

EGSM 19: Pixels and players (Indie Video Games)

Content Warnings

- Explicit language
- Discussions of: death & violence, food, ghosts, police
- Mentions of: guns, injury, starvation, gore, drugs & alcohol

HELEN

And she has this amazing laugh, every time she makes her own jokes, she sort of goes...

HELEN AND NATHAN IN UNISON

[imitating Deltarune character Queen's laugh] Ohohohoho!

[Show Theme - Intro]

HELEN

Hello friends and fans and welcome to Enthusiasm, the show where we talk about a few of our favourite things. I am your host Helen Gould, one of the best Rusty Quillers, and today we're talking about indie video games and I am super, super stoked to be joined by Maddy and Nathan. As always, we shall introduce ourselves alphabetically, so Maddy can you give us your pronouns and tell us what you do?

MADDY

Yes, my pronouns are she/her and I am an editor and a director with Rusty Quill. I worked on Stellar Firma as the lead editor, I was the director of Inexplicables, the Patreon exclusive supernatural drama, and you may be hearing more from me in the future, hmm, question mark.

HELEN

Very, very exciting. Righty-oh, next up, Nathan, can you please give us your pronouns and tell us what you do.

NATHAN

Oh, how do I follow up such a stellar resume?!

(Laughter)

I go by he/they pronouns. I am the androgenous android gameshow host from the future Nathan Blades, tabletop RPG designer, streamer, voice actor and general internet ne'er-do-well. You can see me at The Neon Caster on Twitter and I am also the voice of Orimar Vale on the Campaign Skyjacks podcast. It's a pleasure to meet you all.

HELEN

You might want to know, Ben has specifically told me to listen to Campaign Skyjacks, so you've got some admirers within Rusty Quill.

NATHAN

Aw that genuinely makes me really, really happy.

HELEN

No, he loves it!

(Laughter)

NATHAN

It's such an illustrious show that has been going on for years so the fact that they cast me just you know, some random robot from Britain to go and be a zombie pirate captain to an audience who do stuff like, say when they really enjoyed the episode that they heard or draw fan art and it blows my mind, every single time! So, yes, thank you for listening those who are listening present, past and future.

(Laughter)

HELEN

Okay, alright, let's dig in. I have got an extremely simple and easily defined question which is, what is an indie game? Someone give me a nice one sentence descriptor of what we mean when we talk about indie games.

NATHAN

Okay, a game is an experience defined by rules...

(Laughter)

...as suggested by games developer and author, Ms Anna Anthropy, but indie games in particular are those things, but also made without the large amount of financial backing of a large games publisher, in my opinion.

HELEN

Mm, that is actually a lot more pithy than, than I thought we would get. I was making a joke about how it's quite difficult these days to draw the line, but you've done really well, you have humbled me.

NATHAN

Sorry to ruin your day.

(Laughter)

HELEN

Maddy, would you agree with that definition?

MADDY

Yeah, absolutely. I am a very arty-farty pretentious person and I very much enjoy going for ooh obscure, I am very much into that so... But yeah, I will play a blockbuster game along with the best of them as well, but yeah, like I have a special love for indie games.

NATHAN

Mm hmm.

HELEN

Mm. I find that indie games tend to be a lot more creative conceptually, than a lot of the triple A stuff that is coming out, but that might be just because I am late to the games and maybe I missed the hey day of the big studios.

NATHAN

No, I don't think you're wrong. I think the main reason why people might argue triple A games being a little uncreative is because they are dealing with such a large financial product, they're treated as investments so they can't be risky. So there are often lots of choices that would be creatively risky that they can't do if they are working with such a large IP. I adore the Pokémon games, but the Pokémon games are never going to be particularly adventurous because of how much that franchise is worth.

(Laughter)

Which makes me sad! But yeah, yeah, I think that's definitely one of the big factors of major games being maybe a little less out there sometimes.

HELEN

Yeah.

MADDY

Yeah, absolutely, and from the other side as well, necessity is the mother of invention and when you have financial constraints it really forces you to be very creative in order to make something enjoyable and innovative on a small budget, and I always appreciate that and I often kind of impose artificial constraints on myself when I am doing something creative in order to force myself to be more out there.

HELEN

Mm. That's interesting, that's something that I have heard from quite a lot of people actually, that like, it sometimes means that you produce a better product when there are limitations put on you in that way. I think also, the reason that I often prefer indie games is precisely because they tend to be sort of quite small scale, and yet still impactful, because I don't have time for some of these open world games where you can go anywhere and be anything and I am just like, no, I need...

(Laughter)

NATHAN

Yeah, I can definitely understand that, as a... I mean, I'm sure most people out there with a regular 9 to 5 job, and then if you're like us, doing additional kind of creative work on top of that, the amount of time that you have for a videogame is quite limited. So, to do the really, really large epics, or you know god forbid like an MMO which is infinite hours long!

MADDY

Mm.

HELEN

Yes.

NATHAN

Can be a really challenging thing to do, so yeah, yeah, yeah. There was like an ish-post, I don't know whether I can swear on this podcast or not?!

(Laughter)

An internet shit-post, if thou wilt!

(Laughter)

That says something along the lines of "I want shorter games with worse graphics made by people who are paid more, and I'm not kidding" or something along the lines of that, and yeah, yeah that's kind of like I think a lot of people are kind of hoping indie games fulfil that energy a bit more as of late.

HELEN

Yes.

NATHAN

But for the record to give the entire quote, because you know people like factual accuracy on podcasts, otherwise they send in angry emails, “I want shorter games with worse graphics made by people who are paid more to work less and I’m not kidding!” put together by @Jordan_Mallory on Twitter, there we go.

HELEN

Thank you, Jordan Mallory, for encapsulating my feelings on that subject, because I am absolutely on board with that to be honest. And there are so many lovely little games that I can’t imagine being picked up by like a triple A studio, like, like Stardew Valley. I did just say that I don’t have much time for big games, but I have sunk a good 140 hours or something into Stardew Valley at this point.

(Laughter)

MADDY

Oh yeah.

HELEN

But I get to take it at my own pace!

MADDY

Yes, yes, I’m like on my third or fourth saved game and three of those are 100 plus hours, so yeah. Like having it on Switch is a killer that’s just the...

(Laughter)

HELEN

I see.

MADDY

That's how I managed to squeeze in so much time, it's like ooh bedtime, oh no a little bit of farming before I go to bed, oh dear it's 2am, alright.

(Laughter)

NATHAN

I've not touched it myself, I lose my powers if I move too far away from concrete.

HELEN

Ah.

NATHAN

So, the pastoral life is not for me. My partner's a big fan of it though, he's played it quite a bit, and we're both actually quite excited for Haunted Chocolatier, the next game in the series.

MADDY

Yeah.

HELEN

I'm so excited for that.

NATHAN

Mm, the trailer though!

MADDY

That looks very cool.

NATHAN

I mean maybe it's just the fact that his ghosts lo-fi hip hop and like an Isekai plotline, but that ticks a lot of personal boxes for me, you know what I'm saying?

(Laughter)

HELEN

Yeah, the ghost looked really cute as well, just sitting behind the counter having their nice undead time, selling choc- just aw!
I love sort of like the aesthetics of Concerned Ape's games. I love the music and like whoever did the sound design on that, there's something about all of the tiny little sounds in Stardew Valley, that really make my brain go "ah, this is a pleasant sound".

MADDY

Yeah, it's a serotonin boost every single time you get the little pop from getting a parsnip out of the ground.

(Laughter)

HELEN

Yes! It's the popping when you get your crops, it's the thunk, thunk, when you chop a tree down, it's the... all of those little things are so lovely.

NATHAN

That kind of attention to detail. Oh, actually, speaking of indie games that have really high attention to detail on sound design, at time of recording, Unpacking released...

MADDY AND HELEN

Yes! Oh!

NATHAN

...about a week ago. Not played it myself but apparently that has like 40,000 different foley pieces of work for moving items around onto different surfaces and things like that...

HELEN

Wow.

NATHAN

...because it's supposed to be that immersive.

MADDY

Yeah, that is on my list of many games that I would be happy to talk about forever.

NATHAN

Oh, please do tell me about it.

(Laughter)

HELEN

Yeah, please tell me about Unpacking, it's exactly the kind of thing I love.

MADDY

Yeah, I saw a live stream of it recently and I thought taking something so stressful as moving house and turning it into a sort of zen experience, seemed very cool...

HELEN AND NATHAN

Mm.

MADDY

...and like the art is very beautiful, it is pixel art but it's very detailed and as you go through it, you are kind of picking up an environmental kind of story

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throughout, like as the person's belongings change as they go from like child to student to adult, you can see how... what elements stay the same and what things change and how different relationships come into their life, but you never, there's no dialogue, you never see a person, but you can kind of be like "oh the main character now has a roommate who likes sewing".

HELEN

Aw.

MADDY

Or they have a D and D character that they have a little mini of, and then later on it gets painted...

(Laughter)

...and so it's just like they have the same mini for like throughout multiple moves of the houses, and I think there's also like the implication of like a queer relationship and having a baby and it's just really sweet.

HELEN

Mm, I will wait until I finally get a PC, because this laptop, this poor darling laptop, it can't handle anything more detailed than like Undertale.

MADDY

Yeah.

HELEN

Which you know, another great game with amazing sound.

(Laughter)

NATHAN

Yes.

MADDY

Incredible. Like incidentally that was weirdly because I am a late adopter of video games as well, one of the first proper video games that I played, and because like previously I had only like done CD-ROM games of like Putt-Putt Travels Through Time and stuff like that as a kid.

(Laughter)

NATHAN

Oh! Edutainment games of the 90s were so dope! I owned almost all of the Magic School Bus games, and they were all great.

(Laughter)

MADDY

But yeah, the music in Undertale is incredible and just the fact that it's mostly done by one person is mind blowing.

NATHAN

Yeah, yeah. Prior to releasing Undertale they did a lot of ROM hacks, they did ROM hacks of Earthbound in the past.

HELEN

What's a ROM hack?

NATHAN

So, a ROM hack is taking the kind of code of a videogame which were called ROMs back in the day where its cartridges now, they are ISOs if they are off discs, and changing the code, hacking the codes to put new content in. So, they were taking Earthbound, the SNES RPG, which Undertale is very, very much a love letter to, and changing aspects of the music, changing the graphics, changing the storyline. One of the most iconic songs in Undertale actually, had its origins because he composed it for that ROM hack of the game way back then.

HELEN

Is that Megalovania?

NATHAN

Mm hmm, yeah exactly that. It's like his signature song. For a while he also did music for the... I guess multimedia web comic slash Flash animation series called Homestuck...

HELEN

Yes.

NATHAN

...which you are maybe aware of, if you're not aware of it I do not have enough time on this podcast to explain it to you.

(Laughter)

MADDY

There's an excellent Sarah Z video that's over an hour long that you can watch, which is how I learned about it.

(Laughter)

NATHAN

Yeah, there we go.

HELEN

That is where I have got all of my knowledge of Homestuck from. It completely passed me by, even though I was on Tumblr in 2012, so theoretically I should have been caught up in it, but I wasn't.

NATHAN

I mean, a narrow miss, I think.

(Laughter)

No, that's mean, that's mean. I read it through at the time and adored it, and I still kind of adore it for it being one of the first pieces of big multimedia cross media projects that managed to also end and be made, but yeah, they did multiple music albums for that project to which Toby Fox did a sizeable chunk of music. So, it's been really interesting seeing him kind of like grow his creative roots to the point where it's like "no, no, I am going to make a full video game from scratch, and it will take me five years..."

(Laughter)

...but it will give everybody who plays it permanent brain worms, so you know."

(Laughter)

HELEN

They really are permanent!

MADDY

There's like the song that's all dog noises, there's Temmie Village where everyone's a cat, it's yeah, it's great.

HELEN

It's wonderful. Have you played, have either of you played Deltarune?

NATHAN

YES!

MADDY

I've played the first chapter and I want to play the second one, but I feel like it's been a while since I played the first chapter, so I need to play that through again to remember what happened.

(Laughter)

NATHAN

I would recommend, not necessarily for the story because it kind of feeds that to you, but the difficult... it's not necessarily harder-ish, but it assumes you've played the first game and was reasonably comfortable at playing the first game, if that makes sense. So, giving your time to kind of remember the story and also get used to dodging bullets the way it wants you to, is probably a recommended, but yeah Deltarune chapter two is great. Me, like many friends of mine, adore Spamton as a character.

(Laughter)

HELEN

Yes! Best boy, horrible little scammy man! Terrible trash person -

NATHAN

Yeah.

HELEN

- love Spamton so much.

NATHAN

For those who know me, my general brand is about technology and retro internet pop culture, layered onto the stuff I normally do. So, that game being specifically about like late nineties, early noughties internet...

(Laughter)

HELEN

Yeah.

NATHAN

It was all like, oh this is everything that I want in my work! I am definitely gonna have something inspired by Spamton in next tabletop RPG thing I do, I swear. I have already used some music from that game as like backing music for streams, streamed tabletop stuff.

(Laughter)

HELEN

Yeah, Maddy you should absolutely play it, if only, if only for the villain, Queen, who is so funny.

NATHAN

Yes.

HELEN

She is... I think she is one of the funniest characters that Toby Fox has ever made.

(Laughter)

MADDY

I am very excited.

HELEN

And she has this amazing laugh, every time she makes her own jokes, she sort of goes...

HELEN AND NATHAN IN UNISON

[imitating Deltarune character Queen's laugh] Ohohohoho!

(Laughter)

NATHAN

Yeah, yeah, yeah.

MADDY

Oh yeah that's a very Final Fantasy thing for every character to have their own specific laugh, like there's "kee-hee-hee" or "gwah hah hah" and sort of like...

(Laughter)

NATHAN

Oh, like Kefka's laugh, yeah yeah yeah, I get you.

(Laughter)

HELEN

Yeah, you're right actually and then Susie's laugh is like [imitating Deltarune character Susie's laugh] hur hur hur!

(Laughter)

I don't know about the others.

NATHAN

Lancer laughs a lot I think as well.

HELEN

Yeah.

NATHAN

Yeah, yeah, yeah.

HELEN

Lancer just kind of goes splat!

(Laughter)

NATHAN

Yes.

(Laughter)

HELEN

If you ever want to do anything with Lancer, he just splats at you.

(Laughter)

MADDY

This may be too personal a question, so feel free not to answer if you don't want to but, have you ever killed one of the monsters in Undertale?

HELEN

Of course!

MADDY

(Gasps!)

HELEN

I feel like most people did on the first go.

NATHAN

Sort of? I was lucky enough to have backed the kickstarter way back when and played the demo, so I was already aware about how the game worked when I went in to play it for real.

HELEN

Oh.

NATHAN

Although...

(Laughter)

...I didn't... against Toriel, that first boss battle, I didn't... I was, you know, hitting mercy and it didn't seem to be working, so I was like oh the game wants me to fight her then, and then I got chastised for it and I reloaded my save and persevered with the mercy and then it worked, and then the game chastised

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me for loading my save to make sure I saved her, and I'm like "ah, ah, this game is clever, I see."

(Laughter)

MADDY

Tricksy.

HELEN

Yeah. Like my first play through, I killed Toriel and later on, and I can't believe I did this because I'm very bad at these games, I have absolutely zero like finger reflexes and can never see things coming, I'm bad at memorising things, but then I killed Undyne as well...

NATHAN

Oh.

HELEN

...and like she turned into dust and then she came back, and I killed her.

(Laughter)

Cause it hadn't, I didn't realise that I had to run away, like physically run away, like I would manage to run away out of the little fighting box, and then I just stood there like where do I go?

NATHAN

Very fair.

HELEN

(Laughter)

And didn't, I just didn't know where to go so I just stood there, and she caught me again and I had to fight her again.

NATHAN

Very fair. I guess if there was to ever be a criticism for that game is that some of the kind of like gimmicks slash puzzles can be slightly unintuitive in combat. I, because it's a single player game though, I'm very willing to look things up if I get stuck...

MADDY

Yeah.

NATHAN

...especially since a lot of the battles in that, even if you know what to do, you still have to physically do it with your hands, right? I remember being stuck on the Mettaton boss fight.

MADDY

Yeah, that's a tough one.

HELEN

Yeah, I got stuck there for ages.

NATHAN

Yeah, there's a gimmick where you have to shoot a disco ball to change the kind of attacks it does at you, and I didn't realise that was a thing that you could do, and it was just getting my ass all day, so...

(Laughter)

NATHAN

I think, you know, with how smooth Deltarune is after Undertale, you can definitely see how his game design sensibilities have really changed across the multiple games he's made.

HELEN

On that, we'll see you in a minute.

[BREAK]

HELEN

And welcome back! So, Nathan you asked me and Maddy if we had ever made any games, and I am going to fire the question right back at you, tell us about the games that you have made.

NATHAN

Yes, yes I have indeed made the vid gam before.

(Laughter)

Yeah, I can't remember how I specifically got into it, but there is a twice yearly, maybe three times yearly, videogame design jam called Ludum Dare, or maybe even Ludum Dare [Nathan pronouncing it "dar-ay"] even the people who run the event are really inconsistent about it.

(Laughter)

The idea is that a whole bunch of people decide on the theme by democracy, and then there is two or three days, depending on whether you are working alone or in a group, there's like the contest mode which can only be one person working on the project and it's in two days. Or like the free jam mode which is as many people as you like working over three. Yeah, you just go and design a videogame within that limited period of time with a theme that has been set for you in order to kind of... as I think we were kind of talking about earlier in the show, fostering creativity through restrictions.

HELEN

Yeah, yeah, yeah.

NATHAN

I really enjoy writing and telling stories. At the time, I wasn't doing tabletop RPGs, I was doing tabletop stuff some years before, and then now obviously,

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but at the time that I started I wasn't really writing any, but I am not a programmer, I couldn't have a head for going into game maker and putting in a physics engine or anything like that. So I am like, "I want to make a visual novel" and teamed up with an artist friend of mine at the time. The theme was "ten seconds", we made a game called "Pizzapocalypse 20XX"...

(Laughter)

...which is trying to stop this glam rock necromancer from turning all pizza in the world into mouldy meatloaf...

(Laughter)

...and you have a time limit in order to persuade him to do something else in that time, and when the clock hits zero everything's ruined and then we have to... yeah, yeah, yeah.

(Laughter)

So silly so, so silly but it was really fun, the fact that even in three days you end up doing all-nighters and working way harder than you normally would to be able to finish something, and that was... I mean this show does not encourage real game developers to crunch to produce projects, but when you are doing...

HELEN

Thank you for the clarification.

(Laughter)

NATHAN

...mm, mm, mm, but when you're doing it for fun and you've never done anything like that before and you're really enthusiastic about the process of creating, you kind of do those bits and pieces, and I have done that maybe three or four separate times with lots of different ones. The last visual novel that I made called "Kenneth Rice, Vampire Detective"...

(Helen gasps)

MADDY

Yeah!

(Laughter)

NATHAN

I'll leave the listeners to go find that, it's on my itch.io account actually, so if you googled that you would be able to find it very easily.

(Laughter)

HELEN

I love it. I love that. Just from the title, you've got me!

(Laughter)

NATHAN

Mm, because visual novels there's a particular programme called Ren'Py [pronounced "ren-pee"] or Ren'Py [pronounced "ren-pie"] using Python, the programming languages to make visual novels, and the code that you type out, has the same kind of formatting as if you were typing a script out...

HELEN

Huh.

NATHAN

...right into saying when characters enter or leave frame, or if they do a particular pose and how character's names are attributed to text boxes and stuff. So, if you are somebody in, I think if you are a fan of Rusty Quill you probably are fancying yourself, or are a bit of a writer...

(Laughter)

...and if you ever wanted to make a videogame, making a visual novel using Ren'Py is probably a good call. But before then I was using Twine, a system to do interactive stories and choose your own adventure like text games.

HELEN

Yes.

NATHAN

So, graphics are not mandatory at all but there's all essentially, the end result will be like an HTML file with text and links that jump you to other pages and the backend is like a big spiderweb of all these interconnecting pages that you are linking up yourself to tell the story.

MADDY

Nice.

NATHAN

Super useful as a tool actually, even if you are not making interactive fiction, just as a way to kind of organise story structures. All the visual novels that I made since, were actually prototyped in Twine so I could get the structure in my head out, and then not having to type and choose your own adventure linearly, because that's a nightmare, don't do that!

HELEN

That's maybe something I want to talk about a little bit, how visual novels are often a really common format for small developers to make, and a really interesting genre, another one where people have been really creative. I haven't played it yet, but like Doki Doki Literature Club!

NATHAN

Ahhh! Mm hmm.

HELEN

Famously bizarre, as far as I can tell, even though I haven't played it.

MADDY

Yeah.

HELEN

Same for, oh what's the pigeon one?

MADDY AND NATHAN IN UNISON

Hateful Boyfriend.

(Laughter)

MADDY

Yes, that's on my list. I haven't played it yet, but I am very much looking forward to it at some point when I can really dive into the bird world.

(Laughter)

HELEN

It's a lot of fun Maddy, I think you'll like it.

MADDY

Excellent.

HELEN

It's very silly, and then there are some storylines that suddenly take a super dark turn, and you're like "oh no! I thought this was a visual novel about funny birds!", but no!

(Laughter)

NATHAN

That is also strangely a classical archetype of the genre, weirdly enough.

HELEN

Oh?

NATHAN

Yes, Japanese specifically visual novels are really, were in the past, a really popular kind of like game medium, because it's the easiest way to deliver cute anime girls directly to your eyes...

(Laughter)

...you know, which I say flippantly but depending on the game pretty straightforwardly that. It's part of what Doki Doki Literature Club! is kind of riffing on, of it being like "oh you know it's cute girls doing cute things and maybe you get to smooch one", and then it turns out to not be that. I will say that DDLC does really, really interesting stuff. You have to play a very

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intentionally flat visual novel to get there, because you know, it's, you know, trying to get you to forget that you purchased a horror game so...

(Laughter)

HELEN

Yes, yeah.

NATHAN

...but yeah, yeah, yeah those kind of like bad ends are a very kind of like popular highlight in that genre as a whole.

HELEN

Oh that's interesting.

NATHAN

Because you wouldn't think about that in any other genre videogame, right? You wouldn't be playing Stardew Valley and then make a specific choice and then have a horrible grisly end, you get eaten by your own cows or something.

(Laughter)

HELEN

That makes one of the bits in Dream Daddy make a lot more sense, because there are a couple of choices in Dream Daddy where you can accidentally die...

(Laughter)

MADDY

Oh, I wasn't aware, I've played Dream Daddy, but I hadn't come across those options, or if I have, I wasn't aware.

(Laughter)

HELEN

There's one where you can be too ambitious of a dancer...

MADDY

(Gasps!)

HELEN

...and like...

(Laughter)

...injure yourself very badly.

(Laughter)

MADDY

Oh wow.

HELEN

And there's another one where you can be too adventurous of a diver and like land on a rock instead of in the water or something like that. While we're talking a bit about horror, again the horror genre is another one that has a lot of interesting indie games in it too.

NATHAN

Mm.

HELEN

Can someone talk to me... I don't know, have either of you played Phasmophobia?

MADDY

I've played a little bit of it.

NATHAN

I have not. I cannot. No, please do explain, because I'm too baby.

(Laughter)

HELEN

No, I haven't played it either!

MADDY

I have watched quite a lot of streams of it and tried playing it, but I am a) very bad at it and b) it's quite scary...

(Laughter)

...so, you can either solo or as a multiplayer crew enter into a house or some other location and try and figure out what kind of ghost is in there using different diagnostic techniques, like does the temperature go below zero or do they write in a book or are there fingerprints on the walls, that kind of thing, but you can get killed and one way to earn money is to, if you're in a multiplayer group is to take a photo of your fallen comrade's dead body.

(Laughter)

Because you get money for photos that you take and you get money for correctly identifying the ghost that's in there, but you have to buy all your own equipment, and if you die and leave all your equipment behind then you have to buy it all again...

HELEN

Oh no!

MADDY

...and so if you're playing solo, it's really unforgiving and you, like that's partly why I didn't get very far, because I don't know anyone else who's playing it and I'm constantly dying so...

(Laughter)

HELEN

Oh.

MADDY

Because I'm a freakin' audio nerd, the interesting thing about the sound design is as soon as you go in the house there's like this low level hum, that just instantly makes things super scary, and like you wouldn't necessarily notice it if you weren't looking for it, but you just as soon as you go in there's like [imitates a whispering/hissing sound]...

(Laughter)

Yeah, it's genuinely terrifying and I tend to avoid a lot of horror games, not necessarily because they're scary, but just because they are like gory, and I just don't want to be looking at gross stuff when I am trying to have a nice time.

NATHAN

Sure.

HELEN

Very understandable.

MADDY

And so I thought Phasmophobia might be a good shout because it's not really gory, it's just kind of spooky, but no it just, it genuinely unsettled me when you are in a room on your own, like especially if you have got headphones on and you are just looking at this dark house and it's like there is no way to like make it light. Like the darkness of it is very effective as well. Like the graphics are not amazing but, like for with the, with the resources they have, they have created a really great sense of atmosphere, so. It is impressive, but yeah, I think better done with a group so that they can take a photo of you when you die.

(Laughter)

NATHAN

For sure.

HELEN

As with all fun activities these days.

NATHAN

I mean lo-fi and low-poly horror is a pretty big way of rendering that genre of game as of late...

HELEN

Yeah.

NATHAN

...I mean, you know, PlayStation 1 models are already hitting Uncanny Valley because they look sort of human, but they don't have the face quite right, and if you use that in a spooky context then you can definitely...

HELEN

Yeah.

NATHAN

There's an entire game anthology of low-poly horror games that's like styled by... I really should stop naming things and then not remembering the full name because I am going to have to look this up and it will destroy...

HELEN

Don't worry, I do this constantly, in so many episodes I have forgotten the names of actors, actresses, singers, musicians. Like, even if I really like them and they're really famous, I am just like "Jennifer whatshername".

(Laughter)

NATHAN

"This free horror game demo collection is a throw back to the PlayStation 1 era". Yeah, yeah, yeah. The Haunted Disc – there we go.

HELEN

Oooh.

NATHAN

It's available via itch.io which is a fantastic platform for obtaining indie games.

HELEN

It is indeed.

NATHAN

But yeah, it is 17 different games done by a whole bunch of different designers that all kind of explore telling horror using low tech by design, which is great, I love that aesthetic a lot. I have always been a big fan of the kind of like turn of the century approach of the computer graphics. I can't play Phasmo either...

(Laughter)

...not necessarily because of the kind of gore stuff but I find it really difficult, if I am in control of the game and I then have to be competent and be scared, I can't do that.

HELEN

Yeah.

NATHAN

I can do horror RPGs and things like that because it doesn't risk, expect me to kind of have the response dexterity to avoid being attacked and things like that so, recently I have been streaming World of Horror and Inscryption.

HELEN

I am hearing a lot about Inscryption.

NATHAN

Oh, Inscryption is so good!

HELEN

Oh!

(Laughter)

NATHAN

It's so good!

HELEN

Oh yeah?

NATHAN

Inscryption was initially, this ties in all the themes together all at once, fantastic!

HELEN

Ooh.

NATHAN

So, the designer of Inscryption is known for doing games that are not quite what one would expect, and they unfold in unusual ways as you play them, and for a game jam some years ago he did like a demo game called like “I am one must starve” or something similar to that, where it’s a card game and you are playing this card game to earn food so you don’t starve...

HELEN

Oh god.

NATHAN

...and as you play it through you realise that either you get the food or your starving child who is behind you can get the food, and only one of you. Only one of you can get it.

HELEN

Oh no.

NATHAN

So, that game did really well, because it was really tense and the person who’s playing the card game against you is just a set of eyes and gross gnarled hands, you don’t see who they are, but it’s also a card game and a very well designed

Rusty Quill - Enthusiasm – Indie Video Games

card game at that, and the full release is, takes that idea and expands it into kind of like a deck-building roguelike adventure and those are two words that probably don't mean anything and that's perfectly fine.

(Laughter)

HELEN

No, I had someone explain what a deck-building roguelike was to me the other day, when they were explaining what Slay the Spire was!

NATHAN

Oh fantastic! Yes!

(Laughter)

Why don't you tell the class what a deck-building roguelike is?

HELEN

Okay, deck-building means that you get given a hand of cards and you have to figure out your strategy depending on what the different cards do, so it's something like Hearthstone or... I mean I'm not good at them, so I don't actually know many of them, but something like Hearthstone, and roguelike means that it's something where you do the same level or the same boss over and over again like in Hades.

NATHAN

Mm, yes exactly like that.

HELEN

Like, you're doing the same thing but it's subtly different each time, and you're getting better and you can try different techniques and different tactics and different strategies, and Slay the Spire specifically is, I think there are 20 bosses, and they're generally the same each time, so it means that it's all on you and choosing your cards and your techniques, and they have the same attack patterns and so it's also based about you trying to remember what to do to combat each of their moves as well. But yeah it sounded really interesting and something that I would be really, really bad at!

(Laughter)

NATHAN

It's a game that loves card games and it will scare you into loving them too. I think is the best way that I would put it.

(Laughter)

Right down to your different attempts. If you fail at the card game the ominous hands and eyes will kill you and you playing another loop is a different person.

HELEN

Wow.

NATHAN

Which is very cool, and it manages to maintain that kind of air of dread on top of a game that is essentially like a Pokémon or Magic: The Gathering sendup for about ten hours. Fascinating. I played it on, I finished playing it on stream relatively recently, which was kind of an interesting experience because you know, you want to stream the game because the game is good and you want other people to go and buy it, but because the game is also really spoiler heavy as you go, there's a kind of like, "well people want to see me finish the game and not quit it half way, but if I stream all of it then everybody gets to know what happens and maybe that's not great either" and I had to kind of do a bit of weighing up.

(Laughter)

HELEN

Well, that's up to them really if they want to continue watching, like if you say, "right we're about to start spoiling the game", then they can decide.

NATHAN

Yeah.

HELEN

You can't protect the whole world from spoilers, like...

(Laughter)

MADDY

Yeah.

NATHAN

Yeah, and you know, the people who were watching got to see me scream out loud...

(Laughter)

...with joy! Once with surprise but later on in the game with genuine “Oh my god! Amazing!” live on air, so you know....

(Laughter)

...swings and roundabouts, but yes, Inscryption is very good and manages to use every kind of like low-poly atmospheric drone music trick in the book to give that sense of dread to something about playing cards.

(Laughter)

HELEN

Excellent. So, Maddy, you say you don't really play horror games that much?

MADDY

Not really, I'm very into kind of gothic horror where things are just kind of spooky and sexy, but I am not really into, like, guts spilling onto floors etc.

(Laughter)

Like I am intrigued by the concept of Resident Evil, but I don't think I could play a Resident Evil game for example. But there are a couple of indie games that I have on my mega list which have kind of horror elements but are not, not very scary, but that suits me very well.

(Laughter)

So, there's Night in the Woods and Oxenfree are two that I really like.

HELEN

Oh! Night in the Woods I think is extremely horrifying though.

MADDY

Yeah, yeah and surprisingly, has surprisingly weird parallels with Hot Fuzz.

(Laughter)

HELEN

Oh my god it does!

MADDY

Yeah.

HELEN

Oh, very good.

MADDY

Playing as a little cat who comes home after dropping out of college and kind of dealing with the small town blues, and picking up with friends who you've left behind and dealing with weird family dynamics and just like all that good emotional heart breaking stuff, it's great.

(Laughter)

HELEN

Yeah.

NATHAN

We can absolutely talk about games that are about things in the indie space, because...

(Laughter)

...I was hoping to at some point bring up Disco Elysium which is very much a game which wears its politics, not so much on its sleeve, but emblazoned on the back of its punk jacket.

(Laughter)

HELEN

Yes, talk to me about Disco Elysium either of you, because again, I haven't played it, but my best friend has and basically live blogged it to me the entire time!

(Laughter)

MADDY

I haven't played it, but I would be very interested to hear more about it because it does seem intriguing.

NATHAN

I am not super far in Disco Elysium unfortunately, it's a game that is... it's also sort of a visual novel and it's a very much a big time commitment, unfortunately.

HELEN

Yes.

NATHAN

So, it's something that I have not been able to put in a huge amount of time into, but it is essentially one of those video games that tries to be an entire tabletop RPG within a videogame space. You are a detective, you cannot remember very much about their past at all, all that they know is that there is a crime that they have been assigned to solve and by hook or by crook they are gonna go and solve it.

(Laughter)

The fact that their, you know, drug and alcohol fuelled haze is what, a big factor in them not being able to remember, means that a lot of people don't really trust them to be a good cop or a good detective and a decent chunk of that game is like, so what is a good cop actually?

(Laughter)

And the answer, considering when they won an award, Studio ZA/UM when they won an award thanked Marx and Engels as part of the special thanks for the award, gives you a pretty solid suggestion on what they think a good cop might be...

(Laughter)

HELEN

Is it...not a cop?

(Laughter)

NATHAN

Mmm. Mmm. Mmm. Which you know, I agree.

HELEN

Mm, yeah.

NATHAN

Unfortunately though, you get like a fellow like detective who is assisting you Kim Kitsuragi, who is an amazing character who is super together and trying to be together for the both of you... trying to keep it together for the both of you...

HELEN

Yeah.

NATHAN

...and you can do nothing but root for him, especially when he also kind of you know, talks about the reality of the circumstances of why he is doing this job with you, noted incompetent...

(Laughter)

...so, a whole lot about how that system worked, but anyway, that kind of cascades through the entire game. In fact, they did like a special edition relatively recently which lets you, when you run into characters with particularly strong politics, you as a character can be like “let me go on the thought experiment of what it would be like to look from that point of view”, and an entire side story arc starts, entirely optional, that leans into that

particular kind of political identity for a while, right down to the rules of the game changing, depending on what that identity is or means.

(Laughter)

HELEN

Wow, that's very interesting.

MADDY

Cool.

NATHAN

So, it's very much a game where you know there are, not being negative on this show, just stating a fact about how people talk about games. Sometimes, there'll be a game that releases from a triple A that will be very political in its subject matter, but the PR about it will say that the game is not political, because it being political would mean that people won't buy it.

HELEN

Yes. Yep! We're probably all thinking of a specific one.

MADDY

Yep. (Mockingly) Get the politics out of my video game!

NATHAN

Big list, big list.

(Laughter)

HELEN

Yeah.

NATHAN

So, to have a game that's kind of like, no this videogame is very specifically political, in fact it is all politics, see what all of them do. It's very funny to me and pretty cool, I guess.

(Laughter)

HELEN

Yeah. We are starting to come towards the end of the episode, so I would like to end us on just a little nice quick question, which I am sure we will have no difficulty in answering. Now we've talked about a lot of games so far, I would be interested to know if any of you, if either of you have a favourite indie game? Either one that like introduced you into it, or one that you can play over and over, or one that you think just is very, I don't know, special to you in any way.

MADDY

There was one that I played recently that I really enjoyed. On the one hand Undertale will always have a special place in my heart because it kind of introduced me to videogames in general as well as being an incredible story

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about empathy and all that kind of stuff, but the game that I played more recently that is also up there is Spiritfarer.

HELEN

Oooh, interesting game.

MADDY

Yeah, I liked it a lot, extremely sad, in a good way.

(Laughter)

And, right the art is so beautiful.

HELEN

Yes.

MADDY

It is incredibly beautiful, and I am terrible at platformers and the platforming elements are very forgiving...

(Laughter)

...so, I appreciate that a lot, and you also get to grow things like in Stardew so that is another plus, and just the dialogue is wonderful. There is a character that you come across who is a DM for a game...

HELEN

Yeah!

MADDY

...that you get to recruit, you get to find all their players and bring them together and get them to set up a wee game and it's very, very sweet and the character kind of talks in character as the DM and out of character...

(Laughter)

HELEN

Yes.

MADDY

...and is like "oh yeah like we need to get some snacks, you need to get..." and then they're like, "oh lo, I see the great hero returneth" kind of thing...

(Laughter)

...and it's just extremely charming and it's just like, I think that's my, one of my favourite NPCs ever.

HELEN

Yeah.

MADDY

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Just this random, this little kind of, I don't even know quite what kind of creature it is, is it like a basilisk or a dragon or a wyvern or something, it's just like a little lizard-y thing.

HELEN

You're absolutely right, it's a very charming, beautiful, wholesome game...about death.

(Laughter)

MADDY

Yeah. As someone who plays a necromancer in an actual play podcast, I enjoy talking and thinking about death.

(Laughter)

...and I can understand why people don't, but also, I think that it is important to be able to explore it in an open and healthy way and be able to kind of consider it from different angles when it is a difficult topic, so yeah, that's kind of one of my things.

HELEN

Yeah. I absolutely agree. What about you Nathan?

NATHAN

Oh sure, I mean echoing the sentiment of Undertale, Mettaton as a character has informed a lot of things about my life going forward since.

(Laughter)

But I think in terms of like my favourite indie game... I am not one for replaying games often, actually, I tend to play them and finish them and then not touch them again, because there's an infinite number of games to play.

HELEN

Yes.

NATHAN

Transistor, by Supergiant Games...

HELEN

Ah, yeah.

NATHAN

...is, I think, my favourite indie game because I have played it through on almost every platform it's been released on.

(Laughter)

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No, no, no, I've played it through about three different times. I really enjoy that it's kind of like, genre fusion of 1920s noir and cyber punk. I enjoy that it's kind of like post cyber punk, in that it kind of takes place in a space where it's post scarcity and everybody there is an artist living out their own dreams of being the kind of, creating the things that they want to see in the world, and then watching that world fall apart. The music is beautiful, I have that on vinyl actually...

(Laughter)

...and yeah, yeah it's also really well paced piece of storytelling. It's not very long, but it manages to tell you a tonne of things about the world and the tragic stories of the character that you are playing as in short order, but yeah Transistor has been a passive...

(Laughter)

...a passive energy across my work since I played it for the first time some years ago.

(Laughter)

HELEN

I've been trying to think about mine. Like you Maddy, Undertale and Deltarune and just Toby Fox's games absolutely have a really special place in my heart, because I think Undertale for me really introduced me to what games could be.

MADDY

Yeah.

HELEN

I was like, oh you can do, you can do this! It was very much the same feeling of like whenever I go to a poetry reading, and I'm like "oh right you can do that with a poem! Oh, that's very cool!" But actually, one that's left a really like... one that I think of is Flower.

NATHAN

Oh yeah, yeah.

HELEN

And it's by the people who made Journey, and Journey also I really, really loved. But Flower is a game that had, and maybe it was just the time that I played it... For those who don't know, so Flower is a game where, it's kind of a music game in some ways. You are a petal and you can fly, and you have to go and like touch all of the other flowers and like wake them up, and slowly you rejuvenate landscapes, and as you touch each petal they create different melodies and notes as you fly around and touch everything and they all like blossom into life, and you start off in like this sort of brown dry land, and by the time you finish it's all green and with trees and beautiful things everywhere and there's several different stages. And in the end you're in a city and you bring the whole city to life with plant life...

MADDY

Aw.

HELEN

...and it just made me want to cry so much!

(Laughter)

NATHAN

Awww.

HELEN

It's just a really beautiful game in every sense that I can think of, and yeah, yeah, I don't know if I'll play it again, because I kind of want that one time to like...

NATHAN

Sit in your memory forever.

HELEN

Yeah.

NATHAN

Yeah.

HELEN

But lovely, that one has had a big impact on me. Right, that definitely brings us to time. Oh my gosh this has been such a cool conversation. I have learnt so much and I have so many more games to look into now.

MADDY

Same, oh my goodness my list is expanding.

(Laughter)

NATHAN

Oh, actually before we go and do our goodbyes and stuff to highlight if there are people who are listening who want to find more about cool and weird indie games. For one, make an account on itch.io, it's like one of the best places to go get indie games just ever...

HELEN

Absolutely.

NATHAN

...and it takes a better cut of the money for the people who are releasing those games than Steam or the Epic Store does. If you want to find some YouTubers who cover lots of cool games, Errant Signal regularly talks about a wide variety of different indie games. He has a bit of a personal passion for first person shooters that echo the ones in the past like Doom, but covers the gamut of lots of different stuff; and then if you are into the kind of like deck-builder

Rusty Quill - Enthusiasm – Indie Video Games

roguelikes that we were talking about earlier, Retromation covers all sorts of games in that genre and adjacent, and has been kind of like my portal of finding games in that genre when I want to try a new one so yeah, wanted to shout those people out for people who were interested.

HELEN

Thank you. Yeah, while on the topic of thank yous, thank you listener for coming along with us, I hope you have had a good time, just like I hope we have also done? I had a good time.

MADDY

Oh, yes.

NATHAN

Amazing.

HELEN

But I cannot speak for you.

(Laughter)

MADDY

Had a lovely time.

HELEN

So, for now, I will see you in the next episode, but it's goodbye from me, goodbye, and it's goodbye from my lovely guests, do you both want to say goodbye?

NATHAN

(Nathan puts on a deep voice) Farewell, my darlings.

(Laughter)

MADDY

(Maddy puts on a spooky voice) Goodbye.

(Laughter)

HELEN

(Helen puts on a spooky voice) Goodbye.

(Laughter)

[Show Theme - Outro]

HELEN

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Rusty Quill - Enthusiasm – Indie Video Games

Marisa Ewing, Tessa Vroom, Jeffrey Nils Gardner and Catherine Rinella. Thanks for listening.

[Show Theme – Outro Ends]

Hosted and Directed by Helen Gould

Producer by Lowri Ann Davies

Executive Producers: Alexander J. Newall & April Sumner

Editing by Tessa Vroom & Jeffrey Nils Gardner

Music by Samuel D.F. Jones

Art by Anika Khan