



THE VIDEO GAMES GENERATIONS NEWSLETTER

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Issue #36 – January 11, 2026

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Loading Screen

Well, I've finally done it; two things, in fact.

First, if you follow me on social media or you're subscribed to this newsletter, you may have seen that I've decided to lift the self-imposed pressure of releasing a new VGGN issue weekly, and adopt a new schedule of "just whenever I finish one." I had considered ending the run entirely, but then thought why would I do that? I love writing about games. I'll just do it on a more relaxed, stress-free schedule.

Second, I finally stopped being lazy and wrote about all the games I played in 2025. It's sort of a journal of my year in gaming, and it concludes with a ranking of my top 10 *new* games (just the ones that released in 2025). I didn't play nearly every new release I wanted to, so it may seem like an odd list.

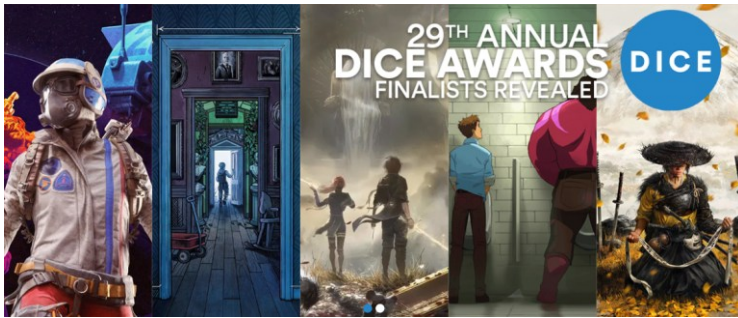


Call me crazy, but this doesn't seem like a full year, does it?

Recent Events

DICE Awards Nominees

What's interesting about DICE vs. TGA is that nominees for DICE awards come from people in the industry who *make* games. At The Game Awards (TGA), nominations come from people who professionally *review* games. These are completely different viewpoints, and so it isn't surprising that the nominations are also, for the most part, completely different.



Up for DICE Game of the Year are:

Arc Raiders

Blue Prince

Clair Obscur: Expedition 33

Dispatch

Ghost of Yōtei

Nominees in every category can be seen at the source link below (at VGC) or directly at the DICE website here:

https://www.interactive.org/awards/29th_dice_awards_finalists_93k3p1.asp

Clair Obscur (listed as *Chiaroscuro* in the VGC article) was nominated eight times in seven categories (two for “Outstanding Achievement in Character”).

It's not as flashy as TGA, and admittedly it's not an awards show I traditionally follow, but it is interesting to see what games get attention from the people actually making them.

Source:

<https://www.videogameschronicle.com/news/clair-obscur-ghost-of-yotei-arc-raiders-and-dispatch-top-dice-awards-nominees/>

Upcoming Xbox Developer Direct

This seems to be an ongoing beginning-of-the-year thing for Xbox. They'll be showcasing the long-in-development *Fable* reboot, which is probably the game I'm most interested in of the three announced titles.

I enjoyed *Forza Horizon 5* for a few hours but never reached a point where I felt I had “finished” the game. Maybe you're never supposed to. I'm not really a driving/racing game fan, but the rewind ability helped a lot. The upcoming *FH6* is lowest of the three on my personal hype meter.

Game Freak (makers of *Pokémon*) will be showing *Beast of Reincarnation*, which does interest me. I [wrote about it](#) briefly after it was announced at Xbox's SGF-aligned event back in June last year, and included a trailer link:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=L-qZiMPsNz0>

The trailer doesn't say so, but apparently it's coming to PlayStation 5 as well. I haven't heard anything about a physical release.



They tend to include a surprise fourth game at these Developer Direct presentations. This one will take place on Thursday, January 22nd at noon Central Time (convert to your own time zone as needed).

If there is a fourth game, will it be something smaller? Maybe a shadow-drop, like they've done in the past with *Hi-Fi Rush* (in 2023) and *Ninja Gaiden 2 Black* (at the 2025 Developer Direct)?

Source:

<https://www.videogameschronicle.com/news/xbox-developer-direct-coming-later-this-month-featuring-fable-forza-and-game-freak/>

My 2025 Wrap-Up

Unlike Geoff Keighley's Game Awards, my gaming year goes from January 1st through December 31st. In years past, before I started the VGGN, I would sometimes post my top 10 (or 20 or 30) to social media. I haven't done that in a couple years, and this year was a bit abnormal in that I played fewer new games and fewer games in general *because* I spent a lot of time writing here instead.

As a result, it feels premature to announce my favorites of 2025.

That said, I'm going to do it anyway.

Maybe once I get through several I missed from this year (the new *Doom*, *The Outer Worlds 2*, *Cronos*, *Dispatch*, *The Alters*, a few others) I can do a feature on my revised 2025 favorites. We'll see.

First, though, I thought it would be fun to recap my entire year of gaming. This includes older stuff I played (retro games, my backlog, and so forth). The bright side of playing fewer games, I suppose, is that I have fewer games to write about. Still, the list is 52 games long and doesn't even include a run of shovelware I tried out when writing about it for [issue #27](#).

Huh. That's exactly a one game per week average. I wonder what it was in prior years?

January

F.E.A.R. Files – Extraction Point

Platform: Xbox 360 (disc) on Xbox Series X

Played: 01/01/2025 – 01/01/2025

Mini-Review: [Issue #25 page 22](#)

As I was nearing the end my holiday vacation, I decided to play through the entire *F.E.A.R.* series, which had been on my backlog for as long as the games had existed. Right at the end of 2024, I had played the original *F.E.A.R.*

So, on New Years Day, I played through the entirety of the first stand-alone expansion. Thankfully, the whole series is backwards compatible on Xbox One and Series X. I had to break out my disc for this (and the next one), but it worked like a charm.



F.E.A.R. Files – Perseus Mandate

Platform: Xbox 360 (disc) on Xbox Series X

Played: 01/01/2025 – 01/04/2025

Mini-Review: [Issue #25 page 23](#)

This is the second of those two *F.E.A.R.* expansions. My time off from work ended, so it took me a couple extra nights to finish it.



F.E.A.R. 2 – Project Origin

Platform: Xbox 360 (digital) on Xbox Series X

Played: 01/04/2025 – 01/07/2025

Mini-Review: [Issue #25 page 24](#)

My *F.E.A.R.* series playthrough continued. In my mini-review, I said it loses a little of the charm of the more quirky first game, but all in all and in hindsight, it might be the best one.



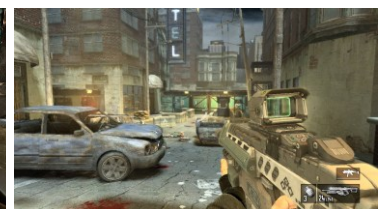
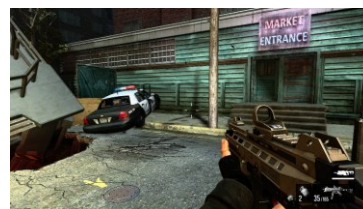
F.E.A.R. 3

Platform: Xbox 360 (digital) on Xbox Series X

Played: 01/07/2025 – 01/11/2025

Mini-Review: [Issue #25 page 25](#)

And then I wrapped up the series with *F3AR*.



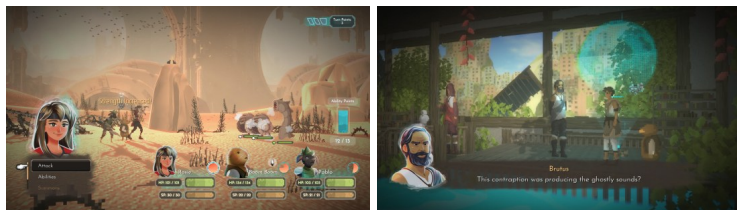
Beyond Galaxyland

Platform: PS5 (digital)

Played: 01/02/2025 – 01/18/2025

Mini-Review: [Later in this issue!](#)

I started on this while still working my way through the *F.E.A.R.* series, but didn't really invest much time until afterwards. I really enjoyed this indie turn-based RPG gem.



Saints Row 2

Platform: Xbox 360 (digital) on Xbox Series X

Played: 01/19/2025 – 01/25/2025

Mini-Review: [Issue #28 page 21](#)

Next up, I was in the mood for the kind of wacky gangster open world drama that only *Saints Row* can deliver, and this was only one of two games in the series I hadn't yet played.



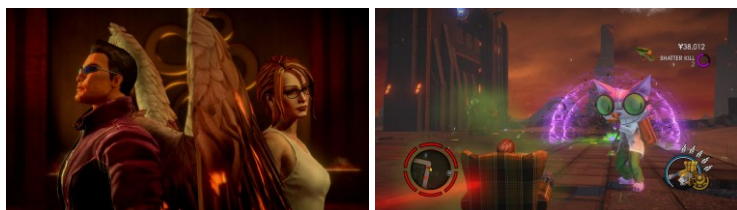
Saints Row – Gat out of Hell

Platform: PlayStation 4 (digital) on PlayStation 5

Played: 01/25/2025 – 01/29/2025

Mini-Review: [Issue #28 page 22](#)

I played through *Gat out of Hell* to complete the whole series. This game kind of made me miss Volition's follow-up, *Agents of Mayhem*, which I liked way more than most people did.



Dustborn

Platform: PlayStation 5 (digital)

Played: 01/29/2025 – 02/02/2025

Mini-Review: [Issue #8 page 10](#)

I played this one next, for three reasons.

One, I enjoyed other games Ragnar Tørnquist has been involved in, like *Dreamfall*, *The Longest Journey*, and *Draugen*.

Two, it looked super cool to me.

Three, the anti-woke chuds had latched onto it as if it was some huge AAA game they desperately needed to see fail, and on social media, they'd crawl out of the woodwork like termites at the mere mention of the game.

I expected to like it out of spite even if it didn't resonate with me, but I ended up genuinely enjoying it. I feel bad that the developers had to see all that unfounded, ridiculous, vitriolic hate hurled at them during the game's first few months. Is it woke? Absolutely, and that was the point. It was well worth playing.



February

Silent Hill 2 (Remake)

Platform: PlayStation 5 (disc)

Played: 02/03/2025 – 02/11/2025

Mini-Review: [Issue #23 page 25](#)

One of the best 2024 releases I didn't get to until 2025 was Bloober Team's remake of *Silent Hill 2* – a game I'd already played years ago on PlayStation 2 but felt I was ready to go through the nightmare once more. It's great.



Shin Megami Tensei - Devil Summoner - Raidou Kuzunoha vs. The Soulless Army

Platform: PlayStation 2 (digital) on PlayStation 3

Played: 02/11/2025 - 02/22/2025

Mini-Review: [Issue #24 page 19](#)

As (bad) luck would have it, a remaster of this game was released not long after I played it. Well, I suppose the silver lining is that I'd have had to pay for it, whereas I already owned the original. For convenience, I went with the digital version on PS3.

Tip: the PSN store is still up and running on PlayStation 3, with a variety of PS2 games for around \$10 each (and even more PS1 games for even cheaper).



Like a Dragon - Pirate Yakuza in Hawaii

Platform: PlayStation 5 Pro (disc)

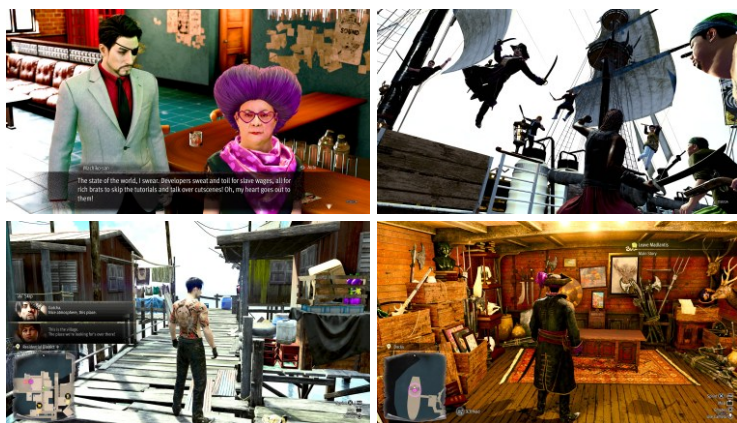
Played: 02/22/2025 - 03/05/2025

Mini-Review: [Issue #26 page 17](#)

My first "Yakazu" game was *Judgment* back in 2000, and for the most part, I haven't missed a major series entry since then. I wanted to play through the earlier ones, but (so far) I've only made it through *Zero* and *Kiwami 1*.

Goro Majima's solo outing in *Pirate Yakuza* was a fun time. The ship combat was a nice one-off addition to the series as well.

This was the first new game of 2025 I played.



March

Fantasy Zone & Fantasy Zone II

Platform: Sega Master System inside *Pirate Yakuza*

Played: 03/02/2025 - 03/02/2025

Mini-Review: I didn't write one

The *Yakuza* (*Like a Dragon*) games are chock-full of mini-games. Depending on which game (although they often include most of these), there are various dice, card, and mahjong games, darts, karaoke, billiards, batting cages, and various Sega arcade games.

Each one usually has one or two bigger, original mini-games as well, like a real estate management sim, an island resort sim, a Pokémon-style battling game, a strange take on Pokémon Snap, slot car racing, a hostess club management sim, and others.

Some also have an in-game Sega Master System for which you can collect and play a few games emulated right there in-game for you. Such was the case with the *Fantasy Zone* games. Even with save states and rewinding, I couldn't beat the first one, but I'm proud of myself (even though that's cheating) for being able to finish *Fantasy Zone II*. It was super fun.

Split Fiction

Platform: PlayStation 5 Pro (disc)

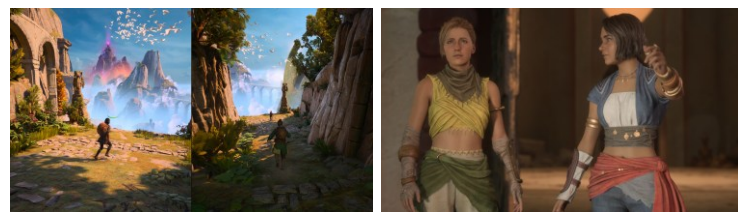
Played: 03/06/2025 - 03/08/2025

Mini-Review: [Issue #9 page 17](#)

The inventive ways Hazelight uses split-screen co-op never ceases to amaze me.

I played through this with my son, and we enjoyed it enough to go back through certain sections to get the platinum trophy. There were a few tricky parts, but totally worth it.

We're both wondering what they'll do next.



Folklore

Platform: PlayStation 3 (disc)

Played: 03/06/2025 – 03/23/2025

Mini-Review: [Issue #3 page 13](#)

This is one from my enormous backlog (and from my collection) that I finally got around to playing. There's a monster catching aspect to it that I really enjoyed. It should have spawned a series, instead of being just a single game forever trapped on the PS3.



Assassin's Creed – Shadows

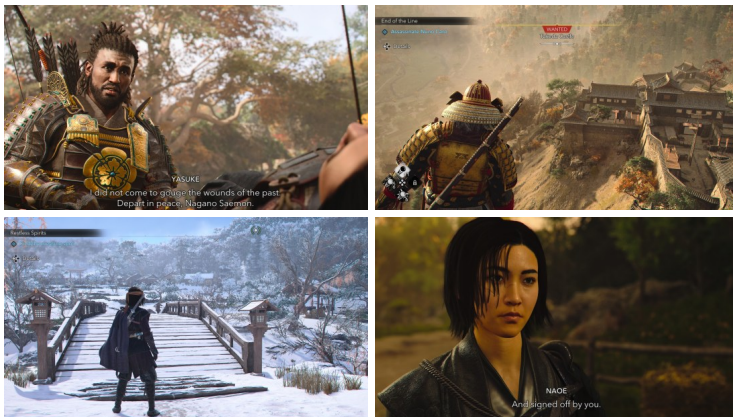
Platform: PlayStation 5 Pro (disc)

Played: 03/23/2025 – 04/12/2025

Mini-Review: **Later in this issue!**

Sure, it's a different story in a different period of time from very different developers, but this game is the main reason why I wasn't hyped for *Ghost of Yōtei* when it released a few months later. I really enjoyed *AC Shadows* but felt it perfectly scratched any itch I might have had for an action game set in Japan's history.

The “we don't want modern day Animus stuff” part of the game's fanbase has, sadly, won, if judging by the entire lack of it in *Shadows*.



April

Blue Prince

Platform: PlayStation 5 Pro (digital)

Played: 04/12/2025 – 04/13/2025

Mini-Review: [Issue #4 page 11](#)

When my son plays a game he really enjoys, I don't hear the end of it until I stop what I'm doing and play it myself. He's usually right, but at the same time, he can't help giving me unprompted tips that are in many ways a bit too spoilery.

Blue Prince is a roguelike in the form of a puzzle game where you draw cards to use in constructing the layout of a house as you go along. There are more secrets and surprises than I found during my two-day marathon through the game, but I feel like I got as much from the experience as I needed to.



Atomfall

Platform: PlayStation 5 Pro (disc)

Played: 04/13/2025 – 04/20/2025

Mini-Review: [Issue #21 page 17](#)

It looks like *Fallout*, but no, it's its own thing.



Eternal Threads

Platform: PlayStation 5 Pro (digital)

Played: 04/21/2025 – 04/23/2025

Mini-Review: [Issue #7 page 18](#)

Check out my mini-review for my thoughts on this inventive, cleverly-crafted narrative puzzle game.



Fear of BIOSEC

Platform: PlayStation 5 Pro (digital)

Played: 04/23/2025 – 04/23/2025

Mini-Review: [Issue #25 page 33](#)

Before you know the codes and what you're supposed to do, this low-budget horror game takes about an hour to finish. After that, you can speed run it in just a couple minutes. I did that multiple times, hoping against hope that the last trophy in the game would finally pop. It didn't. It seems to be permanently glitched, and an update to fix it now seems unlikely.



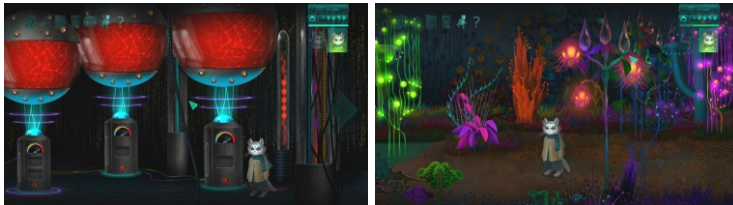
Cat's Request

Platform: PlayStation 5 Pro (digital)

Played: 04/23/2025 – 04/24/2025

Mini-Review: [Issue #1 page 5](#)

As point-and-click adventure games go, this one about an anthropomorphic cat is on the weirder and easier side. It's pretty good.



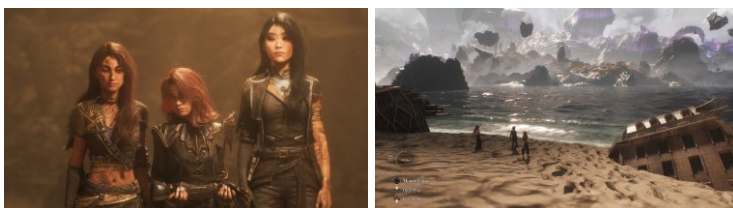
Clair Obscur – Expedition 33

Platform: PlayStation 5 Pro (disc)

Played: 04/24/2025 – 05/03/2025

Mini-Review: [Issue #32 page 13](#)

I'm going to spoil a feature later in this issue by saying that *Expedition 33* is my game of the year. My GOTY is often something different and original that nobody else but me seems to love (*Stellar Blade* in 2024, *Atomic Heart* in 2023) but everybody seems to love this one.



May

The Hundred Line – Last Defense Academy

Platform: Switch (cartridge)

Played: 05/05/2025 – 06/08/2025

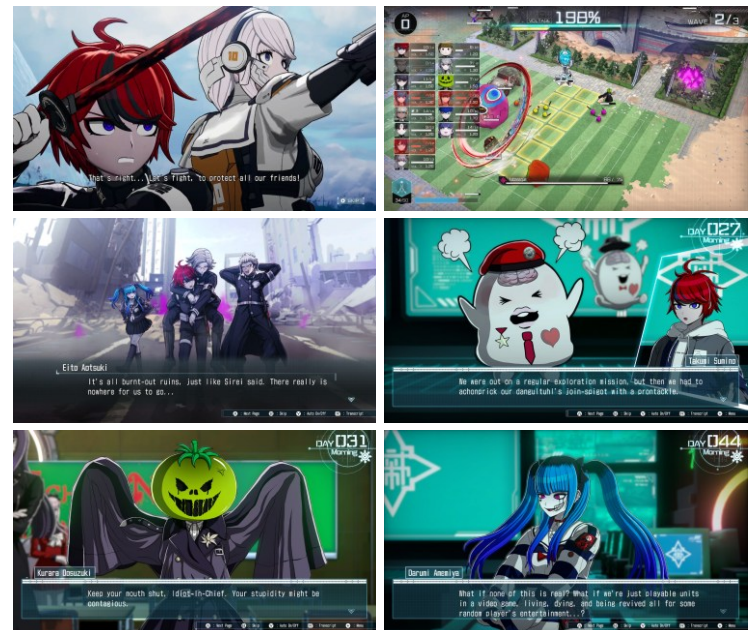
Mini-Review: [Issue #7 page 15](#)

This is the point where my free time shifted from pure gaming to starting the VGGN. That, and the fact that I spent 155 hours with this game (and still only saw 66 of the 100 different endings) means this was the only game I played in May (aside from finishing *Expedition 33* just prior to it).

What a game, though. Not enough people played it. I haven't seen it nominated for *any* awards *anywhere*, but it's really something special. After a linear playthrough establishes all the characters and the prime timeline, it gets wild with branching paths and time travel that lets you explore dozens of different routes and see things play out in wildly different ways (and in wildly different literary genres).

There's also a turn-based tactical combat element to the game, which the developers allow you to skip later once you've completed certain battles on a different timeline.

As a fan of *Danganronpa*, I expected to like it a lot, but it exceeded every expectation I had.



June

MindsEye

Platform: PlayStation 5 Pro (disc)

Played: 06/10/2025 – 06/15/2025

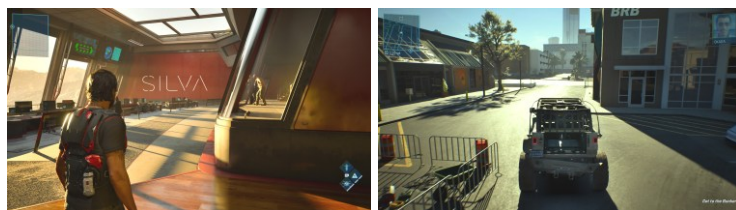
Mini-Review: [Issue #17 page 12](#)

Someday, I want to write an article exploring the reasons (if I can identify them) why I tend to enjoy games other people don't. It could just be that I've been gaming almost my entire life (and I'm 54 now) and never developed whatever gamer quirk makes people balk at a game that doesn't run at 60 FPS.

I don't think modern gamers realize just how good they have it, but I digress.

In the case of *MindsEye*, the discourse around it was so vile and exaggerated that it makes me wonder if we even played the same game. People were criticizing it for reasons ranging from somewhat justified to completely unhinged, criticizing an empty open world when *it's not even an open world game* (although, to be fair, it looks like one).

The game I played was fun, ran fine, and wasn't a broken mess. I don't yet know if it'll make my top 10, but if not, it isn't because of any particular failing on the game's part. It's because this was a fantastic year for games.



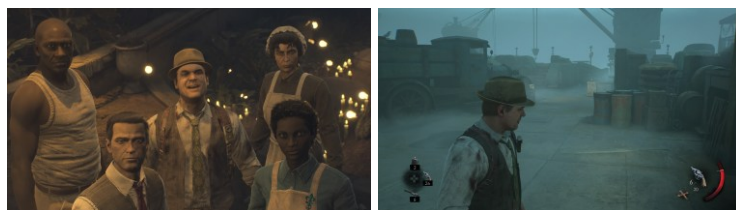
Alone in the Dark (2024)

Platform: PlayStation 5 Pro (digital)

Played: 06/15/2025 – 06/26/2025

Mini-Review: [Issue #11 page 23](#)

David Harbour and Jodie Comer in a reinvention of the horror classic. I don't have strong feelings about this one. It was good. It was fun enough.



Death Stranding 2 – On the Beach

Platform: PlayStation 5 Pro (disc)

Played: 06/26/2025 – 07/09/2025

Mini-Review: [Issue #11 page 21](#)

I do have strong feelings about this one. It was fantastic. I'll spoil my top 10 again and say this is my second favorite game of the year.



July

South of Midnight

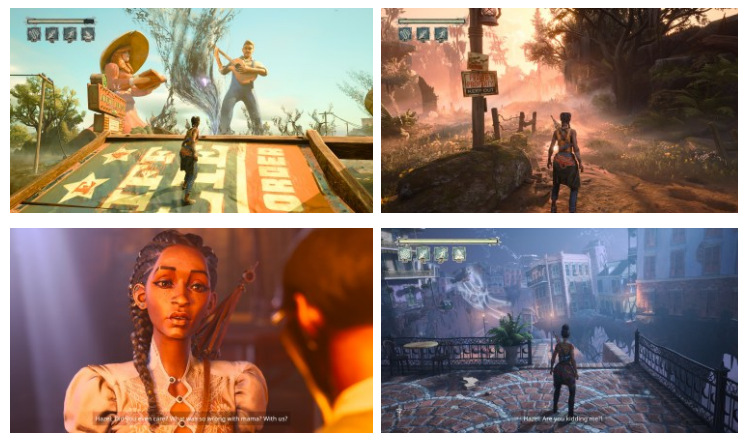
Platform: Xbox Series X (digital) on GamePass

Played: 07/10/2025 – 08/02/2025

Mini-Review: [Issue #16 page 14](#)

At some point a few years ago, I bought eight individual one-month Xbox GamePass codes while they were on sale. I redeemed the fifth one intending to binge several games on the service, but only managed to get through this one before the month expired.

After more time to reflect on this game, I think I really liked it, but I didn't love it. I think that's mainly due to combat I just never did master. Otherwise, everything about it was excellent.



Night Trap – 25th Anniversary Edition

Platform: PlayStation 5 Pro (digital)

Played: 07/12/2025 – 07/12/2025

Mini-Review: [Issue #11 page 19](#)

This is one of those games that I *knew* has a reputation for not being very good, but it was also a cultural moment in time when it first released, that I always want to play it anyway. I chose then, because I was working on the “actors in video games” issue of VGGN.

I *wasn't* able to finish it. I probably could have with a guide, but it wasn't very fun and the FMV gimmick alone wasn't enough to keep me invested to keep starting over to figure it out myself. Still, I played enough to write a mini-review, which I usually don't do when I drop out of a game early.

**Viewfinder**

Platform: PlayStation 5 Pro (digital)

Played: 07/18/2025 – 07/19/2025

Mini-Review: [Issue #12 page 27](#)

This one came at a time over the summer when I was playing games that I wanted to tie into the theme of the next issue of VGGN. In this case, it was first-person puzzle games.

It was already on my backlog. I *had* wanted to play it, but it's another where my son beat me to it and insisted I drop everything to play it.

**August****Baobabs Mausoleum – Episode 3**

Platform: PlayStation 5 Pro (digital)

Played: 08/03/2025 – 08/03/2025

Mini-Review: [Issue #14 page 22](#)

For those following along with my begin and end dates for each game, it may seem weird that I finished *Viewfinder* on July 19th, and my next game wasn't started until August 3rd.

That's because I had been playing *South of Midnight* while taking a couple short breaks for those other games. I started the final *Baobabs Mausoleum* episode after I finished *South of Midnight*, and again, it was because I intended to write a VGGN issue about the weirdest games I'd ever played.

**Choo-Choo Charles**

Platform: PlayStation 5 Pro (disc)

Played: 08/03/2025 – 08/04/2025

Mini-Review: [Issue #23 page 34](#)

High concept horror about an evil spider train engine. It's not GOTY material, but I liked it.

**Between Horizons**

Platform: PlayStation 5 Pro (digital)

Played: 08/04/2025 – 08/09/2025

Mini-Review: [Issue #20 page 22](#)

I was impressed by this indie gem that plays out like a detective game aboard a colony ship on a hundred-year journey through space.



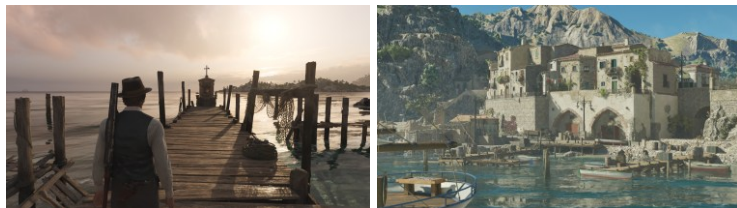
Mafia – The Old Country

Platform: PlayStation 5 Pro (disc)

Played: 08/09/2025 – 08/17/2025

Mini-Review: [Issue #28 page 24](#)

As great as this game is, it just barely misses my top 10 for the year. The story is engaging, the characters and voice acting are top notch, and Italy looks great on PS5 Pro.



Reynatis

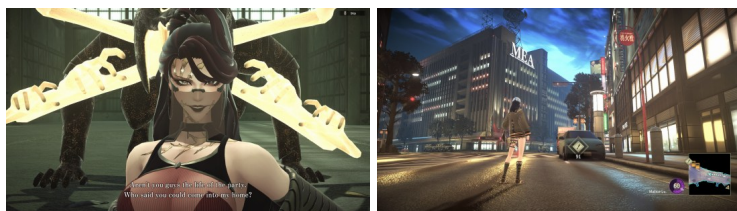
Platform: PlayStation 5 Pro (disc)

Played: 08/17/2025 – 08/31/2025

Mini-Review: **Later in this issue!**

The shielded enemies in this game made me want to write a VGGN feature about the most frustrating and annoying enemies in video games. Those birds from the original *Ninja Gaiden* on NES would also qualify, as would swarms of bats in almost any game.

I played *Reynatis* because I was in the mood for something anime-inspired. I liked it a lot.



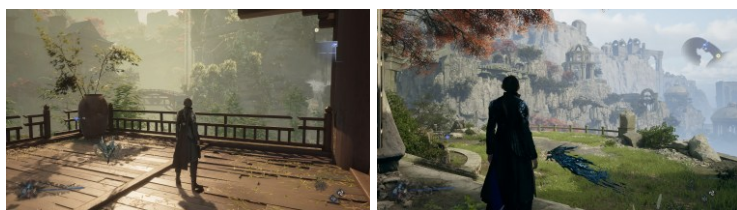
Lost Soul Aside

Platform: PlayStation 5 Pro (disc)

Played: 08/31/2025 – 09/03/2025

Mini-Review: **Later in this issue!**

For most people, this game came and went. For me, I'd nominate it as one of the most underrated games of the year. It's superb in almost every way and is easily in my top five.



September

Hell Is Us

Platform: PlayStation 5 Pro (disc)

Played: 09/04/2025 – 09/17/2025

Mini-Review: **Later in this issue!**

I'd also nominate *Hell Is Us* as one of the most underrated games of the year. My mini-review appears later in this issue. It's a great game.



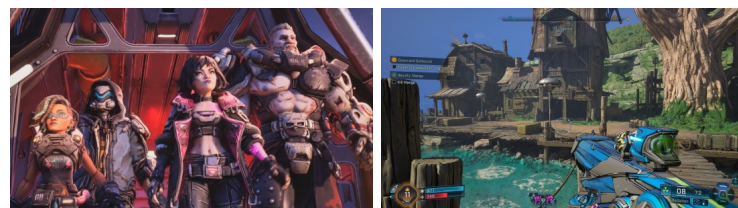
Borderlands 4

Platform: PlayStation 5 Pro (disc)

Played: 09/17/2025 – 11/17/2025

Mini-Review: **Later in this issue!**

Yes, it was two months after I started the newest *Borderlands* before I finished it. I ended up playing a spate of other games for newsletter topics (horror games and shovelware – two different topics). Plus, it was a really long game. Does it make my top 10?



Zombies Overloaded

Platform: PlayStation 5 Pro (digital)

Played: 09/28/2025 – 09/28/2025

Mini-Review: [Issue #22 page 11](#)

I got an early start on spooky month with this repetitive top-down single-screen twin stick zombie shooter. This is a game that released in 2025, but I consider it more of a short novelty arcade game than anything else.



October

Creeping Terror

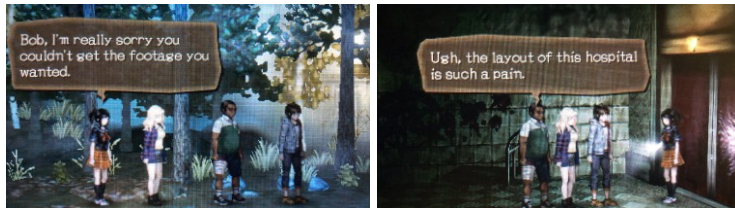
Platform: Nintendo 3DS (digital)

Played: 10/02/2025 – 10/05/2025

Mini-Review: [Issue #23 page 40](#)

I spent two nights and a weekend doing something I usually don't these days – playing a game on my Nintendo 3DS. Part of that is because the older I get, the worse my vision gets with small things close-up.

My optometrist said that's because our eyes start to lose their ability to focus on close-up things as we get older, but I digress. I put on my glasses (which I only use for reading and when I'm working, since I stare at screens all day) and played through this side-scrolling survival horror game.



Lady in a Leotard with a Gun

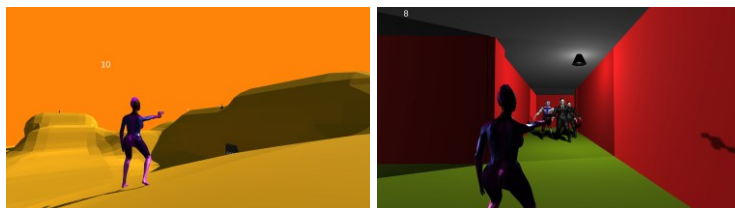
Platform: PlayStation 4 (digital) on PlayStation 5 Pro

Played: 10/31/2025 – 10/31/2025

Mini-Review: [Issue #27 page 14](#)

On Halloween, I didn't even play a spooky game. I had just wrapped up four back to back issues of VGGN about horror games, and I picked this next because I intended to write about shovelware in an upcoming issue.

While *LiaLwaG* (huh... maybe we don't need to make an acronym out of *everything*) may not be a great game, it was at least *fun*, and I wouldn't call it shovelware. Some might disagree, but shovel doesn't even try. This is clearly a real game with thought put into it, and enjoyable for what it is.



November

Multigun

Platform: PlayStation 4 (digital) on PlayStation 5 Pro

Played: 11/01/2025 – 11/02/2025

Mini-Review: [Issue #27 page 13](#)

I didn't realize it until now, but *Multigun* was a new release in 2025 as well. It's another I played because I was looking for shovelware, but I was pleasantly surprised to find a highly flawed but ambitious first-person shooter.

We're already into November on this list, and you may have noticed just two smaller games listed under October. That's because I was still playing *Borderlands 4*, which I didn't finish until November 17th.

There are also quite a few other actual shovelware games I played in early November, but I didn't even bother adding those to my game play log. You can read about them all in [issue #27](#), where the mini-review for *Multigun* also appears.



Spectrewoods

Platform: PlayStation 4 (digital) on PlayStation 5 Pro

Played: 11/02/2025 – 11/02/2025

Mini-Review: [Issue #27 page 12](#)

The third of the three from The Voices Games that I mini-reviewed is a super-short game with a minimalistic art style and an odd story.



Silent Hill f

Platform: PlayStation 5 Pro (disc)

Played: 11/18/2025 – 11/30/2025

Mini-Review: [Issue #32 page 14](#)

I was skeptical of moving *Silent Hill* into a Japanese setting (despite the original series coming from Konami, a Japanese company) because to me, sleepy creepy small town America has always been integral to it.

For many people, it worked. The story is heralded as one of the best of the year. It takes more than one playthrough to see it all, but for fans, it was easily worth the effort.

I wanted to like it more than I did. I even did a second playthrough, but I messed up and failed to read some important information at the end of my first one that explains what to do to even get a second ending. I did what's required for getting the special weapon, and I even purified it (if you don't, there's yet another unique ending), but I missed one key thing you're *not* supposed to do, and ended up playing all the way through only see very minor scene variations and the same ending.



Shadowgate 64 – Trials of the Four Towers

Platform: Nintendo 64 (cartridge) on Analogue 3D

Played: 11/23/2025 – 11/25/2025

Mini-Review: [Issue #31 page 15](#)

My long-awaited Analogue 3D arrived at the start of my Thanksgiving holiday week off work, and I've been obsessed with N64 games ever since. Expect to see many more N64 game reviews.



Star Wars – Shadows of the Empire

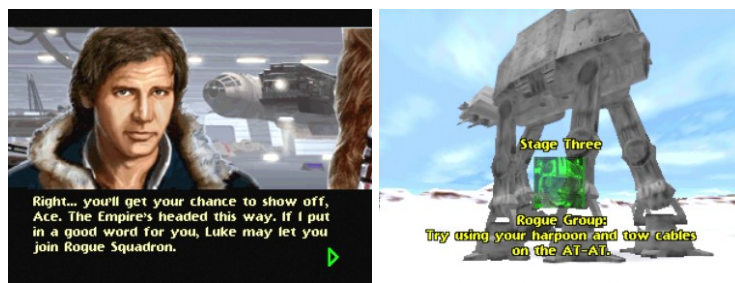
Platform: Nintendo 64 (cartridge) on Analogue 3D

Played: 11/26/2025 – 11/26/2025

Mini-Review: [Issue #31 page 16](#)

I've warmed up to *Shadows of the Empire* more in the weeks after I played it. I do think playing on easy mode was the right decision, and as I look back on it, it was a lot of fun with plenty of variety and some very memorable missions. I ended my mini-review by positing that it may not have been worth playing in 2025, and while that's probably true for most people, I think for me, maybe it was worth it.

I did one day-long playthrough of this game.



40 Winks

Platform: Nintendo 64 (cartridge) on Analogue 3D

Played: 11/27/2025 – 12/06/2025

Mini-Review: [On X/Twitter](#)

Even though I'm including my mini-reviews for the few games I played in 2025 that I hadn't already used in a prior VGGN issue, I'm going to hang onto *40 Winks* until I do a second N64 tribute issue. I'd like to play a few more before I get back to my 2025 (and earlier) backlog, and before my anticipated 2026 games start coming out. The N64 list is long, though.

Still, you can check out Threads, Twitter, or BlueSky for my mini-review of this game. It's a pretty impressive platformer/adventure that was finally completed after crowdfunding.



December

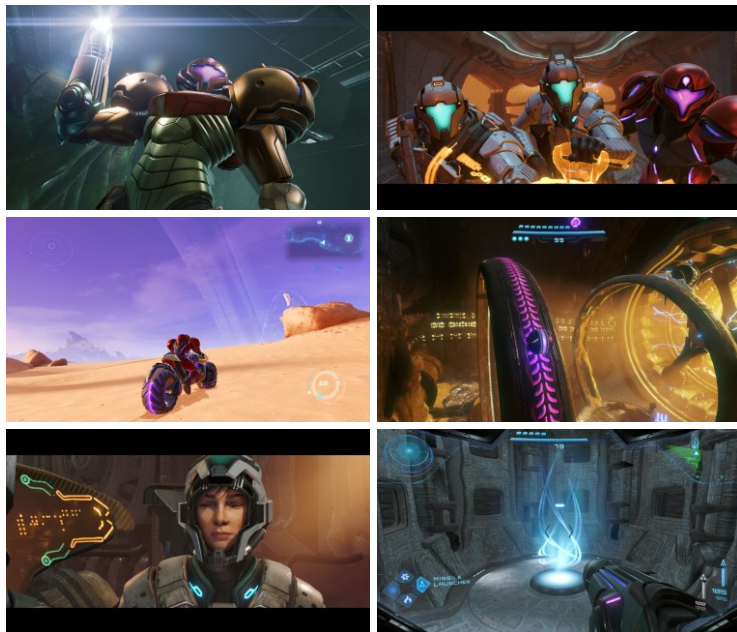
Metroid Prime 4 – Beyond

Platform: Nintendo Switch

Played: 12/07/2025 – 12/20/2025

Mini-Review: [Issue #34 page 12](#)

The game I was most looking forward to in 2025 didn't have a release date until much later in the year, and until then, I honestly didn't believe it was going to happen.



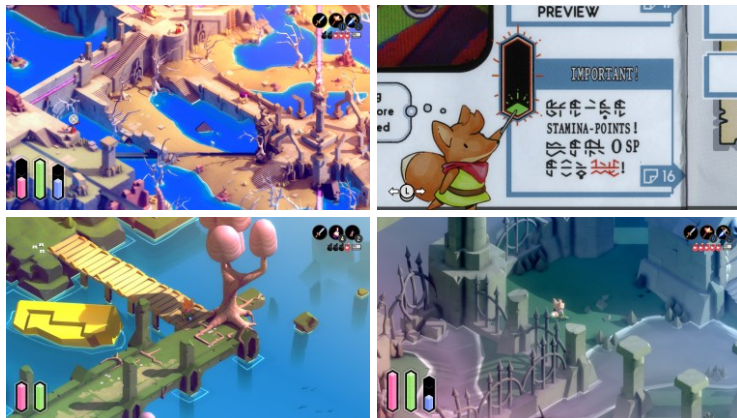
Tunic

Platform: PlayStation 5 Pro (digital)

Played: 12/20/2025 – 12/22/2025

Mini-Review: [Later in this issue!](#)

I had wanted to play *Tunic* for a long time, and had even started it once, but wasn't in the mood at the time. After my son played it (and loved it), it was another situation where he wouldn't let up until I played it too. It's great.



Conker – Live & Reloaded

Platform: Original Xbox (digital) on Xbox Series X

Played: 12/22/2025 – 12/25/2025

Mini-Review: [Later in this issue!](#)

I had originally intended to play the N64 version of *Conker's Bad Fur Day*. It's been in my collection for a long time, since I bought it brand new when it first released.

Plan B was to play the version in *Rare Replay*, but with inverted camera controls and no way to change it, I decided against that as well.

Despite Rare censoring certain parts of the game for *Live & Reloaded*, I feel like this was the right choice. Not only are the visuals much improved over the original, but it's worth it for the more modern control scheme.

I ended up absolutely *loving* this game. I expected it to just be one I'd finally get off my backlog and maybe be a bit let down, but no. The game is fantastic, and it holds up well.

There may be some upscaling and auto-HDR going in with Xbox backwards compatibility.



How 2 Escape

Platform: PlayStation 5 Pro (digital) + Mobile App

Played: 12/25/2025 – 12/31/2025

Mini-Review: [On X/Twitter](#)

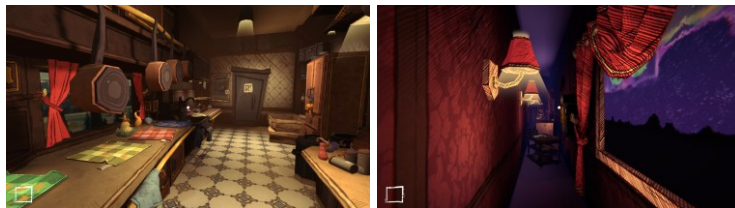
Two or three times each year, I have a week or two of vacation at the same time my kids are out of school on a break. Sometimes, when my son is here (rather than at his mom's) and he's between games, he gets an urge for us to play something co-op and puzzley.

(MS Word doesn't think puzzley is a real word, but I formally disagree.)

This one is a six-level escape room game where one player is on the console (or PC) controlling a character trapped on a train, and the other uses a mobile phone app, emulating the character's brother in the game who is helping remotely.

You're not supposed to look at each other's screen, because the game is built around describing items and situations, finding codes, and helping each other as the two characters in the story would.

We totally did, though, and it can still be a bit of a challenge even so, just solving the puzzles.



Hybrid Heaven

Platform: Nintendo 64 (cartridge) on Analogue 3D

Played: 12/25/2025 – 12/30/2025

Mini-Review: [On X/Twitter](#)

My N64 collection already had a few complete boxed games I had originally purchased when they were new, but I started supplementing it with loose cartridges off eBay. That's how I came across *Hybrid Heaven*, a game I hadn't even heard of before looking it up on some guy's list of [the 100 best N64 games](#).

This one took me by surprise. As a game from Konami and with surface-level similarities to *Metal Gear Solid*, I was expecting, well, that.

Instead, combat plays out like a turn-based RPG with active-time elements and real-time positional movement, where special moves mix kickboxing and professional wrestling.

I really dug this game. (Dug – do people still say that? I guess it doesn't really matter.) It's by no means the masterpiece that Kojima's *Metal Gear Solid* was, and it even feels like Konami was just throwing Nintendo a bone after *MGS* came out on PS1 the prior year, but still, it's a good game on its own merits, and I liked it.

I'm holding my mini-review of *Hybrid Heaven* for a second N64-focused VGGN issue, but you can read it on Threads, BlueSky, or X/Twitter right now.



Mega Man 64

Platform: Nintendo 64 (cartridge) on Analogue 3D

Played: 12/30/2025 – 01/01/2026

Mini-Review: [On X/Twitter](#)

The mega-fans are right: the long-dead *Mega Man Legends* series definitely deserves to be revived.



Escape Academy

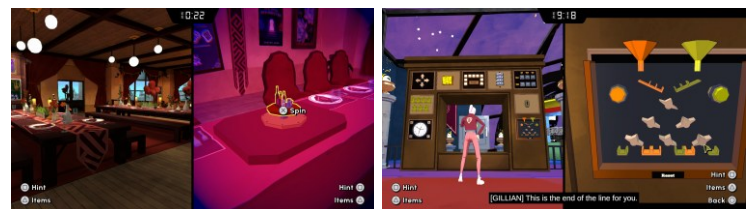
Platform: PlayStation 5 Pro (digital)

Played: 12/31/2025 – 01/02/2026

Mini-Review: [On X/Twitter](#)

It technically counts for 2025 since my son and I started it on New Years Eve. It's a fun co-op series of escape rooms with a story, and in a rare twist, it isn't built around not seeing each other's screen.

It can also be played entirely alone, but having a second person makes it easier to not get stuck.



UGGN Top 10 of 2025

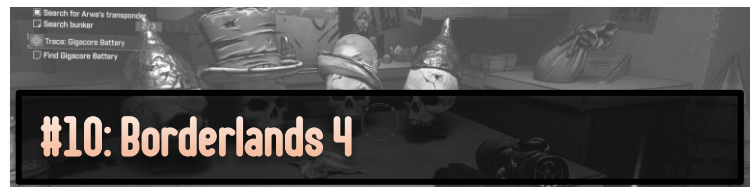


If I had played every new release I wanted to, my top 10 might look vastly different. Some of these might have missed the mark for me, but others might have risen to the top. In fact, there are more games I *didn't* play (among the ones I wanted to) than ones I did. Those are games like *Kingdom Come Deliverance II*, *The Alters* (which I may get to soon), *Cronos: The New Dawn*, *Hotel Barcelona* (which I know is supposed to be mediocre, but I really want to see what Swery65 and Suda51 cooked up together), *Keeper* (I should have made a point to play this), *Doom: The Dark Ages*, *Avowed*, *Ninja Gaiden 4*, and *The Outer Worlds 2*.

Add a dozen or more to that which aren't even coming readily to mind, and it's clear I don't have a full picture of what 2025 offered even for my own gaming tastes.

On the plus side, this makes it easier to rank my top 10. Of the 52 games I played (52 if you count both *Fantasy Zone* games as one, and if you don't count all the shovelware I tried out just for that one newsletter issue), only 20 of them were games that released in 2025. Of those, at least three were small games I played without any expectation of them being GOTY contenders to begin with.

Here they are, in reverse order from my #10 to my #1 favorite game of the year.



#10: Borderlands 4



#9: Assassin's Creed - Shadows



#8: Metroid Prime 4 - Beyond



#7: Atomfall



#6: Like a Dragon - Pirate Yakuza in Hawaii



#5: The Hundred Line - Last Defense Academy



#4: Lost Soul Aside



#3: Hell Is Us



#2: Death Stranding 2 - On the Beach



#1: Clair Obscur - Expedition 33

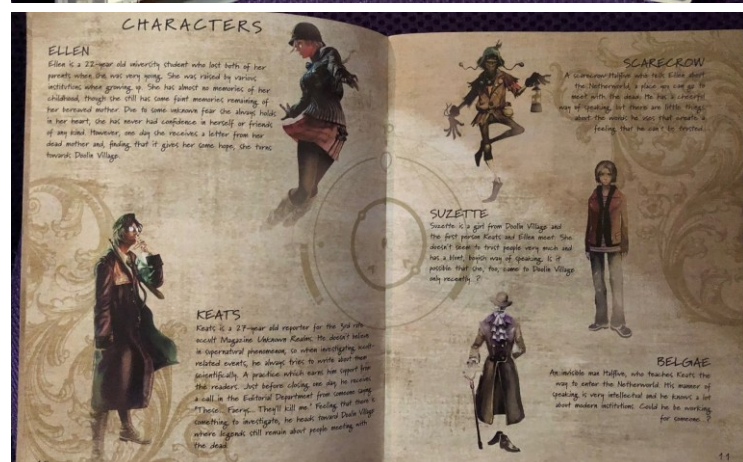
Collection Inspection - Backlog Gaming

These are a few of the older games in my collection that I managed to play in 2025. Some of them were also available digitally, which I bought for convenience. The only two actually needed my disc for were the *F.E.A.R. Files* games (both are on the same disc) and the PS3 game *Folklore*.

Folklore

Platform: PlayStation 3 / **Edition:** Standard

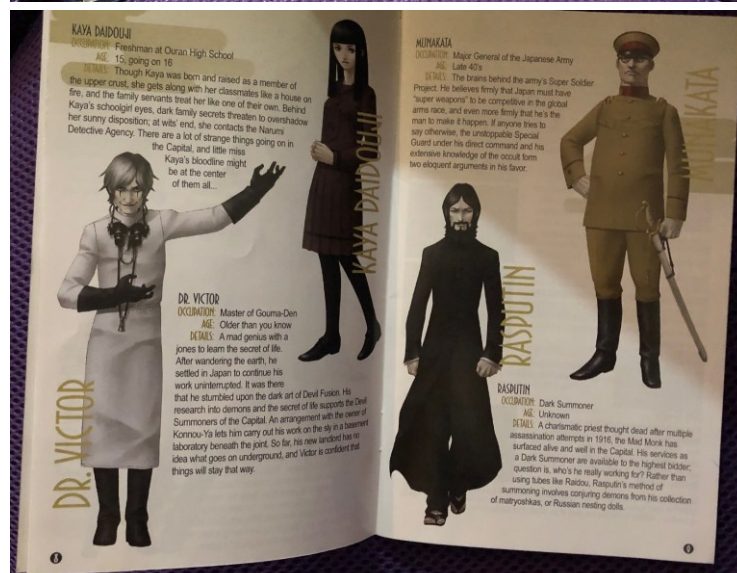
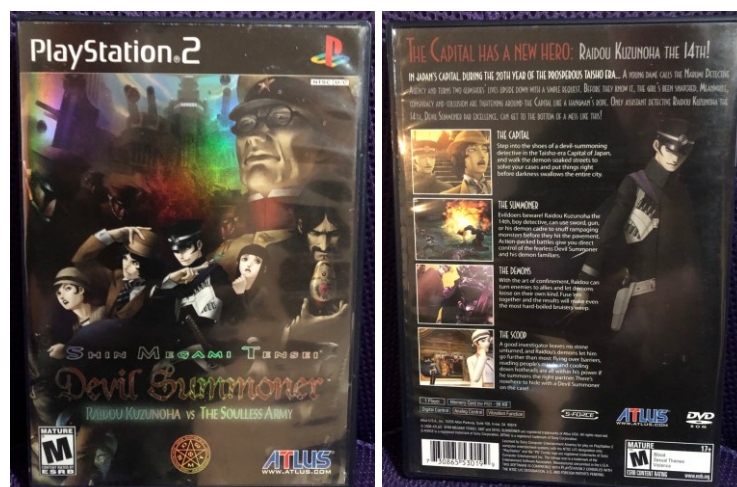
Comments: You have to love that *Spiderman* font they used for the PlayStation 3 branding at first.



Shin Megami Tensei - Devil Summoner - Raidou Kuzunoha vs. The Soulless Army

Platform: PlayStation 3 / **Edition:** Standard

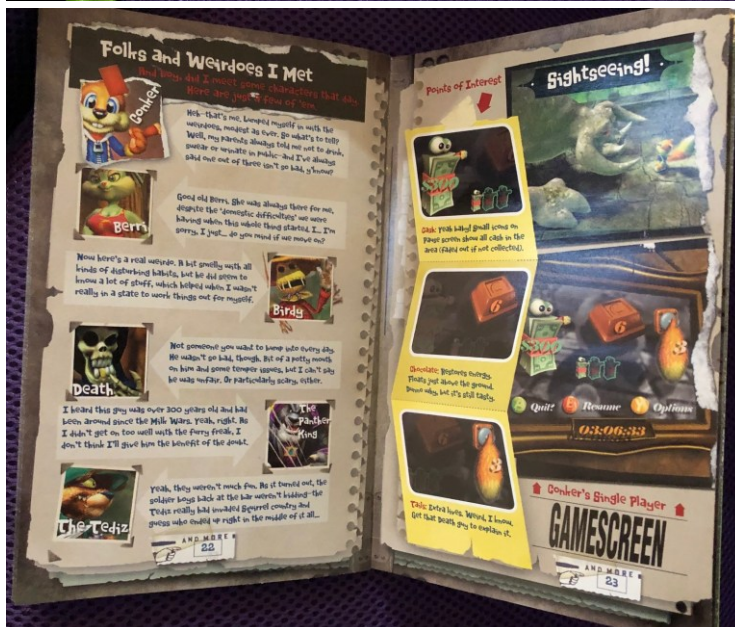
Comments: It might have been better if I had waited for the remastered version, which came out shortly after I played this. I didn't realize it was imminent.



Conker – Live & Reloaded

Platform: Original Xbox / **Edition:** Standard

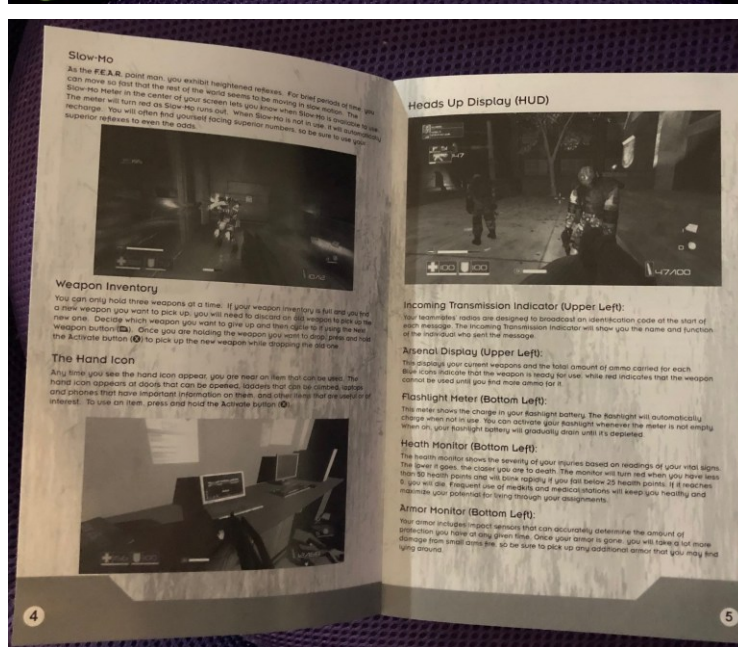
Comments: It might be censored from the original Conker's Bad Fur Day in small ways, but it was worth playing this version for the superior controls and the much-improved graphics (especially with backwards compatibility enhancements on Xbox One / Series X).



F.E.A.R. Files

Platform: Xbox 360 / **Edition:** Standard

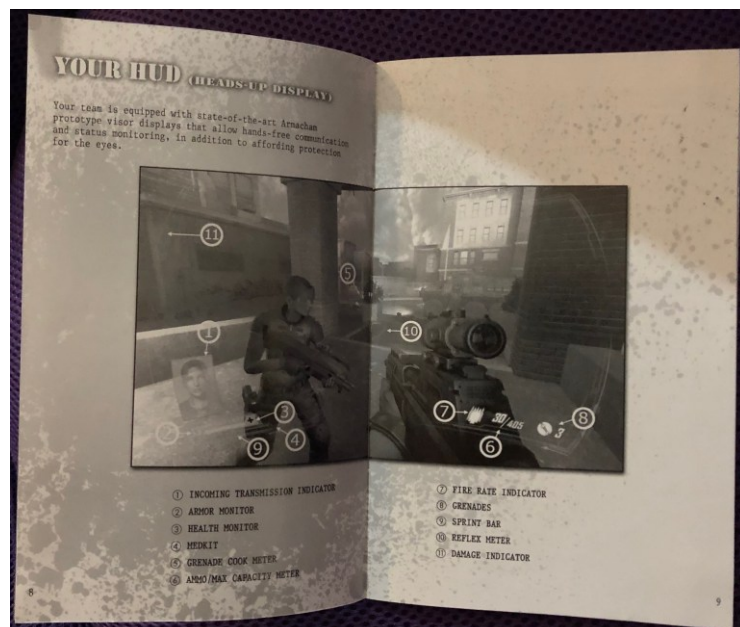
Comments: The disc includes the two stand-alone expansions, *Extraction Point* and *Perseus Mandate*. Although they seem non-essential to the overarching story told in the trilogy as a whole, they were both fun. This is how I started my 2025 gaming year.



F.E.A.R. 2 – Project Origin

Platform: Xbox 360 / **Edition:** Standard

Comments: This one came with an outer cardboard slipcover for the game. In retrospect, I don't really know what this adds to the package. It's nice, I guess. There's also a little ad insert for a game called Wanted: Weapons of Fate, based on a movie I think.

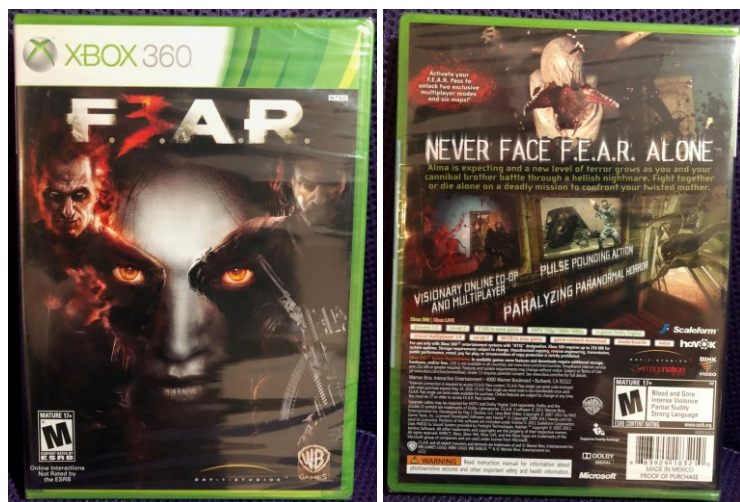


F.E.A.R. 3 (or F.3.A.R.)

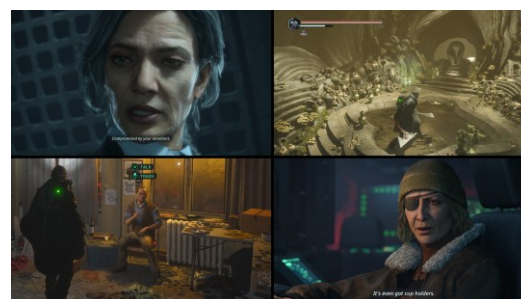
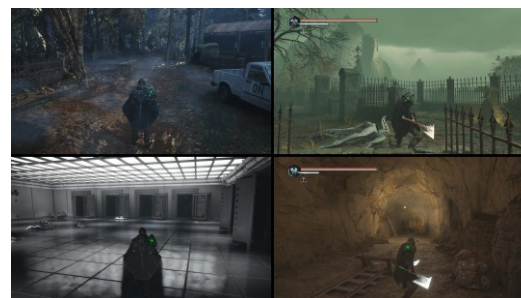
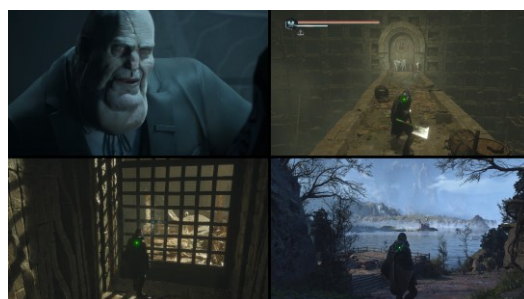
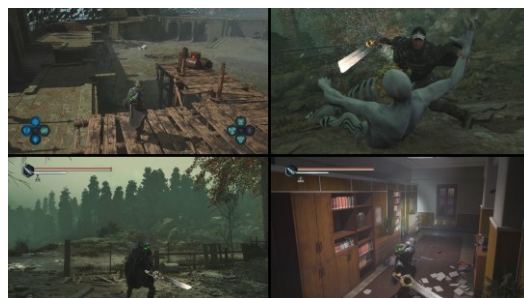
Platform: Xbox 360 / **Edition:** Standard

Comments: When I buy new games, I tend not to open them until I'm ready to play, or unless the disc is rattling around loose inside. (On a side note, there's a good way to re-seat loose discs inside PS4 and PS5 cases, which usually works when there's no manual inside the case, which is the norm these days.)

Anyway, F.3.A.R. is a game I never opened. I'm not sure if they're still doing it because I haven't bought a new physical Xbox game in forever, but they used to put a barcode sticker on the case edge that opens. I tended to peel them off carefully and stick them to the inside of the case, so as to preserve everything.



Mini-Review: Hell Is Us



With no area maps, waypoints, or quest markers, I thought this was going to be tougher to navigate. If I had put too much time between play sessions (multiple days, for instance), I might have lost the thread or forgotten what I needed to do next, but there is a journal (sort of) with important clues and info, so that helps.

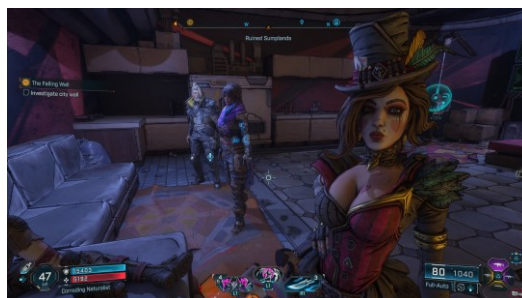
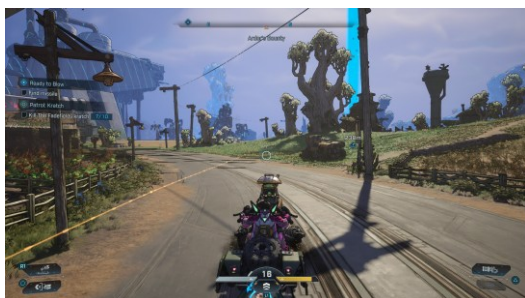
That said, this game is fantastic. The story is dark, and I don't think I fully understand it all, but it involves some alternate version of our world where there's an entire country call Hadea and a civil war between two factions (one being religious fanatics) with both sides committing absolutely heinous atrocities against the other side.

Lots (and I mean *lots*) of puzzles, many of them optional. It's like *Myst* if it was a grim action game with combat.

I loved this game.

*Played on console: PS5 Pro.
Originally posted: 09/17/2025.*

Mini-Review: Borderlands 4



When I see people being dismissive of the *Borderlands* series these days, it confuses me. These games typically score in the 80+ range, and if I was to assign a score, mid 80s is where I'd be. In some ways it's "just more *Borderlands*" but in some of the most important ways, especially where "just more *Borderlands*" might be derogatory, it isn't.

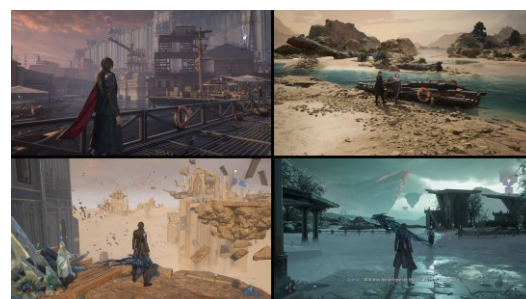
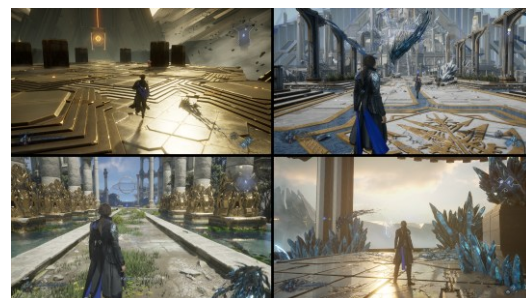
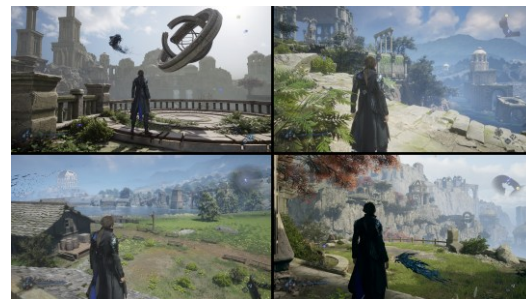
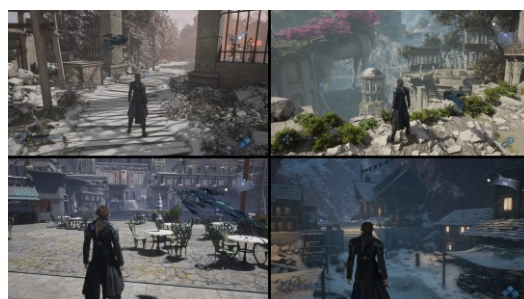
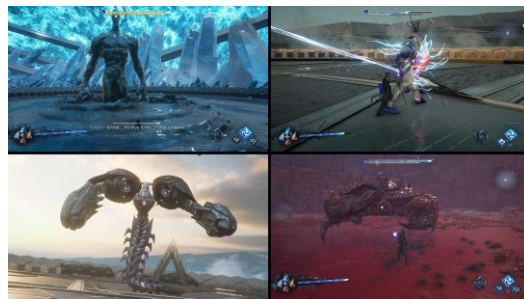
The world is bigger, and it's a single open world now (with a few "dungeon"-analog stand-alone areas).

The writing and humor in previous games tended to be of a love it or hate it style, but here it's more restrained and far less uneven, if a little less edgy. The distinctive art style remains, but it's so detailed at this point that it barely feels cell-shaded. First-person shooting and melee is excellent. Loot and upgrades are great.

Loved it.

Played on console: PS5 Pro.
Originally posted: 11/18/2025.

Mini-Review: Lost Soul Aside



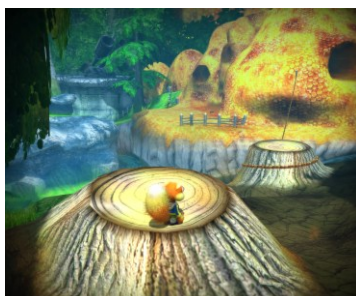
I'm thankful for a number of things. One, reviewing games isn't my job, so I don't have to nit-pick whether it lives up to 9 years' worth of hype or doesn't reach Naughty Dog levels of voice acting and characterization.

Two, I'm not so entrenched with a single platform that I have to make up faults in exclusives on other platforms just so I can feel something.

Three, by trusting my own gaming tastes and realizing that I can't map my own enjoyment to an aggregate review score, I didn't miss out on one of the best, most fun games I've played this year. From gorgeous locations, to excellent, varied combat, to one-off gameplay systems, to the well-done music (nothing that'll be a classic, but it's good) to the story (seemingly FF7-inspired, until it isn't), I loved all 25-ish hours.

*Played on console: PS5 Pro.
Originally posted: 09/04/2025.*

Mini-Review: Conker – Live & Reloaded



I played a little of the original *Conker's Bad Fur Day* for N64, then a little of it in *Rare Replay*, but with the camera X axis inverted and no way to fix it, I decided to go for the Original Xbox remake.

I was hesitant to do that, since I know it's a censored version, but what I decided is that superior controls and improved graphics (even over the *Rare Replay* remaster) is totally fine, given that I don't care whether or not I hear every swear word or see every unfiltered poo texture.

Not only is the game very playable, it's - and I can't believe I'm saying this - a great game. It exceeds the years of hype I built up for it. I absolutely loved this game, despite getting stuck (where to go) twice.

It's as much action-adventure as platformer. Tons of variety.

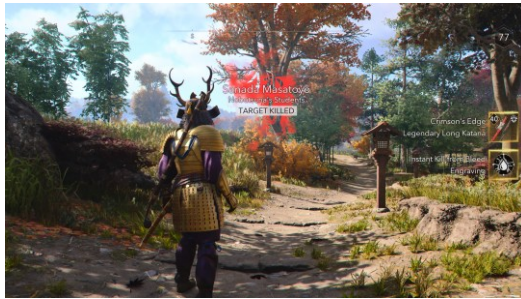
Loved it.

Original Xbox game played on Xbox Series X.
Originally posted to social media on 12/25/2025.

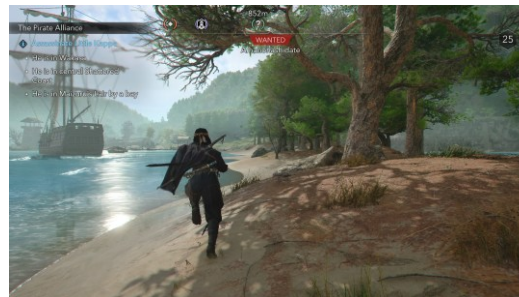
Mini-Review: Assassin's Creed Shadows



I'm of two minds about AC *Shadows*. It's an excellent epic set in feudal Japan, with beautiful landscapes and smooth gameplay.



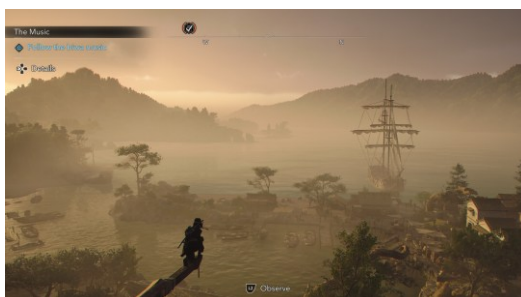
The combat is varied between two characters, although I preferred the more agile, stealthy movement of Naoe for exploration and overall gameplay, since it fits better with my playstyle than the tank-like, sort of clumsy Yasuke.



It tells an interesting story, if a bit unresolved. Future DLC, maybe?

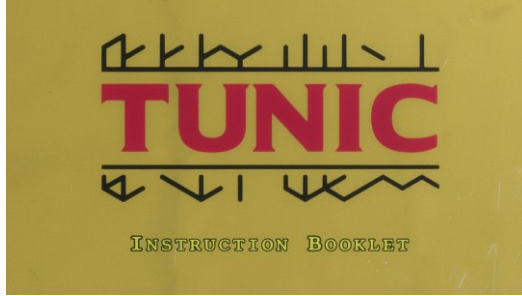


But for me, *Shadows* pulls back even further from what makes AC special and has always set it apart. Not knowing who was in the Animus or why, having no modern-day framing story, sidelining Assassins vs. Templars to late game story bits, and even losing all but brief cursory nods to the Animus, kind of reduces it - for me - to generic historical fiction.



Played on console: PS5 Pro.
Originally posted: 04/12/2025.

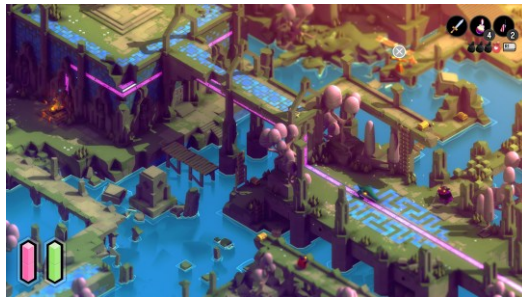
Mini-Review: Tunic



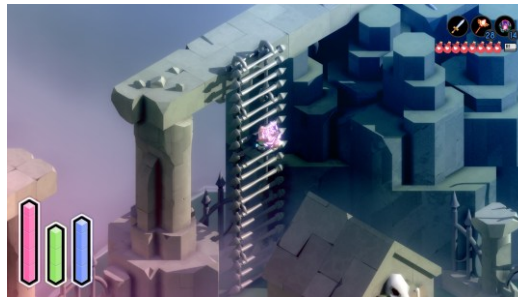
The first time I tried *Tunic*, I wasn't in the mood for a top-down *Zelda*-like. I returned to it now because my son played it, absolutely loved it, and wouldn't stop bugging me until I played it myself.



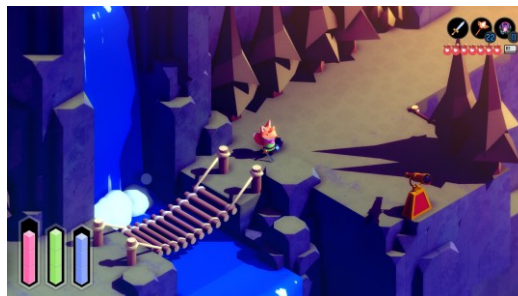
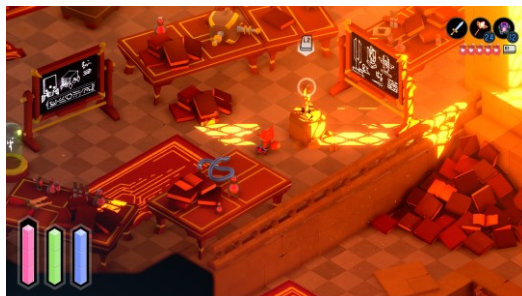
I enjoyed it a lot, but I had him there the whole time giving hints and suggestions so I'm not sure I got the whole unspoiled experience.



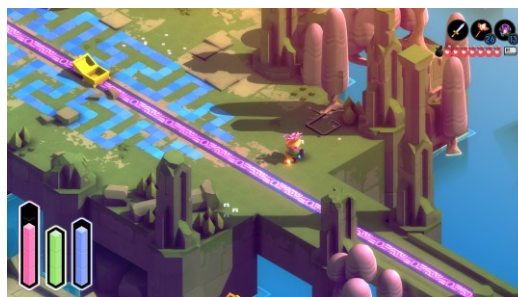
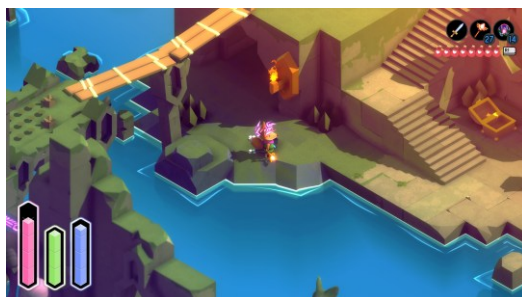
Between that and already knowing that the central gameplay gimmick is finding manual pages to understand how things work (stats, abilities, the world itself) it probably didn't hit me with the kind of "wow" moments it's supposed to.



I wasn't paying enough attention to the manual at first and didn't even realize how to upgrade my stats until he hinted at it.

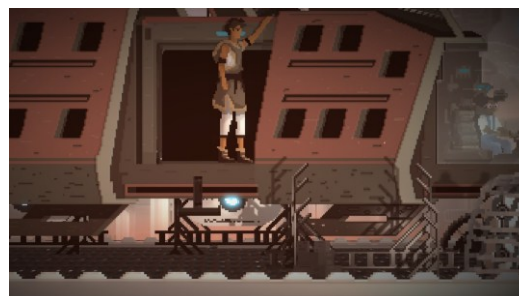
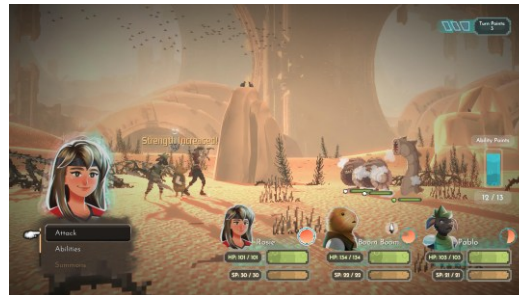
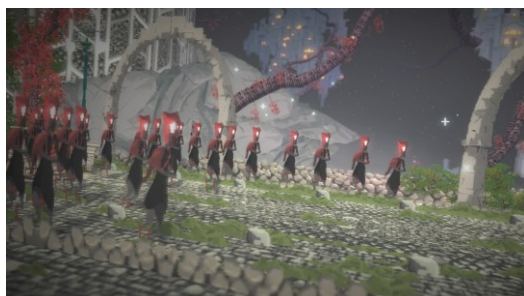


Still, the game is amazing. It's filled with hidden areas, secrets, bosses, shortcuts, and many surprises.



Played on console: PS5 Pro.
Originally posted: 12/23/2025.

Mini-Review: Beyond Galaxyland



Here's an interesting turn-based RPG with a mix of pixel art, higher-res character portraits, and various zoom/lighting effects from first-time indie developer [@EnrightBeats](#).

It was in the PSN holiday sale late last year, but it's worth the standard \$18 price easily.

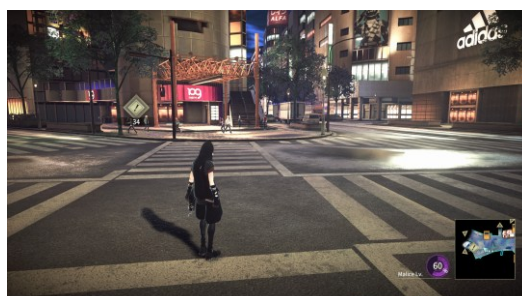
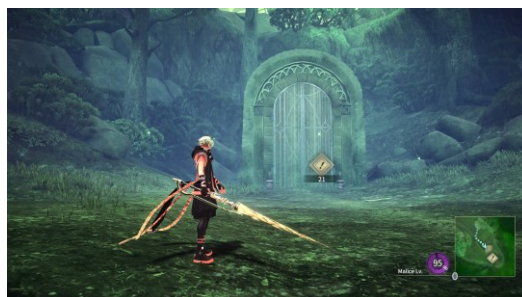
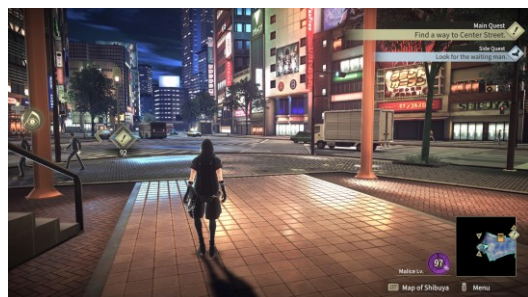
There's no spoken dialogue, which will be a drawback for some, but that's about the only negative I can come up with.

There's catchy music; several varied locations across several planets; plenty of enemy types; puzzles; a couple different optional racing mini-games; cool characters; a doomsday story; turn-based combat that lets you attack, capture and summon creatures, use abilities or items, and manage status effects; and a fun platinum trophy if you're a completionist (but beware the missable trophies).

I enjoyed this a lot.

*Played on console: PS5 Pro.
Originally posted: 01/19/2025.*

Mini-Review: Reynatis



It's a third-person action game set in an alternate reality Shibuya, the popular fashion and entertainment district of Tokyo where magic is real and rogue wizards are hunted by a wizarding police force.

The story was interesting enough to keep me invested, with plenty of lore and history to discover, but it does end up seeming a little shallow by the time it wraps up.

Each character can be equipped with abilities, leveled up, and swapped out to form a team of three (from six total).

The combat is fast and frantic. It features a dodge and slow-mo system that takes getting used to, since the idea is to watch for a ring meter and hold the dodge to fill it, and an offense/defense stance system.

One downside: no English voice-over. It's a fun time, and it happened to be my 200th platinum trophy.

*Played on console: PS5 Pro.
Originally posted: 08/31/2025.*

The Final Stage

Repeating Mini-Reviews (Again)

Once again, I accidentally included a mini-review in the previous issue for a game I had included before. This time, it was *SteelRising*, which I had already used in [issue #21](#) when I ranked the top 50 game development studio names based on how evocative they are.

SteelRising was made by Spiders, which was my #1 pick for evocative game studio names. I included it again last week, when writing about all the *Souls*-like games I've played.

Well, I guess a good game deserves a second mention. At some point, I may have to start re-using mini-reviews on purpose, as I'll run out of them at some point and won't be able to play games fast enough to always keep up.

Honorable Mentions

My top 5 games of the year were a lock, but it was more difficult picking the rest. For fun, here is how the other 10 new games I played this year rank on my list, in simple forward order from #11 to #20. Yes, *MindsEye* is at a higher spot than *Silent Hill f* and *Blue Prince*, but I'm just going off my gut feelings. Again, these are *all* the new 2025 games I played in 2025, so those last spots may seem unusual for a "best of" anything list, but that's why.

11. Mafia – The Old Country

12. Split Fiction

13. South of Midnight

14. MindsEye

15. Silent Hill f

16. Blue Prince

17. Choo-Choo Charles

18. Multigun

19. Zombies Overloaded

20. Fear of BIOSEC

Mafia and *Split Fiction* should probably be in the top 10, but so should the games *already in my top 10*. It must be way easier for the folks who rarely enjoy any game unless it's a 10 out of 10 masterpiece with no flaws whatsoever.

This was a fun issue for me. If I'm still writing the VGGN a year from now, maybe I'll make it an annual tradition to recap my whole year.

Feedback

I'm interested in where readers learn about this newsletter. My hunch is it's usually from my [X/Twitter](#), [Threads](#), or [BlueSky](#) profile or posts, but the SysOp of the Looney Bin BBS (at <http://looneybinbbs.com/>) has offered to upload each issue to his files area, and some of them can be found in Google searches too.

Unless you're trying to be mean, or rake me over the coals for a small amount of gen AI image usage, I welcome feedback. I can also be reached by email: news@vggpcast.com.

Next Issue

I usually try to think ahead to next week (or "next issue" now that I'm not adhering to a weekly schedule). I still have plenty of topic ideas on my list. I had wanted to play a few more first person adventure games (in the vein of *Myst*) before I write about those, but maybe that'll be my next topic. If not, then I'll think of something, I'm sure.

End Credits

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Images of the physical games in the *Collection Inspection* feature are photos I took of games in my own collection and weren't sourced from the internet.

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