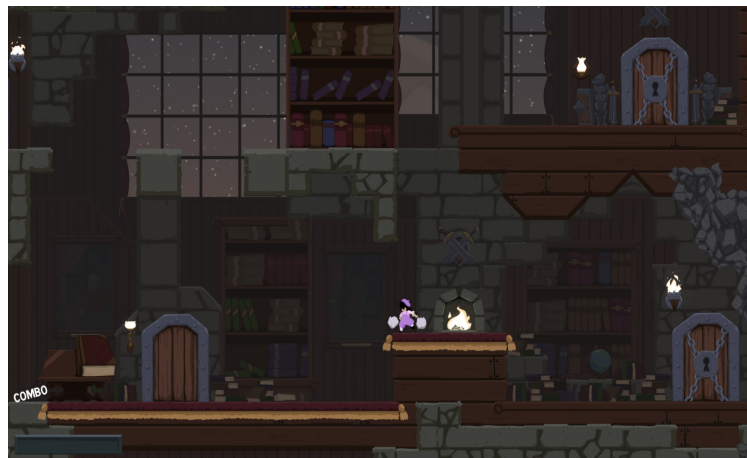
character and the one whose abilities are more evenly distributed, perfect to start with.

Dustgirl (pink/red) accelerates faster, she is a bit quicker. Dustkid (purple) has smaller jumps, but she has three of them. Dustworth (green) is a bit slower, but has a slightly bigger hit box than the rest.

The Filth characters are: Dustwraith (purple), Leafsprite (the autumn girl), Trashkid and Slimboss. They all can be chosen when playing multiplayer and have the same game dynamics with the difference that they leave a path of dirt in their passing.

The immediate plans for the developers include the Level Editor, which will offer the same tools and capabilities that the team at Hitbox used when designing the scenarios. Also coming soon are a demo and a Mac version for their product.

Dustforce can be played with controller or keyboard but I would say it feels and plays more naturally with the former. Reaction times are important and the way keyboards are set don't make them ideal in such a context.■
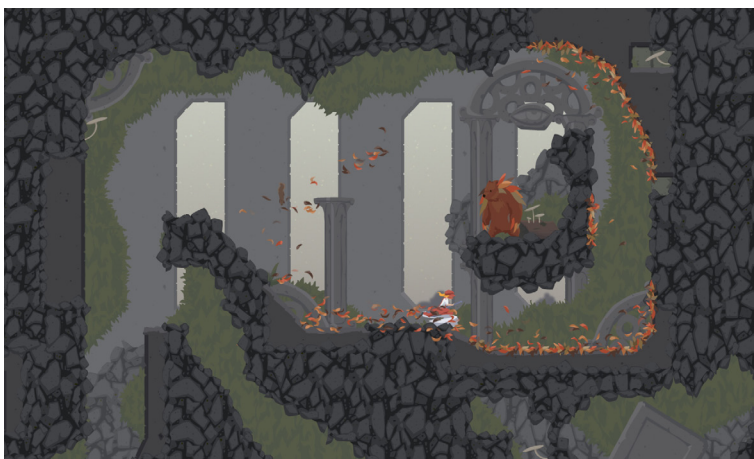
ROCHARD

ROCHARD is one of those games that comes out of nowhere and suddenly has you wanting more. It has a very nice and sophisticated cartoonish 3D look and a 2D arcade scroller puzzler dynamic.

It could have gotten lost among the crowds were it not that instead of one form or another of a weapon the character, a miner, has to use his G-Lifter, a gravitational tool, to solve physics based puzzles and get rid of the station invaders.

We can use the G-Lifter to carry, attract and repulse objects. Early on we get access to the Rock Blaster, that can be used as a space gun but that doesn't mean we stop using, or needing, the main tool of the trade. We can even combine them and exploit the environment to our advantage.
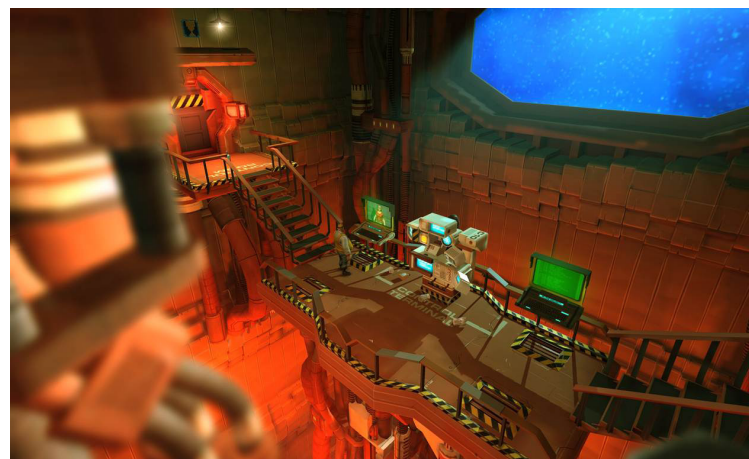
Being in an asteroid mining station has one extra benefit that the local team can use, they have access to the machinery providing the artificial gravity, which means that when needed they can shut it off.

When gravity is lowered Rochard can move around heavier objects as well as jump higher, or fall deeper, without suffering injuries. It is also a very effective way to bring enemies out of their cover and take them out while they are trying to figure out what is going on.

The G-Lifter becomes indispensable to solve the simple physics puzzles present in each level. In particular when we need to activate pressure buttons or hit distant relays to cross bridges or turn off/on the energy force fields. It is also very practical to grab crates as shields or use them as projectiles against the enemy.

There are various colored force fields in the game. Inanimate objects can go through the red field, organic matter can cross the blue field. The orange field blocks explosions and weapon's fire, the white one blocks everything. These present themselves as an interesting way to create puzzle dynamics that sound plausible within the game's context. As well as to watch interesting behavior in the environment. Like throwing a crate on some enemy from behind the relative safety of a red force field.

John Rochard is the name of the main character, the leader of this small astro-mining team that moves around in an attempt to find a good catch. Right now they haven't had much luck, they are at the bottom of the list and in desperate need to strike gold. But that is about to change since what they do find is an alien structure and a lot more trouble than they were looking for.

The other members of his crew are: Skyler Hanson, the technical expert of the team. She is also the one helping and guiding the main character as he moves along the different levels of the mining station. Zander, the other miner of the team, an old friend of John with whom he has been a long time.

Now they need to find out why they are under attack so soon after their apparently fortuitous discovery of an alien presence. And that is just one of many mysteries they need to solve, after all, who is attacking them and why isn't any help coming?.■

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BASTION

BASTION looks and feels like a traditional platformer game. But it has something unique, a small trick that makes it so different. There is a voice that follows the player's character, that tells the story as it unfolds, as we play it and write it. Sometimes the voice also gets a little bored with our actions and gives us tips, tells us what we should do, where to go. It doesn't take long for the voice to become part of the gameplay, for the Narrator to be part of what makes the whole entertaining and fun.

Thanks to its unusual context, very nice visuals and soundtrack Bastion would probably have fared well without the omnipresent voice. But it is it that gives the whole that unique personality which makes it all the more enjoyable.
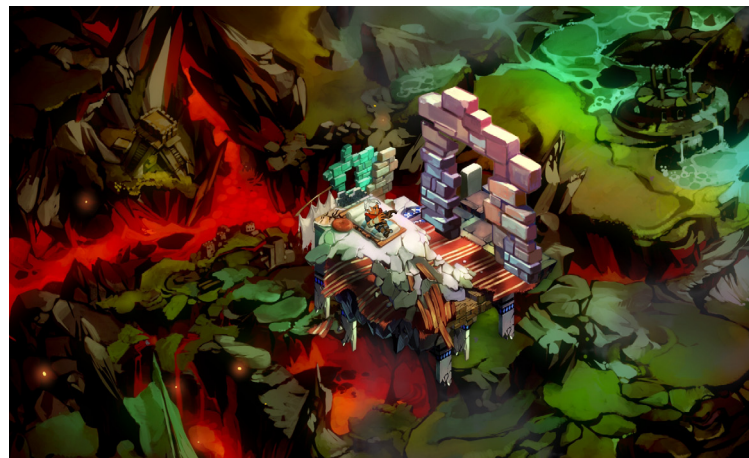
We are The Kid, and while others awake to the sound of their alarms he suits up by the subtle insistence of the voice of the Narrator. Then starts his path toward the agreed reunion point of the town to know whatever he can in order to help restore his world to the way it was before the Calamity struck.

Gameplay wise Bastion isn't particularly great but everything has been done properly. It plays like it has to without annoying dynamics. It's an action arcade game with a hack-n-slash RPG element at its roots.

The Kid has two weapons to fight with, one that is for close combat and another for ranged attacks. He also has a powerful shield to reflect enemy attacks. There is also the possibility to do combos and special attacks using limited black tonics that can be found through exploration or from fallen enemies.

Each mouse button is assigned to either the primary or secondary weapon and its attack. Like in most hack-n-slash its all about hitting and aiming, although ranged weapons work differently depending their type (one of the first, the Fang Repeater, needs to reload but fires quickly, the Breaker's Bow needs its bowstring to be pulled by keeping the button pressed to be more effective). Our character can shield attacks as well as avoid them rolling away (with the unspoken rule of being careful with the edges).

There is loot to find, health tonics, better weapons and equipment. The Kit can upgrade some of its abilities and attributes through the Distillery, where unique spirits provide passive bonuses. He can also choose which combo to have active and with which weapon it will work at the Arsenal, where he also gets to pick his favorite tools of mayhem for the next mission.

The world of Bastion is a group of islands spread around, floating. Parts of what once was the city of Caelondia and surrounding areas. Each offering challenges and maybe a clue to the ultimate solution for the land.

The gameplay is straightforward, the view is isometric, and the look has a very nice drawn by hand style that contributes to the uniqueness of it all. The original soundtrack, by Darren Korb, adds to the overall positive impression with its own particular beat.■

TRINE 2 offers us a renewed chance to return to the adventures of Zoya, Amadeus and Pontius, respectively the Thief, the Magician and the Soldier. Three very different and unique characters whose souls get once more linked by the mysterious power of the Trine.

It has been said quite a few times that this game borrows the general concept from a very old classic, The Lost Vikings, the biggest differences being the use of three distinctive characters instead of three more standard vikings and that we can only play with one of them at a time. Something that allows for a single-player campaign but also enables a co-operative one where all three do their part concurrently.

Visually Trine 2 improves on its predecessor offering nicer graphics and vistas. There is a platformer feel to the whole presentation but it doesn't spoil nor get in the way of the gameplay. Although visually there is depth and a 3D look to it the dynamics are old school 2D.

As an arcade scroller puzzler game Trine 2 is more about solving problems than eliminating enemies. In many cases there is even a *smart* way to take them out, other than head on.

Each of the characters has its own set of abilities which help solve puzzles and deal with enemies. Zoya is the nimble one when it comes to acrobatics, she has a bow and arrow as weapon and a grappling hook which allows her to hold onto wooden surfaces and climb; she can also swing to reach difficult places.

Amadeus is the magician who can conjure strange mechanical cubes as well as levitate objects, and/or enemies, around. Pontius is the character best suited to combat, with a shield and a sword or using a hammer he can deal a good amount of damage as well as dish it out.

As long as not all three die we are bound to find a spot where to restore the health of those fallen close enough. Exploring as we move forward is a good way to find obscured and/or hidden places where to find more experience to later upgrade the powers and abilities of our party.

Switching between them is very simple. The level design in single-player favors the use of all the characters in such a way as to benefit from their skills, but it also feels as if you can move forward just with one of them, mostly the Thief, and keep the others ready for when there is no other choice or they become the better option.

The soundtrack is good and the whole has a very *for everyone* feel which is nice and consistent. The visuals maintain their quality and fantasy look that goes along well with the way the story is brought forward --almost like a faery tale.

The puzzles are good but don't offer anything too innovative or imaginative. A detail that becomes the balancing factor between making it easy to reach and play or something no one can beat without a walkthrough. Frozenbyte decides to play it safe by keeping a good balance between the presence of puzzles, the need to combat and moving forward the adventure.∎
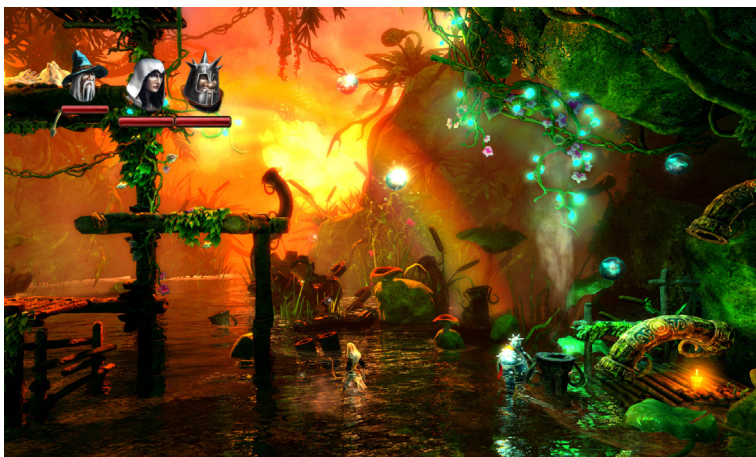
SIDEWAY NEW YORK

SIDEWAY NEW YORK plays with the idea that to some graffiti is art, to others a way to express themselves, to the team of Fuel Entertainment it is a dimension where their characters encounter a battleground, special powers, enemies, the chance to be heroes and many adventures.

The overall dynamics of the game are rather standard for a side-scrolling arcade with some puzzle and adventure elements. What make it unique though is its context, the surface of walls and roofs of New York's neighborhoods.

Sideway is the name of the parallel dimension where Nox and his friends find themselves in. Where the world becomes 2D and urban art become obstacles and paths, where color is a weapon.

The element that truly grabs attention from Fuel Entertainment's game is the setting and how they have implemented it. It looks 3D but works like any classic two dimensional game of old. By keeping in perspective the actual building we are in as well as the notion of neighborhood the whole acquires a very fresh and interesting look and feel.

Jumping, evading, attacking, running, sliding. All of them are there. At times it is even possible to interact with the real world in order to move crates or boxes that will allow us to avoid obstacles, go higher. Reach places that otherwise are out of our grasp.

It is interesting, and a little disorienting, how we can continue through corners, how we can jump and end in roofs. Gravity laws seem to have different rules when it comes to roofs but nothing that goes against the gameplay or the possibility to solve puzzles --it just leaves you with a feeling of awkwardness.

Since it is a platformer we move around with the not too subtle goal of collecting tags, including some secret ones that would probably require exploration; a good reason to go through it more than once or compare notes with friends.

The adventure makes Nox and his crew enter Sideway to save his little brother, Raymond, from the villain, Spray, who, among other things, wants to conquer the world.

The gameplay will probably not feel strange to anyone used to platformers. It is about moving forward, collecting tags, unlocking new abilities and powers. Exploring each neighborhood and avoiding the different obstacles in the way as well as getting rid of the critters, henchmen, monsters and level bosses that want to stop us.

Besides Nox his crew includes Cass, the tough and pretty girl, and Fume, a rather strange being that helps the hero survive the day by acting as his guide in the world of Sideway.

The whole 2D on 3D and the way that graffiti becomes a part of the gameplay itself is very interesting. There is a very promising premise there to be explored and evolved. As it stands, Sideway: New York is a nice looking platformer with a unique contextual twist.■

ANOMALY WARZONE EARTH

There is no rule of thumb --yet-- to help establish whether a game succeeds or fails. But there are a few critical factors that many seem to forget every time. Good gameplay, good context and/or story, good visuals, good production values. They might sound like the obvious things to aim for but too many seem to neglect them. Not 11 Bit Studios.

What they offer is something simple, straight forward, designed mainly for the Smartphone and Digital Tablet market. But it is so well done that it has managed to go beyond its original platforms and receive a very good welcome.

It speaks a lot for them that what is undeniably a simple gameplay can be enjoyable, fun, entertaining and captivating. Showing us how properly designed elements that fit together well can do wonders for a game.

Anomaly: Warzone Earth is probably the first Tower Offense game. A mirror dynamic from the classic Tower Defense concept. Instead of being the ones placing the attack towers on the path of the enemy, we become the latter, the invading force.

Our armored vehicle line needs to go along twisted roads sometimes avoiding the enemy towers, others aiming for them in order to destroy all the opponent's defenses.

That the motorized caravan can't do much more than move along a preset path soon becomes a tool rather than a hindrance. As players what we can do is set the path in strategy mode and support the vehicles with the abilities of our Combat Suit.

Such a simple scheme becomes fun thanks to well designed scenarios and interesting alien towers, some of which have powerful attacks but also chinks in their armor we can use to our benefit.

One of the first such towers has a very deadly beam that they can fire in a straight line touching and harming everything and anything in their path. It doesn't take long to figure out that it is better to approach them through the side and/or distract their beam to avoid having our troops hit.

Ideas as simple as those make the game ever engaging as more specialized towers start to appear that force us to switch gear and think of a different approach or face the consequences.

Our armored units aren't that static either. We can upgrade them, we can move them along the line to increase their efficiency or to protect them until we get the chance to repair them. We also unlock new units as we move along. The first of which is a nimble but very practical shield generator unit.

One design idea, which becomes a blessing, is that the gameplay doesn't punish taking risks and trying different things. We can resell any unit at full health and recover every cent invested in them. Then use those resources to upgrade others or rethink which units we need.

The power ups the Combat Suit brings to the battleground are also very well thought out. The first we have is Repair, then Smoke Curtain, Decoy Unit and, finally, Bomber Attack. We only have a limited number of each, so using them at the right time and place adds a little tactical element to the overall gameplay.

Each scenario is very well designed and balanced. At no time did I feel like I was once again grinding through another level. Each offers a challenge and in each we can choose to just do what we need to or go the extra tower to earn gold medals and better ranking.

Visually Anomaly: Warzone Earth looks stunning, even more when in the right context. It is one of the best looking games, if not the best one, in the Smartphone and Digital Tablet platforms. It even manages to look good at high resolutions on the PC, and that's no small achievement.

11 Bit Studios showed us that you can do simple, do it right, add some visual flare and end up with a success. There is a lesson to be learned here, hopefully more developers will grasp and understand it.

For a while now Anomaly: Warzone Earth is also available for Android based devices including a properly optimized version for the Amazon Kindle. ∎

UNSTOPPABLE GORG might be a rather traditional Tower Defense game in the broadest sense but a change in setting give it a nicely fresh feel and look.

Switching to space allows for a more dynamic generation of paths between waves of enemies as they invade. Using orbits around planets, spaceships or asteroids gives the gameplay a slightly more tactical nature.

The whole context seems like an homage to Ed Wood and his bizarre repertoire of movies. This is highlighted by the 1930's to 1960's visuals and the way the adventure is narrated and advanced that give it a unique style and a humorous underlying, very much in the line of the movie Mars Attacks!.

Although the whole change in context give it a distinctive feel Unstoppable Gorg doesn't leave the Tower Defense category it just... stylishes it in its own, particular way.

Each invading wave follows a preset path that we can see on the map. There are many orbits each with a limited capacity for satellites, these need to be smartly placed so as to provide

the best possible defense.

As the invasion takes place each orbit can be turned around to provide our turrets the best possible chance to attack the enemy saucers. Since they have limited range it is essential to keep an eye and make sure that the enemy's path lays within it. It is even allowed to rotate while on combat for those few critical moments.

Each new wave of attackers gets its own path that forces us to rotate the orbits and maybe rethink the type of satellites occupying them. A gameplay detail that adds a little bit of diversity to what usually becomes a repetitive and tedious process of just watching rather than participating.

In the same way that the aliens have different type of spaceships we have various

kinds of satellites. Such as the Vulcan with its orbital machinegun. The Blastcannon with its powerful gun or the Missilelauncher with its long range rockets. There are also support satellites such as the Solar Generator, for income, the Research Lab, to gain new technologies, and the Repair Station (these are among the first and can be seen in action in the demo).

Before each mission we can pick which defenses would better serve us against the list of expected enemies. We can also establish the level of upgrading that each will be able to support.

Once a scenario has been successfully finished it gets unlocked as a Challenge. There is also an Arcade mode in which the whole idea is to see how long we can survive against wave after wave of invaders.

Unstoppable Gorg might not break away from the genre but it does offer some level of freshness to it. Although it can get a little complicated as we advance in the adventure to save Earth from invading armies of extraterrestrial life.■

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SOL: EXODUS

So far I have had the chance to play the demo and although one can give it some level of relation to the likes of Freespace and Wing Commander there is also something missing --or, maybe, amiss?.

Production qualities are very good and visuals are ok. The story falls within the *pretty standard* category but it doesn't sound bad either. Maybe a little hard to immerse in with what little is known from the demo and the available information.

I believe that the *something is not right here* sensation the demo leaves behind comes from the arcadish way the game seems to flow. One minute the story is starting and taking shape, the next we are being taught how to use our new Hades Class ship, then suddenly we are under attack from a couple of waves of unknown enemies and not too long after we are running away.

That compression of events and narrative, which end up overlapping each other, give a bad vibe to what otherwise seems a very atractive action oriented space combat game.■

Q.U.B.E.

Manipulating color cubes --using the term in its broadest sense-- might not sound particularly engaging but, as Portal has shown, there is people who enjoy a good first person puzzler. And it's not like they are common either.

The demo of Q.U.B.E. presents us with a gameplay that is intriguing and interesting. The first scenarios don't look particularly engaging but at least they show the potential that exists to how and what we can manipulate in the environment that surrounds us.

As the combination of different functional cubes starts to increase so does the depth of the puzzles and the need to combine the growing possibilities to achieve the right sequence and/or solution to the scenario.

From cubes that we can rise or lower into the ground, push or pull from the walls, jump onto to be sent in a specific direction, to cubes that flatten or come out in a predisposed sequence. And these are just those at the beginning.■
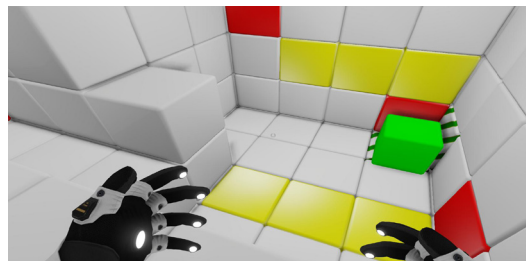
SHANK 2

Shank 2 feels, looks and could present itself as the game that Quentin Tarantino and Robert Rodriguez would do. It is brutal, and even cruel, in a Reservoir Dogs and Desperado way.

Visually it feels more elaborate and better focused to its target market (young adults, 18+) than its predecessor. There doesn't seem to be any attempts made at softening the gore or the no holds barred gun and close combat style it brings.

Compared to Shank's controls, on the PC at least, those of the sequel feel more natural and better balanced. Although arcade fighting games have never been good at finding proper key combinations that don't end up with your fingers playing Twister on their own.

Shank 2 does a decent job with the key definitions and controls in general but combos get a little messy --as usual-- and the visual response lags slightly at times; a detail that can prove a nuisance in critical moments but nothing that shouldn't be fixed soon enough with a patch or two.■

WARP

This game is about a small little cute alien creature that gets captured by a group of scientists that want to study it and discover its secrets. Most likely, what he looks from the inside as well. But, there is no need to call the intergalactic alien protection foundation yet, as the captors soon find out the risks involved when dealing with an unknown species coming from off planet.

Warp is an arcade puzzler with some action elements. The creature, Zero, can teleport itself short distances, and into bodies/objects, which is the restricting factor that gives the whole dynamic a puzzler feel since there are contextual and labyrinthine problems to be solved before he can exit a level of the underwater facility to which he has been taken.

It has a very nice cartoonish look that manages to diminish in part the contextual violence possible in the game, since Zero can teleport inside a person and if he doesn't exit fast enough they explode. At least I hope the choice to do so, or not, is in the user's hands and not in the developer's.■

VESSEL

The main character of the game, M. Arkwright, has invented The Fluro, an animated being whose essence is water. Mainly conceived as a cheap labor force they have gotten out of hand and it is the role of their creator to stop them.

Vessel is a game of puzzles that share one main element among them, liquids. As the trailers show there are many tasks that the Fluro can accomplish, all we need is some water to bring them to be and we can even recycle it for other tasks as needed.

Visually the game seems to offer not only a very sophisticated physics system for the presentation of liquids but one for physical objects in general, as well as the use of dynamic lights and shadows. It's cartoony look can't hide the advanced interactions going on for the animations we see.

The trailers also show that water based Fluro are but the first we will encounter. Each kind having it's own behavior, capacities and limitations. And, apparently, we can even combine them to get more sophisticated interactions.■
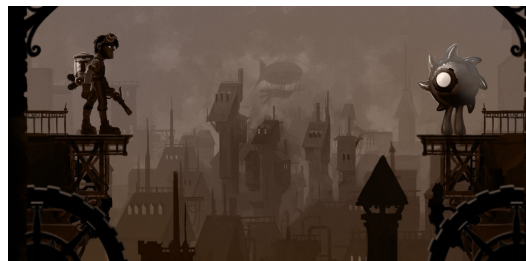
LEGEND OF GRIMROCK

Before the time of multiplatform game concepts and the move toward a third person perspective dungeon crawler RPGs were in first person. One of the last of this genre that I remember playing was Arx Fatalis.

Almost Human Games is giving the final touches to a game that returns to those days. Offering the chance to explore the depths of Mount Grimrock with a party of four prisoners in a gameplay style all its own.

Each character can be upgraded, each of them has his/her own inventory and their own abilities. Combat and party movement will certainly require a little getting use to by the new generations but everything points to that it should be worth it.

There are many puzzles, treasures and mysteries hidden in the dungeons of Grimrock ready to be found by the adventurous explorers. Not to forget hours upon hours of making sure we don't miss any secret passage or hidden chamber, where the best treasures usually can be found.■
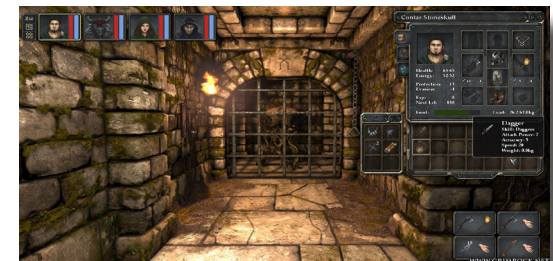
The fight between developers, publishers, distributors and the so called "software pirates" continues, and it is reaching a point in which there is only going to be one losing party and it isn't any of those really involved in the skirmish, but those on the sides, the consumer, the receiving end of most collateral damage in the electronic/digital entertainment industry.

There has been a lot told in favor or against one or the other argument. As of recently there have been many important voices letting themselves be heard against the extreme measures some parties are taking in order to avoid "piracy".

I mean, who can argue the facts? Absolutely NO DRM method, system or device, as of yet, has been able to accomplish its goal. The "pirates" still "pirate" copies. But the end-user, the legal consumer, finds himself (or herself) with every time more unnecessary restrictions and conditions. No wonder so many have started to ask if they are actually **buying** something or just lending it. Are we acquiring a product or are we signing up for a service?

And I believe there in lays the fundamental question, the conundrum of the problem so to speak. The Digital Age has come so abruptly and moved on so fast that it hasn't even had time to define the most fundamental of its game rules.

> "DRM does not work and however you would protect it, it will be cracked in no time".
> Marcin Iwinski, *CEO GOG.com.*

What exactly is software, a product, a service, bits and bytes? What exactly does the consumer buy; rights to use, rights to own, the chance to use once, twice, to lend, to re-sell? Does the consumer actually get something in return of his, or her, money? (this gets more greyish as we enter into digital distribution).

This are questions popping all over the place and every time more frequently. An while one side is busy taking away everything we can do, or should be able to do, with the product we buy the other keeps on copying, duplicating and distributing under the rug.

In any other context "pirated software" would actually be called a counterfeit. A forgery of an original. The problem is the nature of this particular product, you can create identical forgeries without losing or adding anything. A gift of the Digital Age, and also a curse.

All Digital Goods --be it applications, programs, music, videos, photos-- suffer the same problem, they can be duplicated without loss of quality. They can be "faked" without creating a distinction between original and counterfeit.

As the possibility to distinguish a legal sale from a "pirate" one diminishes, mainly because of the increased use of digital distribution, big software companies are turning to DRM as a way to give the bits and bytes some form of physical hold that allows them to control things a little more, as they would in the world of physical products.

This being a battle they seem to be losing because of the awful way they are dealing with the problem. Punishing those that buy, those that consume, those that like their products and want more of them. While the others, whatever their reasons for what they do, go --more or less-- unchallenged.

The Digital Age continues to advance, to move forward and we continue not to establish the ground rules. There is a need for all digital goods to be properly defined, the rights of the consumer over them properly set; those of the creator, publisher and distributor as well.

We are now moving toward Cloud Computing a concept that puts those bits and bytes everywhere, anywhere, all the time. What does the user buy? What does he get from his/her purchase? What are we allowed to do with it? What do sellers give us and/or provide?

Again, the issue is: are Digital Goods products or are they the end result of a service being provided by the parties selling them?

The excessive relevance that the industry puts on the *finished and delivered product* has also affected the perception the consumer has over it. Most people see it as a *something* that can be infinitely replicated and as such would have no true value.

They forget what is behind said product, the years of effort put into it, the people that worked on it, those that created it, the minds that made it possible; not counting the expenses in developing the technology or acquiring it. The money invested. They forget that the *digital good* had to come from somewhere, had to be made, it didn't just appear so people could be asked to buy it.

From a selling point of view what companies in general love is perishable goods. But in the world of the physical there are many rules in play that don't allow for such products to be mass produced like crazy, nor to be sold at irrational prices. The digital arena is another story.

Software in general --games even more-- are perishable goods by excellence. In part because of their nature, in part because no one does any effort toward the contrary. The problem we face now is that there seems to be in someone's agenda to make them even more short lived, turning them from *perishable goods* into *consumables*. Buy once, use once. And this is wrong at so many levels.

The mind of the consumer has the physical world as its role model, the rules of this reality govern what he, or she, believe they can do, and are due, with what they buy. Part of the process of acquiring something resolves around the idea of a change of hands of --one or other form of-- property.

If I buy an X product from you, it becomes mine. The concept of ownership, and the idea behind it

that the less people that have the same the better, drives a whole parallel industry. That of the luxury, limited editions and exclusive goods. Their value comes from their uniqueness.

Now. *Digital goods* have always had the problem that replicating them is easy, fast and the copies are identical. As retail versions diminish and focus only on exclusive editions the problem rises on how do you value a product of which you can create infinite copies without requiring infinite resources --which is one of the limiting factors with their physical counterparts.

As companies see fit to take more and more rights away from the consumer from the *digital goods* they buy, it is no wonder they end up wondering what have they truly bought. It's not like I don't get to eat a candy bar if I buy it, it's not like I don't take home a pice of furniture or electronics, it's not like I can't carry around a paperback book I bought.

Why can't I borrow my *digital goods*? Why can't I carry them around, exchange the computer I work/use with them?. How can I call something mine if everyone I know has a copy, an identical copy at that? (Although this idea would need its own analysis).

I don't believe that there are many commercial transaction systems where the buyer needs to sign up with a given company, keep in touch with them, check-in every now and then so they can be certain

he was the buyer and he still has whatever it was he bought.

But that is how the video game industry works and it's getting worse. All of a sudden it's wrong to sell your old games, it's wrong to buy second hand games, it's wrong not to play them --all-- frequently enough so they know you still "want them". Say what!?

The sad part here is that if something like that were to start happening in the realm of the physical goods there would be many official entities, some unofficial and probably a few of the government that would get involved to protect the consumer. Why not with *digital goods*? Why protect those who create and sell and produce but not those who buy them?

The Digital Age is still moving forward and every time faster, we better put the ground rules now. Define properly what a digital good is, and isn't, what the buyer of it can do with it, and what he can't, what the creator of it can do, or can't, what the seller can, or can't.

We can keep on trying to create physical wrappings around digital goods, we can keep on attempting to create technology that gives them physical properties, but those are nothing but temporary --expensive, unnecessary-- solutions. We need something for the long haul, and soon.■

ZERO SIGHT had an intriguing name and a very attractive price. Being a digital Amazon Kindle edition it also provided with a chance to sample it. Once I started it was hard to let go, I needed the full book. Then I was able to properly meet Dieter Resnick and Rei Acerba Bathory and the incredible world they live in. One where magic, creatures of the night and legend live together, and sometimes they even share a strong cup of coffee.

The world created by B. Justin Shier, the author, puts together many of the things we all have already read about, heard about or played in, along with a couple of twists that give it that special flare.

Shier is among those few authors that grab the known and unknown blend it, mix it, and come up with something that is both familiar and fresh, different, unique, somehow, new. His work reminds me of what Andrezej Sapkowski does in The Witcher and Sergei Lukyanenko in his The Night Watch series.

Zero Sight also takes advantage of more contemporary influences from works such as Underworld and, inevitably, Harry Potter. But his context and characters manage to be different and distinctive.

Dieter Resnick is also a very unique type of hero, we can call him a borderline anti-hero even. He is a geek with an attitude, with some very intriguing abilities and, like most of us, a thing for a good cup of coffee.

By chance Rei Acerba becomes his protector, his guide, a new friend. The one thing they both share is their love for coffee, and a good fight. After all, Rei is a Nosthoporos, a Vampire. Probably not your most common type of customer at Starbucks, Caffe Nero or Costa.

If Zero Sight introduces us to the world and characters and develops them a little, Zero Sum goes the next step. It feels like Bloodrayne, The Masquerade: Vampire, Underworld, 21 Jump Street, The Night Watch and Harry Potter blended together, not shaken, and the result is unique in its own way, very enjoyable, a very entertaining read with some incredible spark that at the very least makes you smile, and more often than not, makes you crack a laugh.

I mean, what do you do when in the middle of a gory fight for their life all the hero, anti-hero, can think of is the lone mug of just brewed coffee that is going to go to waste if he dies?. Told this way you might, smile, the way Shier puts it, you will probably ROFLMAO.

There was a point at the end of the first book that made me cringe at the possibilities for the sequel. After a few pages from Zero Sum I was happy to see that the author kept the original pace, focusing on the characters, the context, their adventures. And their inner thoughts.

For many reasons I think that Shier's second novel becomes better than the first. It feels like a properly preplanned sequel in what is most likely a very well thought out continuation of events and adventure. We see how things develop little by little, enjoying what this new chapter of the whole brings, and the clues of what is to come. Much in the way that Rowling did it with her own world and characters.

Now that we know Resnick and Bathory slightly better Justin focuses more on developing their surroundings, the world they live in. Friends and enemies, and oh boy! is this tome full of unexpected surprises and unthinkable encounters. It is so, now. It offers so much of what we can consider to be common sense, contemporary, gamer, student, geeky knowledge of bits of facts that, in the way of Sapkowski and Lukyanenko, make you actually reconsider the truth about our so called reality.

Among the many Indie writers I have found, thanks in no little part to Kindle, B. Justin Shier is one of my favorites and his heroes and world and context among the most disturbingly trapping I have come along. Now all we can do is enjoy one more warm coffee while reading Zero Sum and then wait for the next book on Dieter and Rei and the students and faculty at Elliot's College. ∎
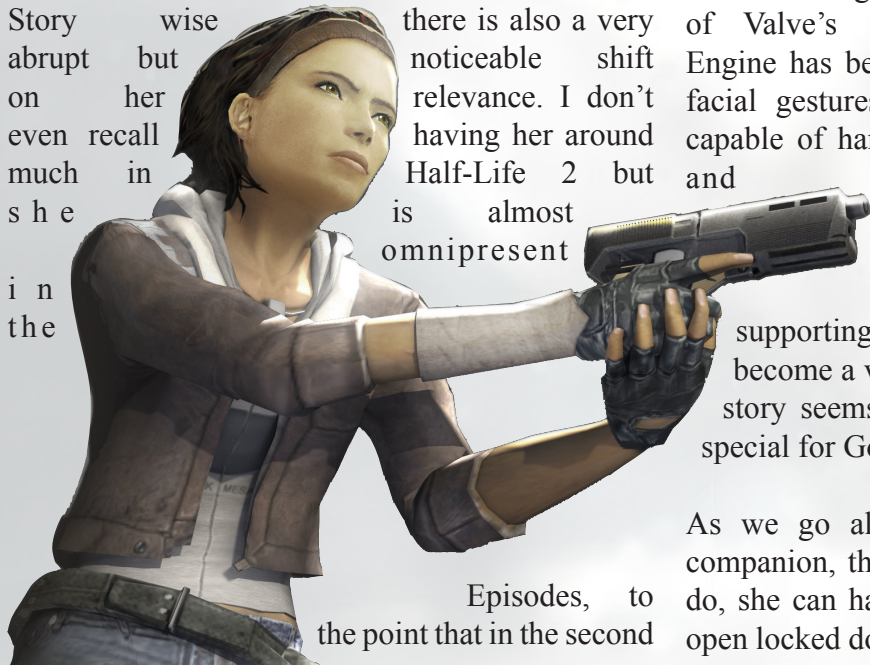
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SERIES

Prominent Female Characters
Alyx Vance

Contrary to the norm Alyx Vance began as a secondary character in Valve's Half-Life 2 and as Episode One and Episode Two came along it feels, and looks, as if she has become something else, something more.

Of course, it all might be nothing but marketing, but even on the official site it is interesting to notice how the screenshots of both Episodes feature her more frequently than anything --or anyone-- else in the games.

Story wise there is also a very abrupt but noticeable shift on her relevance. I don't even recall having her around much in Half-Life 2 but s h e is almost omnipresent i n the Episodes, to the point that in the second

we need to assist a Vortigaunt in the search of some Antlion larval extract to save her life after she is mortally wounded by a Combine Hunter.

Except in a few places where we need to go around while she goes through a more direct path, or when the contexts requires for Gordon and Alyx to split she is very much a permanent companion.

From a narrative perspective, and even gameplay, it is obvious that her presence serves a purpose. And luckily she can fend for herself without pushing the game dynamics toward a very long babysitting mission.

One of the highlights of Valve's Source Engine has been the facial gestures it is capable of handling, and the

supporting AI systems. These allow for Alyx to become a very unique kind of NPC, and as the story seems to point to, someone particularly special for Gordon Freeman.

As we go along she becomes the guide, the companion, the Swiss Knife. She knows what to do, she can hack into enemy computers, she can open locked doors. Most importantly, she can fight

and other than that one scripted time in Episode Two I haven't seen her fall or look truly hurt by enemy fire. Of course, she also knows when to strategically disappear --at least she can blame it to the script writer.

Another detail that makes her a very unusual NPC is that she is probably the only sidekick companion in gaming that has her own sidekick, the huge, gorilla look alike robot, Dog. And just as her it looks so alive, a pity he can't tag along in the adventure more often.

There is no doubt that she will return whenever Valve decides to continue with Gordon's adventures. There is no way they will risk not putting her. She has become essential to the story, to the adventure, to the main character himself.

I would say that Alyx Vance is to first person shooters what Deekin Scalesinger has become to role playing games, and she is much, much prettier. Obviously, her gorgeous looks, the voice acting and the technology that make her all help, but deep inside those bits and bytes lures something that is truly just her, unique.■