

Adventure Lantern



かたわ少女
プレイヤーズガイド

Editorial

When I first started playing adventure games, I was in middle school and living in Istanbul. At the time, I relied on monthly magazines for the majority of my gaming news. The magazines always came with handy CDs that contained demo versions of that month's releases. Unfortunately, none of the publications available in my area were dedicated to adventure gaming. In fact, beyond the occasional review, adventure games were given fairly limited coverage. The news page and the preview articles were typically dedicated to other genres. Thus, I would periodically visit the local gaming store to see if there were any new adventure releases.

Back then, the store was primarily dedicated to PC gaming. Console games were confined to a single shelf in the back. I could reasonably expect to walk into the store and find several adventure games on sale. Most of the employees knew about adventure games and could easily make recommendations if I asked for advice. However, the best part of these trips was to discover a new game I had not read about in the monthly magazine. There was something special about finding these hidden gems and playing through them without any preconceptions based on review or preview articles.

These days, walking into a gaming store here in Oklahoma is a very different affair. There are three places where I can purchase games within reasonable driving distance of my house. All of them dedicate the vast majority of their floor space to console games. Only one store has an actual aisle for PC gaming. More than half of that aisle features casual games. There aren't any full adventure games in sight. Another store only has a single shelf dedicated to PC titles. The last time I walked in, they had no adventure games available. I don't have anything against console games or casual adventures. In fact, I have come to greatly appreciate casual games for the short breaks they provide during busier times of the year. Nevertheless, it is frustrating to walk into a gaming store and not see full adventure games on sale. It would be all too easy for individuals living in my area to not know anything about adventure games. When there isn't a single adventure title in sight at any nearby store, it would also be all too easy to think that the adventure genre is dead. However, taking one quick look at our news page would tell you otherwise.

This month, the news section that Jonathon put together spans an seven pages. In it, Jonathon reports numerous adventure titles that have been recently released or nearing completion. I for one am rather excited to play several of these games, including J.U.L.I.A., Cradle, and Wretcher. Unfortunately, it is highly doubtful that I will see any of these games at my local stores. The only way to

purchase most, if not all of them will be online. Granted, many of the games Jonathon describes are independent development efforts and it is unreasonable to expect all of them to find a publisher that will handle large-scale distribution. However, even adventure games with high production values that find publishers outside the United States are no longer readily available in Oklahoma. Just as an example, I had to get my copy of The Book of Unwritten Tales as an import because I wanted the original case. The boxed version of the game was not available at any nearby store.

It is a shame that at a time so many adventures are in development, PC games are hard to find at my local stores. While I do not mind purchasing my games online, I do miss the joy of finding hidden gems while casually walking through the aisles. More importantly, the absence of a strong PC gaming section means that individuals who aren't already familiar with adventure games may never even hear about the titles that are available. Given the relatively limited coverage adventure titles receive on mainstream gaming Web sites, at least in my area, adventure games seem only accessible to those already in the know. I hope this trend will eventually change. There are too many promising projects out there to be lost to obscurity.

Besides the lengthy news section, this month's issue of Adventure Lantern features a rather unusual ensemble of reviews. Jonathon starts off the reviews section with his article on Katawa Shoujo, which is a dating game with a considerable amount of sexually explicit content. This is the first time we provide coverage for a game with strong adult content here at Adventure Lantern. While we do not necessarily plan on making this a regular feature, we hope you will enjoy this diversion from our usual scope. We also have Gnome's review of Gemini Rue from Wadjet Eye Games. If you haven't purchased it already, I hope you will consider trying Gemini Rue upon reading Gnome's strong endorsement. Finally, we are welcoming a new staff member, Nick Burgener. Impressed with his detailed analytical reviews, Jonathon and I asked Nick to join our team. This month, Nick provides reviews of the shooter F.E.A.R. 2 and the RPG Grotesque Tactics. You can see more of his writing here. Many thanks to Jonathon, Gnome, and Nick for making the March 2012 issue possible. Here's hoping you will enjoy this month's PDF.

Until next time,
Ugur Sener

For all your questions and comments about the magazine, send an e-mail to: ugur@adventurelantern.com

To receive an update when a new issue is released, send an email to: subscribe@adventurelantern.com. Please make sure the subject line of your e-mail includes the word "Subscribe".

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Contents

News



- **News** page 4
- **Announcements** page 5
- **Upcoming Releases** page 6
- **New Releases** page 7
- **News from the Big Blue Cup** page 9

And I thought last month had a ridiculous amount of adventuring goodies. With the release and imminent release of many amazing looking games and the industry changing Kickstarter campaign by Double Fine, this is the most exciting month I have seen in recent history.

Adventurer's Ravine



- **Katawa Shoujo** page 11

Medical scans turn up a heart defect as the cause, which means that he will have to live with a fragile heart the rest of his life and that remaining calm and taking his many medications are absolutely necessary. This in mind, he is enrolled in the specialty highschool for the disabled, Yamaku. At the school Hisao must battle his fragile health, overcome his depression, and interact with his disabled school mates.



- **Gemini Rue** page 13

Azriel's attempts to locate his brother take him to the dark city of Pittsburg on the unnaturally rainy planet of Barracus, where the Boryokudan are running things and engaging in a most destructive, yet apparently exotic, drug trade. Delta-Six, on the other hand, spends his days in the aforementioned rehabilitation facility, where he attempts to discover his true allies and his true identity while trying to escape.

Uncharted Waters



- **F.E.A.R. 2: Project Origin** page 15

The HUD flickers and distorts with static, the screen gets filled with bloom and motion blur effects, sometimes everything will turn orange, there will be weird filter overlays. All of these effects put you in a different mood that tend to ruin the horror elements,



- **Grotesque Tactics: Evil Heroes** page 18

You play as Drake, a military academy drop-out who failed the final exam of defeating a mushroom in combat. Depressed and ashamed of himself, he sets out to let himself be eaten by a mushroom.

And I thought last month had a ridiculous amount of adventuring goodies. With the release and imminent release of many amazing looking AGS games; The release of many great looking and long awaited commercial titles; The Upcoming release of more then a few games I WILL be playing; And last but certainly not least, the industry changing Kickstarter campaign by Double Fine and even the possibility of a sequel to Psychonauts some time in the future makes this the most exciting month I have seen in recent history.

But often the most welcome adventure gaming news is of previously unheard of games. There are quite a few titles I will be mentioning in this issue that are both close to release and have received very little news coverage. Both the open-world adventures Cradle and Anna came to my attention this month, as well as the AGS title Masked that came out of nowhere but immediately caught my attention.

- Jonathon Wisnoski



2011 Aggie Awards

Once a year www.adventuregamers.com gives out a series of awards to adventure games. As 2011 had quite a lot of premium adventures every category had stiff competition. Not completely surprisingly, Portal 2 pretty much swept the awards; Even being awarded "Best Gameplay" of 2011, which seems ridiculous to me as I would not of awarded it any other award then perhaps the non-existent "Best Interactive Film" or "Best Cinematics" myself. Ignoring the fact that I have just lost all respect for these awards, a bunch of other amazing adventures did manage to snatch the few remaining awards: Gemini Rue, The Book of Unwritten Tales, L.A. Noire, A New Beginning, Stacking, Gray Matter, and a few new Telltale games among them.

Psychonauts 2

Psychonauts was easily one of the best games of all time. Now Double Fine has expressed their interest in making a sequel. There are many ways they could go about funding such a project, most notably Notch (of Minecraft fame) has stated an interest in the idea of publishing it.

What are Adventure Games?

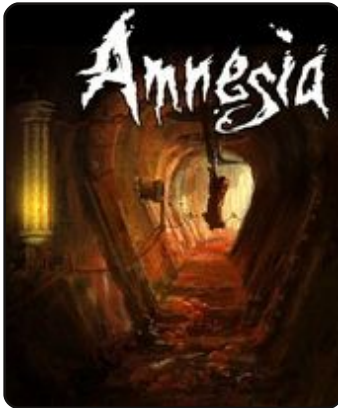
The Adventure Gamers site has an article up about the genre and common themes of adventure games.



Enter the Story gets a Revamp

Chris Tolworthy's series of adventure games based on classic literature, Enter the Story, have just undergone a major overhaul. In addition to each game being available for free online as it is developed, the development pace is being sped up, the art style being simplified, the price is going down, and the gameplay is changing drastically.

Announcements



Amnesia: A Machine For Pigs

If you have played the very successful Amnesia: The Dark Descent and want more, then I have a treat for you. Frictional Games (makers of the Penumbra series and Amnesia: The Dark Descent) and thechineseroom (makers of Dear Esther) are teaming up for the Amnesia sequel (more spiritual than anything else), Amnesia: A Machine For Pigs.

It is due out later this year for the three major operating systems. Unfortunately, there does not seem to be much information on it released so far, some interviews being the most I could find.



Double Fine Adventure

The biggest news this week, by far, is the announcement of Double Fine's upcoming adventure game. Not only have they submitted it to Kickstarter, the crowdfunding website, with the goal of raising \$400,000; But they have reached and far surpassed this goal in only a handful of hours, with the amount currently hovering around \$2.4 million.

This not only changes the entire gaming landscape, opening up huge and amazing opportunities for adventurous game development studios; But also gives us an adventure game made by the renowned Double Fine, lead by the legendary Tim Schafer (Day of the Tentacle, Full Throttle, Grim Fandango), and with Rob Gilbert (Secret of Monkey Island series, DeathSpank) at least in the same building!

The team has been mostly quiet about the actual game itself. We know that it is going to be "classical" in style and a "point and click adventure" in genre. Its story, art direction, whether it is going to be voiced or not, gameplay difficulty, and length are all a mystery; And likely underwent huge changes after the overwhelming support they received.

After the astounding success at getting funding, the game developers have announced their intention to release the game on Windows, Mac, Linux, iOS, and Android, with both Steam keys and DRM free versions being available. As well as translations of the game's text into French, Italian, German, and Spanish.

Edna and Harvey: Harveys New Eyes

A sequel to Daedalic's Edna & Harvey: The Breakout has just been announced. We do not have a date yet, but it will be available for pre-order soon. Play as Lilli, a young girl at a convent school. She executes all her chores in a diligent manner, no matter how unfair they may be. Any angry thoughts, any childlike disobedience is buried deep beneath a seemingly impenetrable surface of sweetness. But how long will these feelings stay hidden? And where do the friendly little gnomes come from that paint over everything unpleasant in Lilli's vicinity with a pleasant pink color?



The Walking Dead

A new Telltale series has just been announced and it has to do with zombies. Following the very successful The Walking Dead tv series based on the comic book series of the same name comes The Walking Dead horror adventure.



Upcoming Releases

Spellirium

Spellirium

In the dark fantasy, post-apocalyptic, trashpunk world of Spellirium reading and writing has been outlawed. Spellirium combines graphical adventure gameplay with word based puzzles, all on top of a delightful animated world. It is currently still in the alpha stages of development but we very well might see a release sometime this year.

Anna

The first game by the Italian developers DreamPainters, Anna is a point and click psychological horror adventure game (of the type with a sanity meter) with quite a few interesting and unique features. It will be getting a trailer with some in-game footage on March 7th and the release date is supposed to be some time in April. The game features, almost, photo-realistic graphics, faithfully recreating the real world location of D'Ayas Valley, in Valle d'Aosta, an Alpine region in north-western Italy; And is based on an authentic folklore tale from that location.

It is in a free roaming first-person view and has a very realistic physical world. Doors and drawers are interacted with using natural mouse movements; And the world is full of objects you can pick up and put down anywhere, but only a few of these are actually useful for solving the puzzles. You can beat the game in around three hours, but since it contains a branching plot and three endings there is supposed to be about nine hours of gameplay here to explore.



Adam Venture 3: Revelations

The final title in Vertigo's Adan Venture series has had its release pushed back three weeks to April 27, 2012.

Cradle

A science-fiction, first-person, open world, adventure set to be released this spring. The story is built around the protagonist and a mechanical girl, who by enigmatic circumstances find themselves together in among the desert Mongolian hills. The player has to restore the lost functions of his companion's mechanical body parts and together reveal the mystery of a neglected entertainment park.

Captain Morgane and the Golden Turtle

Join Captain Morgane on her quest for the legendary Golden Turtle on March 16th. Visit 5 Caribbean islands, solve puzzles, meet interesting characters, and uncover the mystery of the Golden Turtle.

Written by Steve Ince, award winning writer of adventure game "Broken Sword", Captain Morgane and the Golden Turtle is a spin-off of the hit adventure game "So Blonde".





Kairo
Built around the exploration of an abstract sci-fi world filled with vast abandoned monuments and ancient machinery. Kairo is an upcoming puzzle adventure, with a planned release date of early this very year and a pre-order already available.

Resonance
With the addition of Wadjeteye Games as a publisher and several new members to the development team, Resonance has a new lease on life and a release date of sometime later this very year.



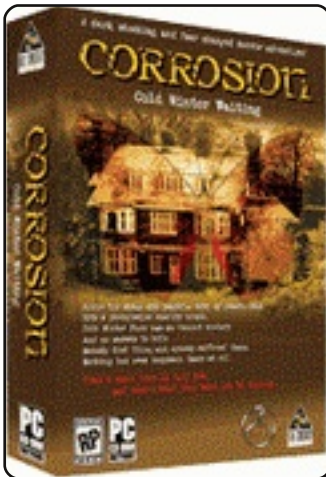
The Testament of Sherlock Holmes
Holmes' latest adventure takes a dark twist when he is the main suspect in many crimes, with evidence to try even Watson's faith. Avoid Scotland Yard, convince Watson to help you, prove your innocence, and solve your case all in this latest sherlockian adventure, due out early this year.



New Releases



Dear Esther
The poetic ghost story, Dear Esher remake got a release on Steam mid February and outdid everyones expectations, repaying the Indie Fund in under six hours. It has received overall positive but somewhat mixed reviews.



Corrosion: Cold Winter Waiting
A horror filled mystery with a first-person slideshow-style interface. Visit the small and peaceful town of Deacon Oaks; Find the identity of a mysterious car crash survivor; Explore Cold Winter Farm; Discover a secret underground complex.

J.U.L.I.A.
Released on March 2nd, JULIA is available at retail locations and as a digital download. JULIA is a first person point and click adventure about the search for alien life.



Law and Order: Legacies

The Telltale iOS game Law and Order: Legacies received a PC and Mac release on the 25th of January. Law and Order: Legacies puts in in control of managing criminal cases alongside of important characters from the TV franchise. Purchase of the game (\$19.99) gets you the entire seven episode season, three of which are completed at this time.

**The Ballads of Reemus:
When the Bed Bites**

The latest, and only commercial, entry in the previously freeware series The Several Journeys of Reemus, this game is a indie fantasy adventure with charming hand-drawn cartoon graphics. A comical storyline, complete voice cast, loads of puzzles, and optional side quests make this look like one professional quality adventure.

Shadows on the Vatican - Act 1: Greed

Released on February 12th and developed by the Italian indie group 10th Art Studios, Shadows on the Vatican is a casual adventure set in Rome following a ex-priest as he investigates some political and religious intrigue revolving around his friend. It is inspired by real events in recent Italian history and adapted from "In God's Name", the bestseller of David Yallop.



News from the Big Blue Cup



**Pick of the Month - February:
Donna: Avenger of Blood**

One of the few AGS games to have really strong mature content, Donna was released on January 13 after a ten year long development cycle. It has been getting some pretty amazing reviews from its player-base. The game takes place in an Eastern Europe with deep financial difficulties and featuring a naked female protagonist, murderers, vengeance, and vampires.

The Journey Down: Remake

2010's hit freeware AGS adventure draws ever closer to a commercial release this spring with the recent release of a trailer. The journey Down is stylish with a full voice-over and a African

Wretcher

Wretcher draws ever closer to release with the launch of the WIP website and the release of the final version of its demo. Wretcher just keeps looking better and better, with its unrivaled quality dark pixel art and mature story inspired by the classic adventure Clocktower.



Doc Apocalypse

Not all that many AGS games get a commercial release, but you know when they do that it will probably be something special. Doc Apocalypse looks like one of these, with its isometric, 2.5D, style detailed graphics and long and involved science fiction/political storyline. For more details, see the trailer or the adventure classic gaming interview.

Da New Guys: Day of the Jackass

A sequel to the 2005 freeware adventure Da New Guys. Only six months after their last adventure, this comedy wrestling trio are at it again. This time with full voice acting, the ability to play as all three protagonists, and even more madcap humor and devious puzzles. It is already available from its publisher Wadjet Eye



New Releases:

- **Suppa Ninja** (Cleanic) - Made for MAGS February 2012. You have a mission. Everything else doesn't matter. This is the way, don't get distracted.
- **Dreams - Pub Master Quest** (Studio3) - Make in the style of Ben304, and drawing some inspiration from Final Fantasy, Pub Master Quest is a tale about a hero sworn to protect the innocent. In the game you journey into a unconscious girls head to save her from death himself.
- **A Cat's Night** (PuNKKoMmANDO77) - Created as part of a project for schools to teach children the importance of respect for animals, in this adventure, we control Orazio, a big friendly cat who, with the help of his friends, must find a way to stop an evil multinational corporation from knocking down the cattery to build a motorway. All in the course of one night, during which Orazio will have to get up to all sorts of tricks to find a solution to the problem.
- **Steve Quest** (Rusty Broomhandle) - A demake of Minecraft into a point-and-click adventure game. Should take less than 10 minutes to play through.
- **Ocean Spirit Dennis: Mighty Viking** (Glenn "BigGc" Collins) - Another entry in the Dennis series. Mighty Viking sets Dennis as a Viking in search of magic, guided by a green nymph.
- **Ed Watts: Bar Runner** (gameboy) - Play as a bartender in this adventure game, made for the January MAGS competition. Deal with customers, the band, and find the hidden treasure.
- **Masked** (Lewis Denby) - An escape the room game with a dark and mysterious story and some stylish looking pixel art. I had to pick one freeware title to suggest for this month (without having played any of them yet) this would have to be it.
- **Cherry's Quest for Coffee** (Maddoxic) - A short simple adventure about a woman's quest for coffee in during a coffee shortage.
- **The Endless Night** (Fallen Feather Studio) - A short paranormal investigation adventure made for the Global Game Jam in 48 hours.
- **Oz Orwell and the Crawling Chaos** (Midian Design) - Play as a fraudulent paranormal investigator in this commercial adventure with 2.5D detailed graphics and great looking



Cherry's Quest for



Masked



Steve Quest



Oz Orwell and the Crawling Chaos



Ocean Spirit Dennis: Mighty Viking

Katawa Shoujo

Review by Jonathon Wisnoski

Katawa Shoujo (translated "Disability Girls") is an anime style visual novel and dating sim set in a high school for people with disabilities. The main goal throughout the entire game is to date one of the five main girls. Additionally, while they are far from the norm, it has adult content (aka H-scenes) with nudity. The game was first conceptualized back in 2007 on the infamous, internet community, 4chan. Many years of development latter and we finally have a freeware release.

Katawa Shoujo is renowned for its story, and for a good reason. It has great and beautiful writing, interesting characters, and a set of great plots; Also, I think that part of the reason it works out so well is the, high school for disabled students, setting. High schools and drama go together, you cannot have the first without the latter, but high school drama is also quite ridiculous and not really a suitable plot device for a mature and interesting story. That is where the disabilities come in, these people have both psychological and physical problems and therefore have reasons to make situations naturally complex.

The game starts off with Hisao asking out his first girl friend in high school. He ends up having a heart attack and being hospitalized for months. Medical scans turn up a heart defect as the cause, which means that he will have to live with a fragile heart the rest of his life and that remaining calm and taking his many medications are absolutely necessary. This in mind, he is enrolled in the specialty highschool for the disabled, Yamaku. At the school Hisao must battle his fragile health, overcome his depression, and interact with his disabled school mates, as well as attending and graduating highschool. The game takes place during this transitional period in his life, in this his final year of highschool.

It is not just the story that makes Katawa Shoujo so outstanding. It also has great hand-drawn characters and great photos, photoshopped to look slightly abstract and generic, for the backgrounds. A big fantastic and light soundtrack. Thirteen main alternative endings, with many different winding paths to get to all of them. And six, very unique, fantastic quality cutscenes; Cutscenes of such fantastic visual quality and artistic style that I cannot help but wish that they made an animated mini-series alongside the game. The game features at least one character that should stand out for any given person, but I believe that the

correct canonical arc would have to be Lily's, both because of its quality and because it is the only arc with an epilogue.

There is one part I disliked though; And that is the entire Shizune arc. I would not call it a love story, even though it still seems to be trying to be one. It is by far the arc with the most filler, which is good and bad, because the filler was honestly a lot better then the actual story. Even the interactions between the main characters could of been taken out of the story in a lot of instances as well, the only person that seemed to develop at all was the third wheel Misha. And I am positive that the protagonist does not love or even really like his "love interest". On more then one occasion it was more very firmly demonstrated that "friend with randomly occurring benefits" seems to be the best description for their relationship. So whatever you do, don't play the Shizune arc first; In many ways it is the route of least resistance, with her being the first one you meet and her undeniable attractiveness and charisma, but if I had played it first I would have labelled Katawa Shoujo as a badly written game and given up on it long before finishing a single playthrough. Not that these facts stop quite a few people from absolutely loving this arc.



The adult content of Katawa Shoujo is quite explicit, but it can be turned off, mostly. With adult content turned on, you simply cannot get any of the good endings without seeing some nudity and reading some explicit sex scenes. And while disabling adult content does skip these sex scenes it does not skip all nudity nor does it skip all sexual content. It turns it into a game that cannot be considered at all pornographic.

But it is still not safe for public viewing or for audiences not comfortable with the idea of teenage sex. If not skipped, these scenes, while a tiny minority of the story as a whole are so explicit that you will only find their like in pornography, and not the participially soft core variety either (in some cases); But at the same time, they are obviously not designed to be arousing so much as legitimate parts of the story.

This nudity and explicit content in a high school setting also brings up the question of, "is this game legal to own and play?". The developers have stated that all characters in the game that are involved in the adult content are at least 18 years of age and this is confirmed for most characters in-game. This generally makes it perfectly legal, and that is the age looked for in North America. But, it is still worth considering that some laws are based on looks instead of some arbitrary number picked by the developer. So my opinion is that it is mostly legal, but you might not want to cross any borders or go through any airport securities with it just to be safe. For what age the characters look like, in general Anime has a young look, that is just its style, but for at least one of the characters I would say she is really only called 18 because otherwise it would make the game obviously illegal in some places (not that some people don't simply look younger than their age).

Katawa Shoujo is high school; It does a perfect job of recreating the atmosphere of high school. All of the people in the game are interesting and likable, but some of the most unique characters are actually the minor ones. Your dorm room neighbor for example, Kenji, is legally blind, almost completely anti-social (though he takes a liking to you immediately), and is convinced that there is a massive feminist conspiracy and rants about it almost constantly. There is not a thing he says that is not hilarious and quotable: "This is

a manly picnic. No glasses. No napkins. Whiskey only. The beverage of true men." - Kenji. You also meet Jigoro, Shizune's father, on a number of circumstances, and his blind arrogance is hilarious, "Your sweater is terrible and I want you to feel bad about it." - Jigoro. These side characters, along with the more likable main characters, make a terrific game filled with interesting friends, acquaintances, mentors, and love interests.

Katawa Shoujo is a fantastic game filled with fun, sad, romantic, and heart wrenching scenes throughout. While it surely will not appeal to everyone, the anime/high school theme is not for everyone, a lot of people absolutely love the game and I count it as one of my all time favourites. While the game is of a respectable length to begin with (I would say at least 6 hours for a single playthrough, assuming everything goes correctly) there are ample reasons to playthrough the game at least five times making it more like a 30 hour game. What still astounds me is how different each arcs is; You really have five completely different stories that hardly even fit within the same genre, so unique in theme and substance that it is jarring.



Katawa Shoujo

PC, MAC, and Linux Adventure



Bright moments:

The wonderful and engrossing highschool atmosphere.

Fumbles in the dark:

I personally did not like Shizune's arc all that much.

Verdict:

A unique and interesting story, told perfectly.



Developer: Four Leaf Studios

Publisher: Four Leaf Studios

Release Date: January 4, 2012

System Requirements:

No specifics available, but quite low as it uses the Ren'Py engine.

Gemini Rue

Review by Gnome (originally appeared on [Gnome's Blog](#))

You should have heard of Gemini Rue by Wadjet Eye Games by now. It is, after all, the indie, AGS-authored, point-and-click adventure that has actually (well, finally) made it to a more mainstream gaming audience, earning glowing reviews left and right. Then again, being of a more indie persuasion, you, precious reader, might remember Boryokudan Rue by Joshua Nuernberger, the dystopian, neo-noir sci-fi adventure with a thing for both action and mystery that won the 2010 IGF Student Showcase award; Well, they are both the same game, though publisher Wadjet Eye have added a full voice-over and helped with polishing things over.

The result is a truly impressive game, that, interestingly, has one of the best plots I've recently seen. Oh, and lots and lots of beautifully rendered 2D rain. Anyway. The two playable characters of Gemini Rue, Azriel and the aloof Delta-Six, star in a mature adventure that sits somewhere between Blade Runner, Rise of the Dragon and Beneath a Steel Sky. The pace of the realistic sci-fi plot is excellent and the storytelling itself quite remarkable, as Gemini Rue follows Azriel, the rogue police officer with a dark past and Delta-Six, the inmate at the Center 7 facility who has had his memory wiped, in a mostly dark story taking place in a beautifully noir setting.



Azriel's attempts to locate his brother take him to the dark city of Pittsburg on the unnaturally rainy planet of Barracus, where the Boryokudan, an organization not unlike the mafia, are running things and engaging in a most destructive, yet apparently exotic, drug trade. Delta-Six, on the other hand, spends his days in the aforementioned rehabilitation facility, where he attempts to discover his true allies and his true identity

while trying to escape. As you should have guessed, those seemingly disconnected stories collide in the dramatic and definitely climactic final part of the game, that leads to a pretty brilliant finale. Mind you, these are not happy Sierra characters in a fairy-tale land and they most definitely are not people you'd invite over for tea and biscuits.

The game setting, the game world if you prefer, feels both big and interesting. It's a labour of love that you'll love to explore, especially if you care for its decidedly retro aesthetic. What's more, it's mostly evenly split between the gritty, rainy planet Barracus and the sterile Center 7 facility. A deep visual contrast, that helps highlight the differences between the two playable characters and the situations they are in.

The characters in Gemini Rue, though not all of them extensively developed, are for the most part well-written and believable, with the two leads being by far the best and more elaborately developed. Gemini Rue does after all focus on them protagonists, and has them face a dark setting, more than a few, uhm, unhappy scenes, betrayal, death, and their dark pasts. This, you see, could also be described as a game about identity; also as a game that treats amnesia as punishment.

The Gemini Rue controls follow, for the most part, a pretty standard point-and-click system, but do sport a few intriguing new mechanics and additions. You, beside fiddling with your traditional inventory, get to shoot stuff in a tactical-arcade manner, control two characters, use a handy phone/digital organizer thing, access terminals and even physically manipulate other characters. The puzzles themselves are mostly easy, yet highly entertaining, very well implemented, and feel perfectly integrated into the plot, and, before everyone starts screaming against the shooting sequences, let me just remind you that combat systems appeared in quite a few Sierra games too. What's more, the action sequences work, fit nicely into the setting, help change the game's pace, and are perfect for the sluggish reflexes of the average adventurer.

I did really enjoy playing through said shoot-outs, (almost) as much as I enjoyed playing through the game without a walkthrough and getting only mildly -and, importantly, very briefly- stuck; never in a truly old-fashioned hair-pulling way mind. There's nothing in there that can't be solved with a bit more exploration and some thinking, whereas the only part I disliked was a pretty tedious mechanical little puzzle that was both generic and not that well explained. Oh, and this is wisely sized game too -should take you anything from 6 to 8 hours on the first playthrough- without any boring and/or filler parts. The fact that Wadjet Eye have implemented a fantastic in-game commentary makes a second playthrough necessary...

As this review is finally coming to its conclusion, I know I just have to mention the visual retro glory of Gemini Rue with its deeply atmospheric VGA graphics, the impressive character portraits, the weather effects, the tons of top-quality animation, the successful framing of each room, and the lively yet hand-painted backgrounds. The sound consists of some lovely ambient effects, mostly rain apparently, a very impressive -in most cases- voice over, and some atmospheric, subtle and slightly bleak music, that sadly doesn't play throughout the game. All in all, Gemini Rue is a brilliant mix of old and new on every level, that manages to be entertaining and even (mildly) thought-provoking. If this were released sometime during the nineties it would now be considered a major classic.



Gemini Rue

PC Adventure



Bright moments:

Its beauty, gripping plot, and seamless combination of the old with the new.

Fumbles in the dark:

One of the puzzles in particular was pretty tedious, generic, and not well explained.

Verdict:

One of the very best commercial indie adventures I have ever played.



Developer: Joshua Neurnberger

Publisher: Wadjet Eye Games

Release Date: February 24, 2011

System Requirements:

- OS: Windows 2000 or newer
- Processor: Pentium or higher
- RAM: 64 MB
- HDD: 700MB
- Video: DX

F.E.A.R. 2: Project Origin

Review by Nick Burgener

F.E.A.R. 2: Project Origin is pretty much a disgrace compared to the original F.E.A.R. Gone are the intelligent, tactical fights, gone is the creepy horror atmosphere, gone is my fun. Project Origin just feels like a lame, phoned-in sequel that didn't even try to innovate like the first game did. I've got a laundry list of problems with it, but the big issues are the combat and the horror atmosphere, the two things that are supposed to be the most important aspects of this series. Overall, it's still an enjoyable game, but as a fan of the original, and as a fan of good, intelligent games, I'm obliged to call it out for its failures.

So let's talk about the combat, then. The original FEAR had good level design with intelligent AI. Fights took place in dynamic, complex areas that were more than just cluttered rooms, and the enemy AI worked to use the environment against you. They'd split up and try to flank you, and flush you out with grenades and suppressing fire. You had to use cover, leaning around corners and ducking behind crates, moving from place to place to avoid being flanked, and enemies did the same. You could save before a battle and play it three different times and have them play out very, very differently.



But now in FEAR 2, the level design mostly consists of big rooms where you stand still and let the enemies come straight at you. The enemies don't move about intelligently, they just run for the nearest cover and camp that spot, and then move into the open to get shot in the face several times. They often enter through a single, narrow doorway that you just aim your gun at and kill everything in one magazine. When they're not just running straight at you, they're cheap-shooting you from around blind corners as you explore, or running in from a secret door behind you after you've just killed everything else in sight.

Most enemies are human replicant soldiers, the only variation among them being how much armor they're wearing and what gun they're using. Combat gets a little stale after a while because most of the time it feels like you're in copy/pasted scenarios, but FEAR 2 does occasionally mix things up. After long stretches of fighting nothing but replicants, they have you fight the cliché "fast monster than crawls on walls" enemy type, and sometimes you even fight ghosts. But the ghosts are never more than boring or lame, either because they'll slowly materialize in front of you and you just wait to fire a single bullet once it's done, or because they'll come out of nowhere and hit you before vanquishing themselves in an anti-climax.

And then there are the random sequences where you pilot a mech unit down the street shooting at trash enemies that only exist to die in a mist of blood. I'm not sure that it's ever been particularly fun to control a big, clunky, slow-moving vehicle, but FEAR 2's mech sections are especially yawn-inducing. On occasion you fight one of these mech units while on foot with ordinary weapons, and I guess these are a welcome change of pace, but there's always a rocket launcher conveniently placed right before a fight so that you can quickly dispose of the mech and then carry on without a hint of effort expended.

The difficulty options aren't well-tailored, either. Normal difficulty is far too easy, with enemies dying in just a couple of hits, barely damaging you unless they're hitting you with blind cheap-shots, and with you constantly tripping over ammo, health, and armor. Combined with the simplistic AI and level-design, it's just not that challenging or engaging. If you're looking for more intelligent, challenging gameplay, you won't find it in the game's only harder setting, because Hard mode only makes the game tediously hard; all it does is make enemies deal insane amounts of damage, forcing you to spend all of your time hiding behind a wall waiting for enemies to run out into the open like idiots. Tedious.

The sad fact of things is that FEAR 2 plays better as a casual run-n-gun shooter. I was disappointed with FEAR 2 feeling less tactical than the original game, and I wasn't having much fun playing in hard mode, either. The game became a lot more fun once I'd resigned myself to just playing in normal difficulty and playing it like a (dare I say it) console shooter. Which would make sense, considering the consolization at play, what with the original being a PC exclusive and the sequel being developed for consoles. I don't really have a problem with console shooters, but it's not what I expected from a FEAR game.

So the combat basically sucks, but how about those fearsome horror elements from the first game? It seems like those got toned down as well. The original FEAR wasn't necessarily scary or that much of a true "horror game," but it did have some good startling moments and a plethora of uncanny sequences that were enough to push you towards the edge of comfort, in like a Poltergeist kind of way. It was mostly a bunch of weird, unexplained phenomena in a dark, mysterious atmosphere, and that made it kind of intriguing, even if its actual horror elements aren't particularly original.

Alma was kind of spooky in the first game, and I was put on edge around her because she could actually hurt you, and you never knew what to expect when she was around. But in the second game, she's just not scary at all because all she ever does is briefly flicker on screen for a moment, or suddenly jump out at you and force a quick-time event where you mash right-click. She ceases to be scary when you realize that she's basically harmless and doesn't really do anything. It also doesn't help that her story has been explained more in the second game; things are generally spookier when they're unexplained.

The first game's scary bits were embedded in very ordinary gameplay. You'd be cruising along doing your thing and then something strange would happen. It was unpredictable and things generally felt real. In the second game, a lot of the "scary moments" happen during more fantastical moments. The HUD flickers and distorts with static, the screen gets filled with bloom and motion blur effects, sometimes everything will turn orange, there will be weird filter overlays. All of these effects put you in a different mood that tend to ruin the horror elements, mostly because you realize that you're in a "horror sequence" instead of just being in ordinary gameplay. It comes off as too obvious and heavy-handed.

I played FEAR 2 at night with the lights off and while wearing headphones and was not scared, at all. I was never unnerved, never startled, never spooked. The attempts at horror in FEAR 2 are, for the part, fleeting and easily dismissed. Alma appears on screen in a blatantly obvious way and then quickly disappears. "Hmm," I say, "that was something" and continue on as if nothing ever happened. Everything was either totally predictable or inconsequential.

Alright, there were actually two moments when I got spooked. Once happened almost randomly when one of those weird monsters-that-crawl-on-walls suddenly darted past the end of a hallway. I startled and suddenly felt ashamed of myself. The other moment happened in the one sequence that I would actually praise, where the lights go out and flicker very slowly and irregularly, like a badly damaged strobe light, as ghosts spawn everywhere and things rattle and scream. That was a good moment because it's one of the few occasions where I actually felt vulnerable.



Next is the way the story is told. There's barely any story at all with only a handful of relevant "cutscenes" in this 10 hour game. Perhaps 90% of the game has you going on pointless detours and after red herrings. Which isn't really a problem, but a game's not going to win any storytelling awards when it's told entirely through text logs and text-during-load-screens.

I'm no fan of text logs or audio logs in games, but these text logs are especially atrocious. As you explore you find "intel items" that you can read on your PDA, which is itself a stupid menu screen that doesn't integrate with the rest of the gameplay. The game pauses while you sit there reading the log; pick up an intel item, press TAB, and all of the ambient sound effects and music stop playing. It completely breaks the immersion of the environment. You'd think the least they could do is keep the ambient sound going or something, maybe make them into audio logs so you can listen to them while you explore.

Then there's the fact that exploration is dumbed down, no more secret areas to find with rewarding loot, there's this new protagonist Becket who ruins the uniqueness of the Pointman from the first game, there's the annoying "airlock checkpoint" save system with no manual saves, there's the stupid audio effects where you turn your back towards a talking person and they suddenly sound like they're on the opposite side of a huge cavern, there's the lack of leaning, there's the fact that the shotgun has no range, spread, or knock-back and isn't fun to use, there's the fact that melee attacks aren't useful at all anymore, there's the stupid glowing enemy effect when activating slow-mo, there's the stupid blue outline of the HUD encircling the screen, there's the messy-looking film grain. So many annoying problems.

FEAR 2 just feels like a "lite" version of the first game; watered-down with filler and not as tasty. It's still very playable and ultimately better than a lot of other shooters, but it's a disgrace to the first game that leaves me utterly disappointed.



F.E.A.R. 2: Project Origin

Uncharted Waters



Bright moments:

Some of the "horror" sequences are visually stimulating, even if they're not that scary.

Fumbles in the dark:

Combat is straightforward without much need for strategy or tact, and the story is lackluster and uninteresting.

Verdict:

FEAR 2 pales in comparison to the original FEAR, feeling more like an average, typical shooter with the FEAR name.



Developer: Monolith

Publisher: Warner Bros

Release Date: February 10, 2009

System Requirements:

- OS: Windows XP or newer
- CPU: 2.8 XP (3.2 newer) GHz
- RAM: 1 XP (1.5 newer) GB
- Video: DX9, 256 MB
- HDD: 12 GB

Grotesque Tactics: Evil Heroes

Review by Nick Burgener

Grotesque Tactics: Evil Heroes bills itself as a "satirical RPG" that "pokes fun at" the well-worn tropes and cliches of popular strategy/action-RPGs. But it turns out that Grotesque Tactics isn't that much of a satire or a parody. Its jokes are worth a slight chuckle at first, but the amusement quickly wears off once you realize that its only way of satirizing the genre is to make you play obnoxiously exaggerated renditions of all of the wearisome tropes of the genre. It references a few games here and there, but only in oblique ways that don't relate to anything at all.

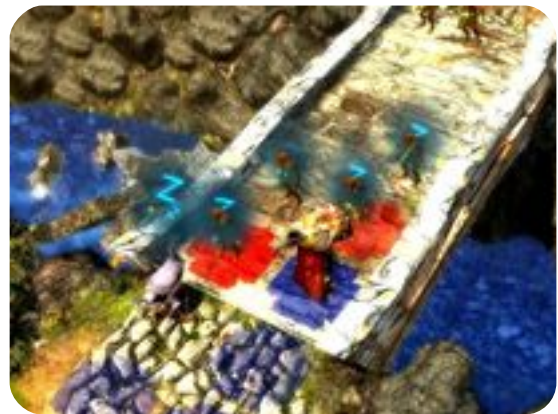
Besides that, the gameplay of Grotesque Tactics is pretty rough around the edges with bugs, glitches, random crashes, camera issues, targeting issues, interface issues, typos, and so forth. On top of that, for a game that's billed as a "tactics" game, there's not a lot of strategy or tactics involved. So putting "tactics" in the title may not be totally appropriate, but the experience certainly could be called "grotesque."

In Grotesque, you play as Drake, a military academy drop-out who failed the final exam of defeating a mushroom in combat. Depressed and ashamed of himself, he sets out to let himself be eaten by a mushroom. Before he can finish the deed, the Holy Avatar, a knight who refers to himself as His Semidivine Humble Self, convinces Drake to overcome his depression and join the fight against the Dark Church, an evil cult that just wiped out the entire military.

From here, you spend the rest of the game recruiting so-called "evil heroes" to join your party and battle against the Dark Church. You're supposed to be a rag-tag bunch of anti-heroes saving the day, but none of your party members could even be described as "evil heroes," so that's another aspect of the game's title that doesn't make any sense.

The gameplay functions like any strategy RPG. You fight on a grid, earn experience for defeating enemies, level-up, complete quests, and buy and sell loot to upgrade your equipment. But all of this proves to be a shallow experience. You can't allocate stat points or pick skills on level-up, it all happens automatically. And each character only gets two skills through the entire game, anyway. There are only a handful of items that each character can equip, and for the most part they're all found during quests which makes money fairly useless.

Combat plays like a rudimentary version of a tactics game. The battlefield is a grid system that your characters can move around on, depending on their movement stat. You move your characters next to an enemy and right-click to attack. And that's just about all there is to it. Your skills tend to be status-inducing affairs, like inflicting blindness, bleeding, poison, sleep, or depression, and a couple of characters have more interesting ones that affect the grids by putting up a wall of flames that deal damage to enemies, or a wall of vines that enemies can't pass. But otherwise the skills are just "deal extra damage and maybe a status effect" which isn't especially interesting.



The only slightly unique aspect to the combat is the "obsession meters." Each character has some kind of obsession that fills up their gauge and causes them to automatically do a special attack, usually after dealing a certain amount of damage or being hit a certain number of times. The twist with these special attacks is that they tend to affect all units around the character, or specifically target your own party members.

The Holy Avatar, for example, starts telling stories of his heroic affairs, which puts all characters (friendly and hostile) around him to sleep. The goblin in your party runs away after being hit so many times, dropping a smoke bomb at his feet that blinds all nearby characters (friendly and hostile). If your healer takes too much damage, she turns and beats the crap out of one of your party members. Whenever your party members stand next to Holy Avatar, the three maidens get jealous and shoot them. The barbarian in your party will go berserk and randomly attack party members (instead of your target) during his turns. The vampire will periodically spend a turn drinking the blood of a party member instead of attacking an enemy.

I suppose there's room here for the obsessions to be strategic, but in practice they just turn out to be annoying. Each character has their own meter (which you can't see until it's their turn – would have been nice to see all the meters at once), and it's just tedious to keep track of them all, moving your characters around depending on who's about to go crazy. Especially when you have no control over some of them activating and you wind up devastating your own party.

On top of these annoyances, the targeting system can be stupid at times. Sometimes you want to click a skill to see what targets are in range or what options are available to you, but if there's only one possible target available then the character automatically moves to the space and executes the skill, and you can't stop it. This results in characters waking up slept targets or getting swarmed by enemies or wasting the skill on a different enemy.

In some areas the camera is totally unbearable. In a cave, for example, it randomly zooms in so close to the ground that it almost goes beneath the floor, and other times it raises up so high that you can't see anything at all. You pan it around the screen and it starts spazzing out between the two extremes. If you want to rotate the camera angle (by pressing Q or E), you also have to move the mouse in that direction otherwise the camera will get caught on your mouse pointer.

I also frequently ran into occasions where my party would get stuck in combat mode with no enemies in sight. Sometimes I'd win a battle and still be stuck in combat mode, or there'd be enemies on the other side of a wall that I can't actually get to, and the battle grids come up, thus forcing me to move all 10 of my characters one at a time until I could get close enough to the enemies to kill them. This often took 3 or 4 minutes worth of slowly moving my characters around. So tedious and annoying.

In other situations, the game crashes or screws you over for no good reason. One time I was in a difficult battle with a large group of goblin mages that did heavy aoe damage to my party members. Towards the end, one of my characters got killed by my own party members' obsessions, so I reloaded a save to use a better strategy. Then another character died near the end because the stupid targeting system had my healer heal the wrong person. Then I reloaded to do the battle a third time, and the game crashed near the end of the battle.

So the average gameplay ranges from completely terrible and obnoxious to lukewarm mediocrity, but how

are the touted "satire" and "parody" elements? Well those are pretty weak too. All the game does is have you play through exaggerated versions of the already-annoying aspects of RPGs that it's supposed to be making fun of, while the main character comments on how annoying everything is. Like a reflection of my inner monologue as I play this game.



be doing a million of them in GT. Get annoyed when you see recycled dungeons repopulated with new enemies? Well you'll be revisiting a lot of the exact same areas in GT. Do you get sick of always doing side-quest favors for every NPC before they'll tell you something you need for the main quest? Well you'll be doing favors galore in GT.

There's one point where you get a quest to collect crystals from the Crystal Cave, fighting giant rabbits and working your way to the back to battle a boss. Later on you get a quest to visit the Cave of Crystals to defeat another boss, and your character mentions that the place looks exactly like the Crystal Cave, while Holy Avatar proclaims that it's obviously a completely different cave. It seems amusing at first for the game to so blatantly recycle the same dungeon, but then you sigh and grumble when you realize that the game actually expects you to play through the exact same dungeon again.

There's another part where an NPC wants you to do some quests for him before he can tell you the location of the Dark Church headquarters. He tells you to kill 6 rabbits, so you do. And then he tells you to kill the big boss rabbit and bring him its skull, so you do. Then he tells you to kill some NPC named Little Death, so you do. Then he almost sends you on an epic quest into another dimension to find a painter somewhere. All-the-while your character is getting more and more impatient and irritated with the NPC, which is exactly how I was feeling about the game.

Then, towards the end of the game, it needlessly pads itself with more absurd satire. You've discovered the location of the Dark Church headquarters and your party's talking about preparing for the final battle, and then a few mandatory side-quests pop up and delay you from completing the game, much to Drake's irritation. Once I'd finally beaten the final boss, I was happy to be done with the game, but then it sprung up

an obligatory "bonus end-game quest" that sent me back to the cemetery that I'd already visited and had me fight the same final boss three more times.

On the whole, the game is a little amusing at first, but it gets annoying very quickly, because it's not especially witty and mostly just amounts to you playing a terrible depiction of terrible game mechanics. It's supposed to be an absurd satire of RPG tropes, but actually playing the absurd satire proves to be more of a chore than playing the games it's supposed to be parodying.

Grotesque Tactics is saved from my hammer of rage simply because of its indie status. I don't expect perfection from indie games, so some of its problems are excusable, but that doesn't change the fact that the game is generally a tedious chore to complete. If you want a game that makes fun of fantasy RPGs, you'd do better to check out InXile's *The Bard's Tale*.



Grotesque Tactics: Evil Heroes

PC RPG



Bright moments:

The humor and easter eggs can be amusing at times.

Fumbles in the dark:

Combat is pretty shallow, and there are quite a number of bugs and other technical issues.

Verdict:

Only worth getting if you're a die-hard fan of tactics games and want something else to keep you busy. Otherwise, it's a tedious chore of a game.



Developer: Headup Games
Silent Dreams

Publisher: Meridian 4

Release Date: October 15, 2010

System Requirements:

- OS: Windows XP or newer
- CPU: 2 GHz
- RAM: 1 GB
- Video: DX9c, 128 MB
- HDD: 700 MB