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Issue #38 – February 14, 2026

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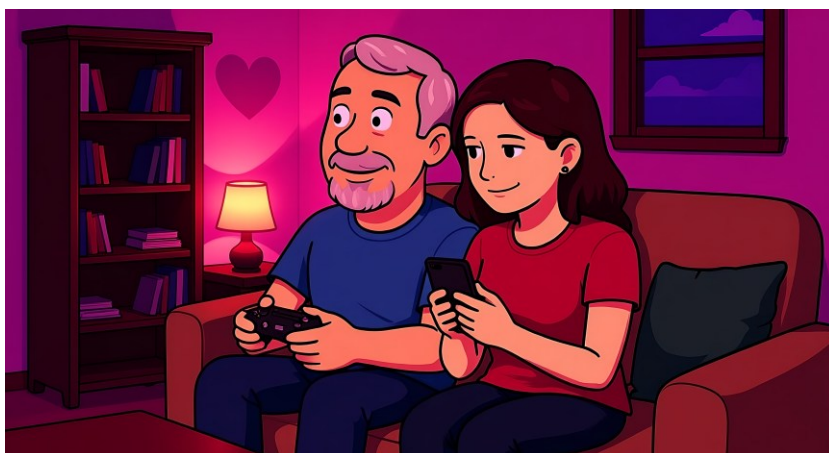
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Loading Screen

I knew I wanted to do a Valentine's Day issue of the VGGN, but ongoing overtime at work sapped any motivation I had to work on it each evening. As a result, I'm rushing now to get it completed and released before the clock (at least, in Central time) rolls over to February 15th. It's already 10 PM here.

This week, I'm recapping recent Nintendo and PlayStation showcases in *Recent Events* (plus a few other news items of note). The main feature is a bit of reminiscing over in-game romances, the fictional women I chose, and why.

In *Collection Inspection* and *Mini-Reviews*, I've tied the content into the theme as best I'm able. Enjoy!



This issue is dedicated to Tracy Arena: 12/25/1978 - 03/21/2025

Recent Events

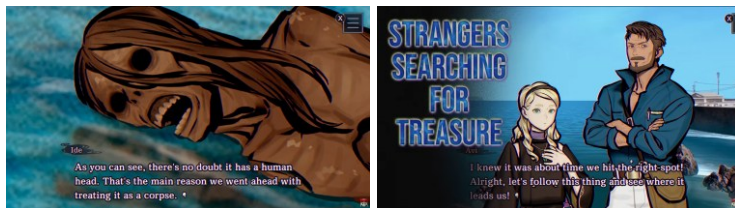
Nintendo Partner Showcase

Nintendo did a 30-minute partner showcase on February 5th, which by every account I've seen was underwhelming. I'm finally watching it (or at least skimming through) as I write this.

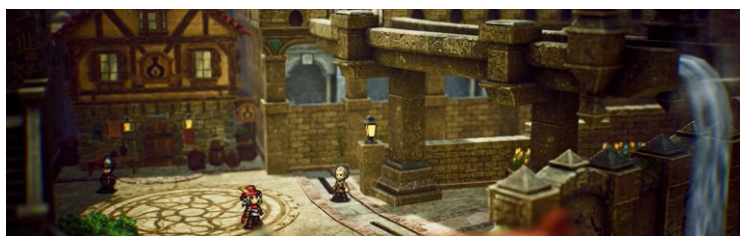
This first game looks interesting. It's probably something my son Heath would enjoy playing together. It is, however Switch 2 exclusive, and I have no plans to buy one any time soon.

Plans change, of course, but for now, this is a big reason why I haven't been excited about Nintendo announcements. I don't have one.

The second game is my kind of thing. It looks to be an adventure game with visual novel styled scenes. Seemingly without a physical release, though, it would also be a pass. It's a game called *Paranormasight: The Mermaid's Curse*, and appears to be part of an adventure series from Square Enix.



Tokyo Scramble looks great and appears to be a stealth game, but it's also an exclusive for Switch 2 and also digital-only. *Valheim* is a survival game, which isn't my kind of thing. *Hollow Knight* is getting a Switch 2 version. *eFootball* was shown (formerly PES) but I'm not into sports games. *The Adventures of Elliot* is a new HD2D game from Square Enix, but it's also coming to PS5 and has a physical release, so that's more my thing.



There's a new *Super Bomberman* collection that was shadow-dropped the day of the showcase. I wasn't ever a *Bomberman* guy, although I do intend to replay and finish *Bomberman 64* at some point. It was fun. That's not part of this collection though. The physical release is scheduled for August, but will it *really* be physical, or just a key card?



Final Fantasy VII Rebirth is getting a port for Switch 2. *Pragmata* was shown next, and it's a game I'm 100% going to play... but on PS5, and my pre-order is already in. My son said he enjoyed the demo, but I want to go in fresh.

Being in the Nintendo 64 mood that I recently have been, the *Turok* games have been calling out to me. I never played them, but they're also remastered on modern consoles. I mention this because next up in the direct was *Turok: Origins*, which appears to have a focus on multiplayer but can be played alone. It's coming to other platforms (PS5, Xbox, and PC), so if I *did* end up wanting to play it, I'd at least be able to. It looks pretty cool.

I remember a game called *Tokyo Xanadu*. This next game is *Kyoto Xanadu*, so maybe it's the next in the same RPG series. It's also getting a PS5 release (and PC and Switch 1; I looked it up). The recent *Digimon Story: Time Stranger* is coming to Switch 2.

Then, more stuff I'm not really interested in (*Granblue Fantasy Relink*, *Monster Hunter Stories*), and then a new addition announced for the *Arcade Archives 2* series, *Rave Racer*.

Console Archives was then announced as part of that same segment, showing *Doraemon* (an 8-bit side scrolling adventure), *Sonic Wings Special* (a vertical SHMUP), *Cool Boarders* (retro snowboarding), and *Ninja Gaiden II: The Dark Sword of Chaos* (I beat this game on NES, and the first *Ninja Gaiden*, but couldn't do it now without cheating).



Rapid-fire game clips were shown next, which included *Scott Pilgrim EX*, *Another Eden Begins*, *Reanimator* (from the original makers of *Little Nightmares*; I think this one is out as of writing this), *WWE 2K26*, *Star Trek: Voyager – Across the Unknown* (which looks a whole lot like *Fallout Shelter* to me), *Disney Dreamlight Valley* (I know it's popular, but it's not my kind of thing), *PGA Tour 2K25* (golf), a new game in the *Culdcept* series called *Culdcept Begins* (strategy card battle games), *Goat Simulator 3* (which has been out on other platforms for a long time), *Shadow Tactics: Blades of the Shogun* (originally released a decade ago), and finally, *Tales of Arise: Beyond the Dawn Edition* (I played the original release on PS5, which is the only time I've played an entry in the *Tales* RPG series; it was pretty great).

Next was a lengthy look at *Resident Evil 9* (aka *RE: Requiem*). I'm skipping ahead because I have this pre-ordered and don't want spoilers before I play it in less than two weeks.

That Switch 2 Pro controller, though, themed for *Resident Evil*, looks really cool. Does that controller work with the original Switch? A quick Goggle search says no, it does not. It's maybe not worth \$100 just to have for some eventual day when I finally get a Switch 2.

The last announcement featured Todd Howard of Bethesda Game Studios (now owned by Microsoft, of course) to kick off a series of announcements for Bethesda games coming to Switch 2. These include *Fallout 4: Anniversary Edition*, *Indiana Jones and the Great Circle*, and finally, *The Elder Scrolls IV: Oblivion Remastered*. This is great news for Switch 2 owners because those are fantastic. I never played *Oblivion*, but I might someday.

Source:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=88Ym9SCKFpc>

Horizon – Hunters Gathering

Also filed under “not for me” is the newly announced multiplayer game set in the *Horizon* universe (*Zero Dawn* and *Forbidden West*). With its more stylized cartoonish art style and the focus on co-op, it's not a game I'm interested in, but I hope it finds its audience. Far too often, the toxic segment of video game fandom is all too happy to cheer for online multiplayer games to fail, as if it's the only enjoyment they actually derive from gaming. It must be miserable being them.



Source:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=JubgL46Xkmk&t=68s>

More GTA 6 Physical Release Info

The CEO of Take-Two refutes recent reports that *Grand Theft Auto 6* won't have a physical release when it launches on November 19th.

Source:

<https://www.videogameschronicle.com/news/take-two-denies-gta-6-will-launch-without-a-physical-version-thats-not-the-plan/>

Beyond Good & Evil 2

Despite turmoil at Ubisoft and multiple games being delayed or cancelled outright, the long-in-development *Beyond Good & Evil 2* is reportedly still happening. It seems cruel to give us hope, knowing us fans of the original game (it's fantastic; truly unique and special) are holding onto any thread of optimism.

Source:

<https://www.videogameschronicle.com/news/director-assures-ubisoft-remains-committed-to-beyond-good-evil-2-despite-recent-upheaval/>

Sony Patents AI-Generated Podcasts

This headline was met with exactly the kind of reception you'd expect from the hosts of the video game podcasts I listen to. Despite it sounding like a bad idea in general, I just don't think I'd be interested in wasting my limited gaming time with some sort of jibber-jabber nonsense whenever I boot up my PlayStation 5, even if the hosts were the actual voice actors and the content wasn't auto-generated from a mix of whatever game Sony is trying to advertise and what me and my friends have been playing and accomplishing.

Not everything Sony patents becomes a real product. Still, the thought of turning on my PS5 to watch Kratos banter with Aloy about the fact that I haven't logged in at all recently sounds like a waste of my time.

Maybe it's for the kids who are fully embracing the AI revolution. I embrace it only enough to dip my toe in with limited logos and images for the VGGN, and enough to (hopefully) not lose my job, where AI usage and learning is now mandatory. I really don't need this, but maybe somebody out there does. Or, as with most things, it's just an attempt to invent a solution to a problem that doesn't exist.

Source:

<https://www.videogameschronicle.com/news/sony-patents-ai-generated-podcasts-voiced-by-characters-from-its-games/>

Project Genie

Game creation tools aren't new. Whether it's a game engine like *Unreal* or *Unity*, something tailored to a genre like *RPG Maker*, a creation suite limited to a platform like *Dreams*, or something tailored to making mods with the existing game's framework like *Little Big Planet* or *Dink Smallwood*, it's rarely necessary to build a game from scratch.

It was inevitable that the generative AI gold rush would spill over into game creation too.

Google's "Genie" makes playable worlds out of text prompts and sample images, although it's limited to an expensive monthly "Ultra" membership currently, from what I can tell.

No, I wasn't checking it out so I could use it. That's just what the VGC article says.

Among chief complaints about AI-generated content is that it's soulless and inaccurate, and often easily identifiable. My fear is less that video games will be dumbed down and generic if AI actually gains a foothold, and more the growling likelihood that AI will get better at it over the next few months or years, leading us into a dystopia where AI-generated games *are* really good... but releasing by the thousands daily, drowning out non-AI works, and taking away what's special about gaming.

It won't happen as long as the end result is utter garbage, but what about when it's *not*? Am I envisioning a future that *can't* happen? I wouldn't have thought the capabilities of AI as they are today would have been possible if I thought about it a decade ago, so we'll see.

To be clear, I'm not for it in the slightest. I just worry that the biggest and loudest proponents of AI-generated games may not be as wrong as we want them to be.

Source:

<https://www.videogameschronicle.com/news/google-rolls-out-prototype-of-project-genie-an-ai-tool-which-generates-playable-worlds/>

Tomodachi Life - Living the Dream

Here's a good news story for Valentine's Day.

Cue the emotionally repressed chuds, but the upcoming *Tomodachi Life* will allow for same-sex romances and non-binary characters.

My daughters really enjoyed *Tomodachi Life* on the 3DS, and they're looking forward to this new one, especially after this was revealed. My younger daughter lost my copy of the game (I've since bought another), along with my copy of *Miitopia* for the Switch. I've lost quite a few games to unreliable kids over the years. When younger, my oldest daughter lost not one but two 3DS systems (and later, four DS games I loaned her for a school trip, including *Phoenix Wright vs. Professor Layton*, which cost me over \$100 to replace), and the younger one dropped and shattered the screen on her brand new PlayStation Vita mere days after getting it as a birthday gift.

I'm trying to think of what my son has lost or damaged, but I'm getting sidetracked from the original point. *Tomodachi Life* is getting with the times. That's the whole story.

Source:

<https://www.videogameschronicle.com/news/tomodachi-life-living-the-dream-will-include-same-sex-relationships-and-non-binary-characters-fulfilling-nintendos-promise/>

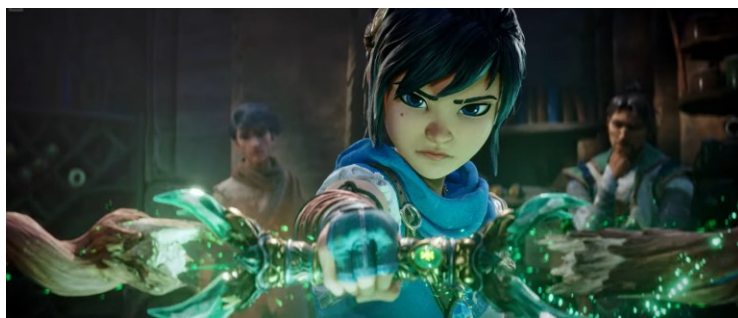
PlayStation State of Play

I had planned to recap the entire February 12th showcase from Sony, since it was twice as long as the Nintendo one and had far more announcements that excite me, but I'm also hoping to complete this issue for release on Valentine's Day, which is to say today, and it's already late afternoon.

So, I'm going to go through just a few of the announcements that excite me the most, and even then, in no great detail.

First up was *Kena - Scars of Kosmora*. It looks incredible; a great way to open the show.

For whatever reason, I wasn't enamored with Ember Labs' debut *Kena - Bridge of Spirits* even though it's exactly my kind of game. I'm looking forward to the sequel though.



If I was a fan of online multiplayer, I'd be beyond hyped for *4:Loop*. Again, though, I hope it finds an audience and doesn't fall victim to the "we gleefully cheer for it to fail" crowd that dominates too much of the space around online multiplayer games these days.

There's another look at *Pragmata* and *Resident Evil Requiem*, but I've been sold from the start on both. I don't need more.

Brigandine is getting a new game, *Abyss*. I have one on the PS1 that I never played.

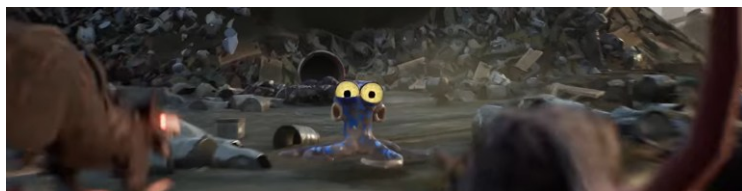
Control: Resonant continues to look great, as does *Beast of Reincarnation*, which looks like a huge step up from what the developer Game Freak is most known for (*Pokémon*). It looks like the lovechild of *Stellar Blade* and *Sekiro*. I hope they announce a physical release soon.

There's a game that looks like *Black Myth Wukong*, except you play as an anthropomorphic rooster (no, I'm not just making that up). It's apparently based on *The Bird That Drinks Tears*, which I've seen described as the Korean *Lord of the Rings*. It was shown as *Project Windless*.

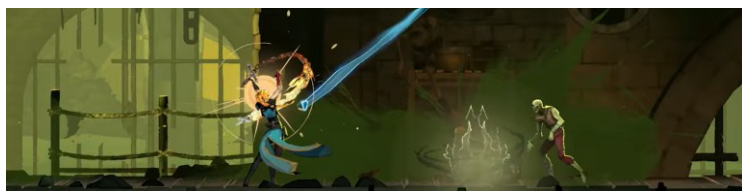


There was a whole Konami block, where the long-awaited and rumored *Metal Gear Solid Master Collection 2* was announced. It includes *MGS4* (previously stuck on PS3) and *Peace Walker*, as well as a port of the GameBoy Color game *Ghost Babel*, which from what I understand is pretty great.

They're publishing a 2.5D side-scrolling game featuring an octopus called *Darwin's Paradox*. It looks fun. There's a physical edition coming, but it may be exclusive to Limited Run Games.



Konami kept the hits rolling by announcing a new *Castlevania*, subtitled *Belmont's Curse*. It looks to be of the traditional 2D variety, but without leaning on a pixel art aesthetic.



To end the block, we got a first look at their previously announced *Silent Hill: Townfall*. As with last year's *Silent Hill f*, it's set nowhere near the fictional town of *Silent Hill*. I was a bit let down by *Silent Hill f* (a sentiment most people who played it don't share), and my mini-review can be seen here in [Issue #32](#).

This one looks like a must-play for me. It has the melancholy music and the vibe I want from the series, and I'm looking forward to it.



Actually no, there was one more Konami game announcement following that. It looks to be an anime-styled JRPG that reminded me of *Xenoblade Chronicles* and *Tales of Arise*. It's called *Rev. NOiR* (yes, there's a lowercase "i" in the title), and they showed just enough for me to think it's a game I should check out.



For a moment, the next announcement had me thinking it was a new Insomniac's *Wolverine* trailer, even though I'd heard it wouldn't make an appearance. Instead it turned out to be a *John Wick* game (and not the smaller-scoped Mike Bithell game that came out a few years ago). It features the likeness (and seemingly the voice) of Keanu Reeves, which they kept partially hidden during the trailer's opening.



Bungie's *Marathon* was shown. At the risk of being a broken record, it looks like something I'd absolutely love if I was into online multiplayer games, and I hope it doesn't get sabotaged by the toxic grifter treatment.

The way *Saros* was presented this time did more to sell me on this game than anything they've shown before. My complaint with Housemarque's prior game, *Returnal*, wasn't just with its punishing difficulty, but with the way it wasted my time as a player with its roguelike structure and long runs that always resulted in a loss of meaningful progress.

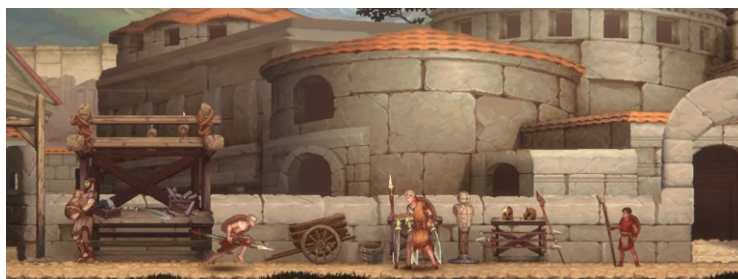
I think they realize people like me exist, and so Housemarque's presenter really drove home the ways they've evolved that formula to allow more permanent progression and less loss of progress. Am I 100% sold enough to put in my pre-order? I felt burned by *Returnal* and to this day maintain it was a waste of my \$75, but I'm at least on the fence now. I was firmly on the other side of it before now.



A pair of *God of War* announcements started with *God of War Trilogy Remake*. If you're Sony Santa Monica, I don't think you slap "Remake" on your game if it's just a port of the original games with better textures. It's hard to tell because nothing was actually shown and it's still in early development (as stated by the original trilogy's voice actor, TC Carson), but my mind goes to the best case scenario.

I'm envisioning a single game, perhaps told as a three-chapter story, in which those originals are merged and reimagined into something that forms a single epic experience.

The rumored *God of War* 2D Metroidvania was revealed next, as *Sons of Sparta*. It looks to be a Kratos origin story featuring highly detailed pixel art, only it doesn't actually appear to be a Metroidvania. It was shadow-dropped the day of the presentation for \$30 on PSN.



Earlier announcements included a new game called *Crimson Moon*, a *Rayman 30th Anniversary Edition*, another look at *Mina the Hollower* (this was delayed last year, but I'm still looking forward to it), a remaster of *Legacy of Kain: Defiance*, and new looks at *Star Wars: Galactic Racer* and *007: First Light*.



Source:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=P0e5YEXtZu0>

The 29th Annual D.I.C.E. Awards

Organized by the Academy of Interactive Arts & Sciences, this show differs from others such as Geoff Keighly's The Game Awards because voting is from within the game development industry, not the writers and content creators who play and review games.

Clair Obscur: Expedition 33 (my personal pick for Game of the Year, and many other people's as well) won in five categories, which were for Art Direction, Story, RPG of the Year, Game Direction, and the big one, Game of the Year.

Awards also went to *Arc Raiders*, *The Alters*, *Blue Prince*, *Death Stranding 2: On the Beach*, *Ghost of Yōtei*, *South of Midnight*, and others.

I probably would have played *The Alters* by now – it's high on my must-play backlog – if I hadn't sidetracked myself with a recent fixation on revisiting the N64 catalogue on the new Analogue 3D. I do want to play it soon.

Source:

<https://www.videogameschronicle.com/news/clair-obscur-expedition-33-wins-five-awards-at-the-d-i-c-e-awards-2026-including-game-of-the-year/>

Dating, Romance, and Video Games

My earliest memory of Valentine's Day is from when I was in 1st grade; *maybe* kindergarten, but I'm not sure we did the whole card trading thing then. At any rate, this was in the 1970s and I don't know if elementary schools even still do it these days, but kids would bring a box of those little cards and pass them out to each other on Valentine's Day.

At the end, you'd have one from everybody, and it was fun to see the variety in them. You might get a *Peanuts* card saying "Happy Valentine's Day" featuring Charlie Brown, or something with Cupid on it, or a card with a candy sucker attached to it.

Our house had burned down within the past year and I was living with my mom and younger brother in an apartment. We were poor – as we were my entire childhood – and so we couldn't even afford to buy a box of those cards for me to give away at school.

But, I had crayons and we had empty brown paper shopping bags, and so I cut them into little cards and made one for everybody in my class. They weren't customized – I was new to the school and didn't know anybody – but I spent the evening making them with hearts and crude little flowers and little messages like "be mine" or whatever you might see on a real one. I held them up to our heater so the crayon would melt onto the paper, for a little added artistic effect.

When I passed them out, a few of the kids laughed or scoffed. Some said they didn't want one at all. Not everybody reacted that way, but it's that negativity I remember most.

I forgot to mention that this is also my earliest memory of being sad and dejected, especially in a public environment. It kind of set the tone for February 14th for the rest of my K-12 years.

After high school and my first couple years of college, I let go of my introverted ways (to an extent) and discovered the world of dating. I probably packed a lifetime of it into the years between then and when I met my wife in 2000 (now my ex-wife, but that's another story).

The prior year, I had been dating a girl, let's call her Kim because that was her name, who was kind of unreliable and untrustworthy in general, but ended up dumping me *on* Valentine's Day because she got back together with an ex.

That's what inspired me to create this silly game *Cupid-Slayer*. It's a small game with turn-based combat for Windows and requires the Visual Basic library [MSVBVM50.DLL](#).



The Dating Games

My oldest daughter was supposed to write up a review of *Date Everything*, but she wasn't able to get to it in time. The game made a big splash last year with its premise of dating ordinary household objects that somehow come to life, or are at least represented as human characters. Anyway, that's my basic understanding of what it's about.

I really don't understand it myself, but the screenshots on Steam are sure... something. Now I'm a little weirded-out knowing that my daughter even played this.



All of this to say, it *probably* would be more fun to write about games where the whole point is the dating, but I can't think of a single game in the genre I've actually played. I know there's one about dating birds called *Hatoful Boyfriend*, one where your swords come to life as real people (or something) called *Boyfriend Dungeon*, some game called *Dream Daddy*, and a pair of FMV games about dating actual people called *Five Dates* and *Ten Dates*.

A lot of those seem geared towards dating men, which is all good and well, but not really something I'm personally interested in doing.

There was a dating spin-off of *Steins;Gate* (the awesome time travel visual novel) called *My Darling's Embrace*, but I never even got around to trying out that one. Some genres, like I mentioned last time, just aren't for me.

Romance Options

Instead, I'm picking a few games I've played where romance was an option. These tend to be RPGs, which I suppose makes sense.

Dragon Age (series)

To be honest, I don't remember my romance options in the first three *Dragon Age* games. I *think* it was Morrigan (maybe Leliana) in the first game. I hardly remember anything about the second game. It might have been Sera in *Inquisition*; or Josephine? I don't remember.

I do remember my love interest in *Veilguard*, since that was a game from 2024.

Incidentally, I feel like *Veilguard* gets way too much criticism. It was a fantastic game. It had a much different vibe from the prior games, sure, but it was still great on its own merits.

None of the romance options in *Veilguard* stood out to me as "oh, that's definitely the one" the way they have in other games. As far as I know, all seven companions are romance options in the game regardless of gender, and they're all likable enough, but I'd already limited my options on personal preference to Lace Harding (the dwarf), Bellara Lutare (the elf) and Neve Gallus (the human).

Ultimately, I romanced Neve. She's on the right in the screenshot below, which is from my mini-review for the game, which can be found in VGGN [Issue #8 on page 14](#). I think it was because she fit "my type" the most.



The Witcher 3

Two separate things resulted in me getting the worst possible ending in *The Witcher 3*. At least I *think* both things contributed and I think it was the worst possible ending, because my Geralt ended up alone and overwhelmed by all manner of approaching monsters in a short, highly unsettling ending cut-scene at the end of my 200+ hours of play.

The first factor, and the one I'm most bitter about to this day, is that Ciri disappears at the end, presumably never to be seen again, because of an invisible background stat that counted how many times Geralt allowed her to be self-sufficient and independent. It's not explained how that system works in the game, but things like offering to accompany her to visit the wizard council (or something; I forget the specifics) are actually *bad* decisions.

If I recall, there are five such decision points that contribute, and you need to support her independence in at least 3 of them. I wanted to accompany her because *I myself am a father and I support my children*.

My other mistake was that late in the game, Yennifer and/or Triss (again, I forget exactly) propose the option to date *both* of them. My heart was with Yennifer. Long dark hair is my weakness, and she's beautiful. But, I'd been gaming it up until then with both, and so of course I responded with a "heck yes please."

That ends the romance with both of them.

In retrospect, I don't know why I didn't load a prior save right away after that.



Baldur's Gate 3

Given what I just said about Yennifer (the long dark hair), it's no surprise that my inclination was to romance Shadowheart in *Baldur's Gate 3*. That's her on the left.



However, romance in BG3 can be varied and surprising, with no gender limitations and one character that even transforms into a bear.

So, before I committed to Shadowheart, I found out that Lae'zel is pretty much down for you know what, almost right from the jump.

Unlike most games that fade to black or have no romance scene at all, the Lae'zel scene is, well... here's a clip from it, but I've added a black bar and a black blob to cover the things not actually covered when shown in-game.



There's also full frontal nudity with a demon lady if you choose to go down that path, but you'd be excused for not, since it makes your companions angry and her idea of lovemaking is pretty brutal. I tried it out of curiosity but loaded my prior save afterwards, because of course I did.

There are also other avenues for romance in *Baldur's Gate 3*, including a pair of dark elves you can visit alone or with Shadowheart. Ok, that's not really "romance" I suppose; maybe a euphemism for something else.



Sadly, my dark-haired Shadowheart ended up with platinum blonde hair at some pivotal moment in her character development. Is that a spoiler? The game's been out for a long time at this point, so hopefully not.

Persona 5

I think the latest three games in the series have some form of romance/dating via social links. I know Chie in *Persona 4* is a fan favorite for romance and maybe Rise too, but for me it was Yukiko; that long dark hair, of course.

It's *Persona 5* that I remember most, though. It always felt a little uncomfortable (and still does) playing a game about teenagers and opting to "romance" a teenager, even if my guy in the game was also a teenager himself.

So, in *Persona 5*, I romanced the homeroom teacher, Ms. Kawakami (who incidentally also works as a maid, or as an escort, or both; it's hard to tell what she was really up to).



Sure, people might suggest that that's a bit uncomfortable too, but I found it easier to get over an in-game teacher dating an in-game student than a real-life "me" role-playing a romance with an in-game teenager.

There is, however, a trap on in-game Valentine's Day if you've been romancing multiple girls. It may be worth it for the comical "Valentine's Day Massacre" scene where they all gang up on you then, but I somehow knew about it ahead of time and didn't make the same mistake I made in *The Witcher 3*. For me, it was just Ms. Kawakami.



It is pretty hilarious, to be honest. Check out the full scene on YouTube [here](#). This player somehow managed to romance what appears to be every possible woman in the game.

Mass Effect (trilogy)

I had forgotten that there were only three romance options in the first *Mass Effect*: Ashley or Liara if you were playing as a male Commander Shepard, and Kaiden or Liara if you were playing as a female. By all accounts, the right choice for a male Shepard was Liara, of the blue-skinned alien Asari who all look female but are (in *Mass Effect* lore) a mono-gendered race.

I romanced Ashley. Never mind that she's widely considered to be a space racist. I didn't know at the time, or didn't care, I suppose.

Of my two options, she was the one with long dark hair, so of course it was Ashley.



I was all set to continue and rekindle that romance when *Mass Effect II* released, but surprise, Ashley isn't an option. I'm not even sure she's in the game beyond a brief cameo.

The other three primary options for a male Shepard in *ME2* were Jack (shaved head, lots of tattoos, kind of unpleasant to be around), Tali'Zorah (entire head hidden behind a mask and a hood, which allows her as a Quarian to survive outside her own environment), and Miranda (human, pretty, long dark hair, modeled after actress Yvonne Strahovski).

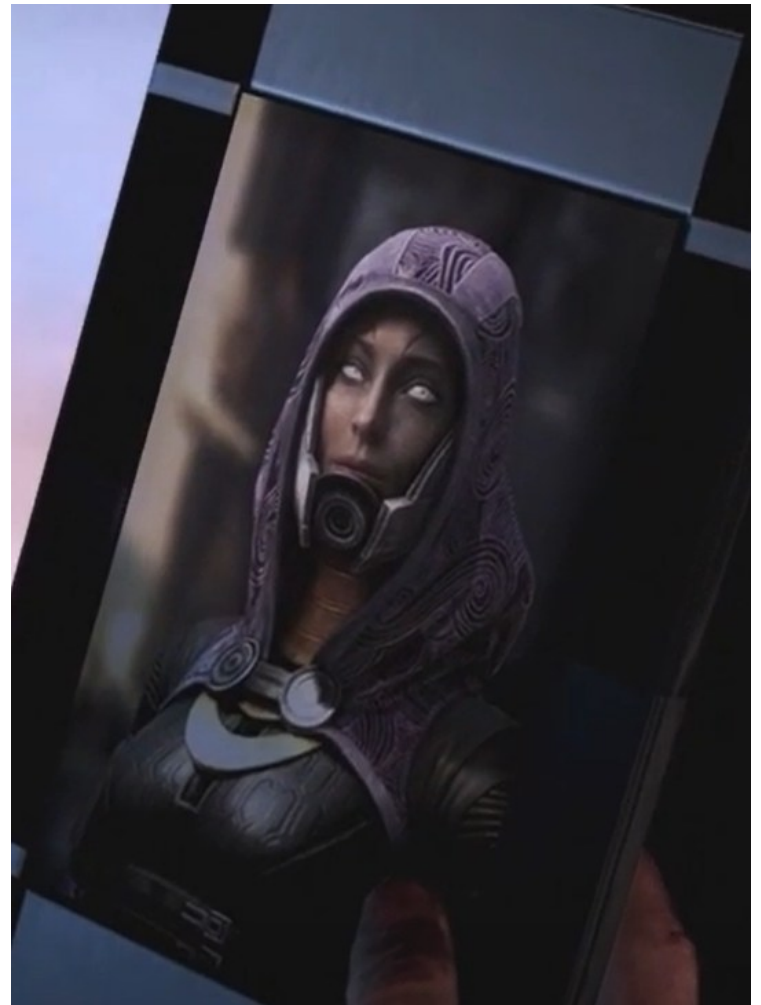


In a surprise twist, I romanced Tali'Zorah. She seemed sweet and sincere and I expected the game to show her without the mask at some point; a mystery waiting to be revealed.

That didn't happen in *Mass Effect 2*. I wonder if the developers at Bioware even knew what her race looked like. I suspect they might have had a variety of differing ideas, but maybe not.

Despite an expanded roster of male Shepard love interests in *Mass Effect 3* (including the return of Ashley), I stayed true to Tali'Zorah. The end of the trilogy didn't unmask her either, but there was a small blurry framed photo you could look at, which showed a human-looking Tali'Zorah with long dark hair.

In the game's *Legendary Edition*, the photo was redesigned in a way that makes her look less like a photoshop stock image and more like a fully-rendered human-like alien in the same suit, but with the mask removed.



Cyberpunk 2077

Romance options in CD Projekt Red's excellent sci-fi open world RPG are about as limited as they were in the first *Mass Effect*.

And yes, I thought *CP2077* was excellent even at launch, despite the jokes and clowning it got, and despite the very real habit it had of crashing entirely every two hours.

For a male V (the character you play as), you can romance Panam Palmer (female) or Kerry Eurodyne (male). When playing as a female V, you can romance River Ward (male) or Judy Alvarez (female). Even if I could have chosen Judy, I'd probably still have gone with Panam.

Guess why.



The love scene with Panam is pretty inventive, but I wouldn't want to spoil the specifics here.

Yakuza / Like a Dragon (series)

This brings me to the final entry on my list.

Romance in this series differs a little from game to game, and I haven't played them all, but most of it seems to involve going on dates with a few women as a side activity. As best I can tell, some of them are modeled after real Japanese actresses and models.

In *The Man Who Erased His Name* (and maybe other earlier ones), women in the cabaret club appear in live-action sequences, with an extended "date" scene of varying risqueness once the relationship level is maxed out.



Hands down, though, the best romance side event in any of the *Yakuza* (or *Like a Dragon*) games happens in last year's *Pirate Yakuza in Hawaii*, and it doesn't even center around the game's pirate protagonist, Goro Majima. I wrote about this one once before, in [Issue #29](#) about the funniest moments in games, but it deserves a second mention.

The cook aboard Majima's pirate ship is Masaru Fujita, portrayed by Japanese comedian Ryuji Akiyama. In a series of live-action scenes (subtitled, but voiced by Akiyama-san, whereas the character's main appearances are in-game renders with an English voiceover), Masaru is set up on a series of dates with "Minato Girls" – fulfilling his dream of meeting and potentially falling in love with one of them.



His antics are unpredictable and absurd, with each woman reaching the same conclusion that this guy is a complete clown with no possibility of romantic interest whatsoever.

If you do just one thing this Valentine's Day, watch the 30-minute [supercut](#) of the entire series of Bachelor-like dates. It might just be the funniest thing you've seen in ages too.



Collection Inspection

Here are a few games from my collection that have “love” (or some form of it) in the title. I’m pretty sure not all of these are about romance.

One game I thought of including but didn’t is a PlayStation Vita title distributed by Limited Run Games many years ago, called *Nurse Love Addiction*. I skipped it because (A) both my Standard and Collector’s Edition have not been opened (although that hasn’t stopped me before) and (B) I bought them from a time when I was inclined to collect every new game released by Limited Run on a weekly basis, and I did so without bothering to investigate what kind of game it even is. In this case, it turned out to be a yuri visual novel.

South Park – Chef’s Luv Shack

Platform: Nintendo 64 / **Edition:** Standard

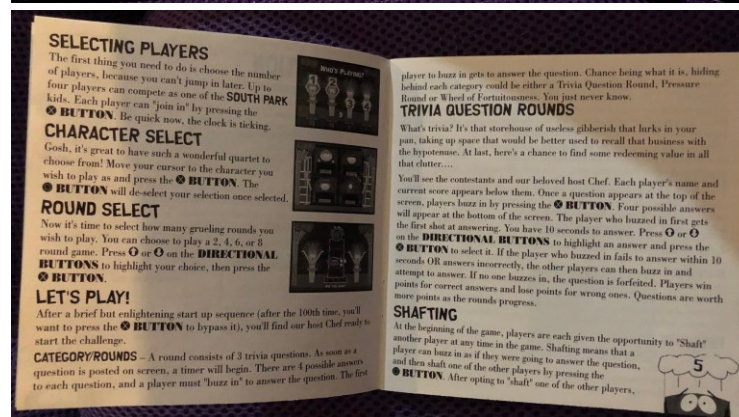
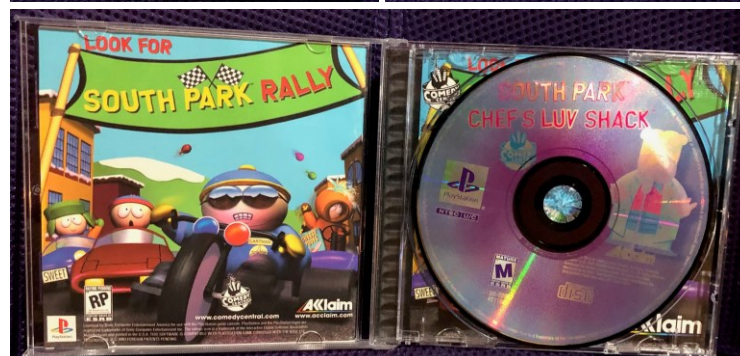
Comments: I literally just received this game today.



South Park – Chef’s Luv Shack

Platform: PlayStation 1 / **Edition:** Standard

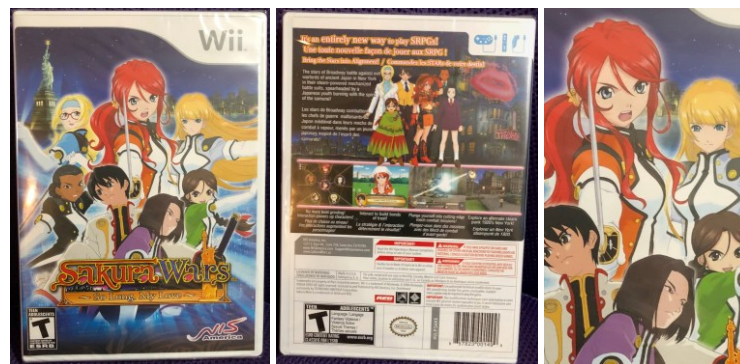
Comments: When I ordered the N64 version from an eBay seller the other day, I completely forgot that I had the same game already for PS1. In fact, I have two copies of it for some reason. It appears to be a silly quiz game of some kind that I’d probably only play if I had already gone through every other game I own (and even then, I’d probably just play one of them again).



Sakura Wars – So Long, My Love

Platform: Nintendo Wii / **Edition:** Standard

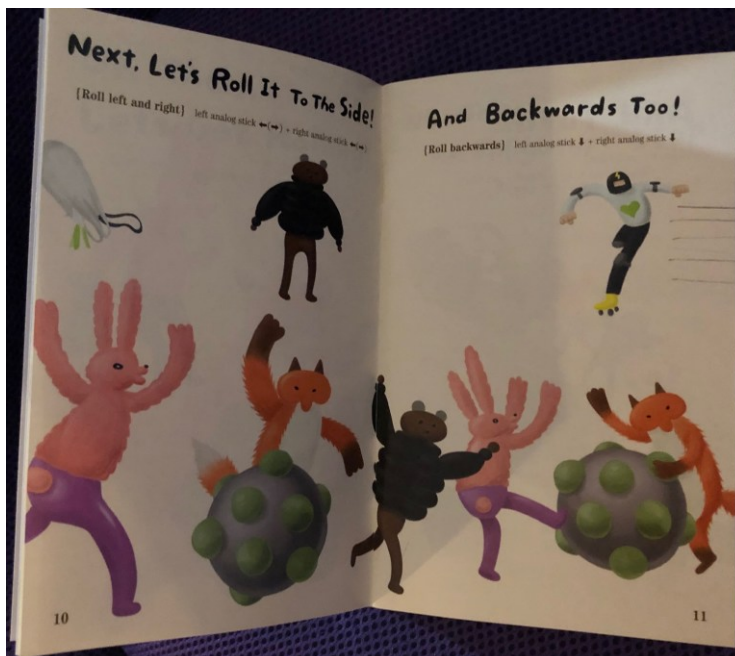
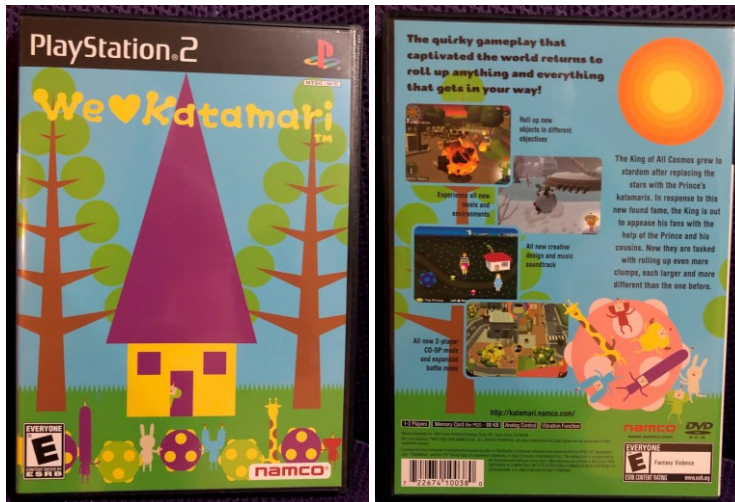
Comments: A strategy RPG that I’ve never opened.



We Heart Katamari

Platform: PlayStation 2 / **Edition:** Standard

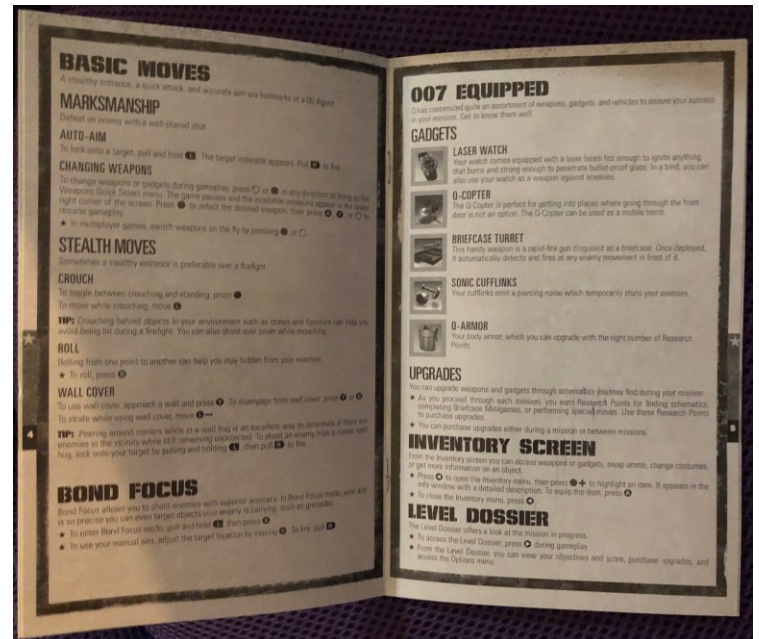
Comments: I've never gotten into this series, even though it's popular with its many fans. Maybe I just never gave it a chance, but it just never grabbed me.



From Russia With Love – 007

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

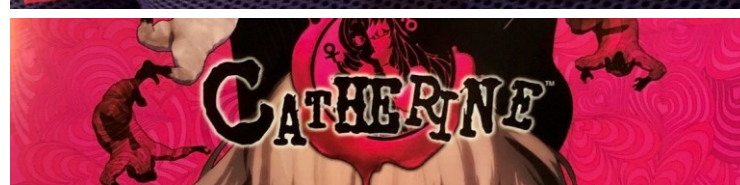
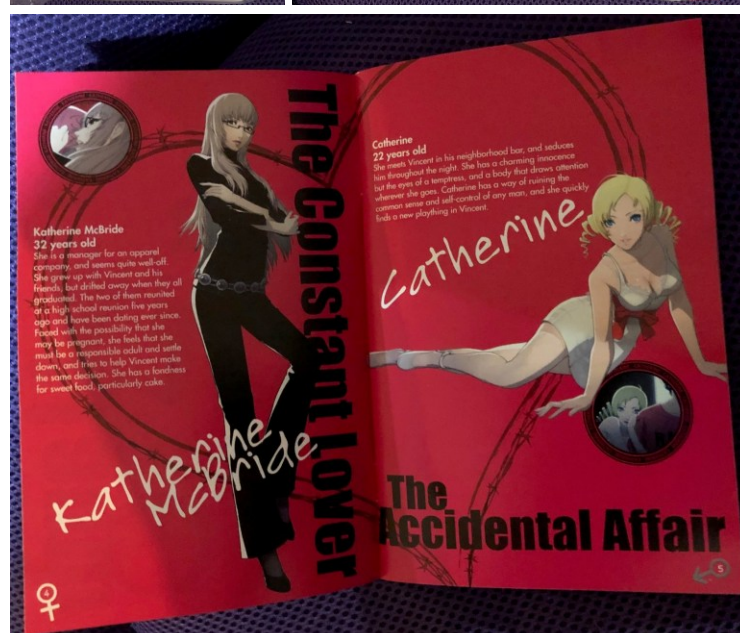
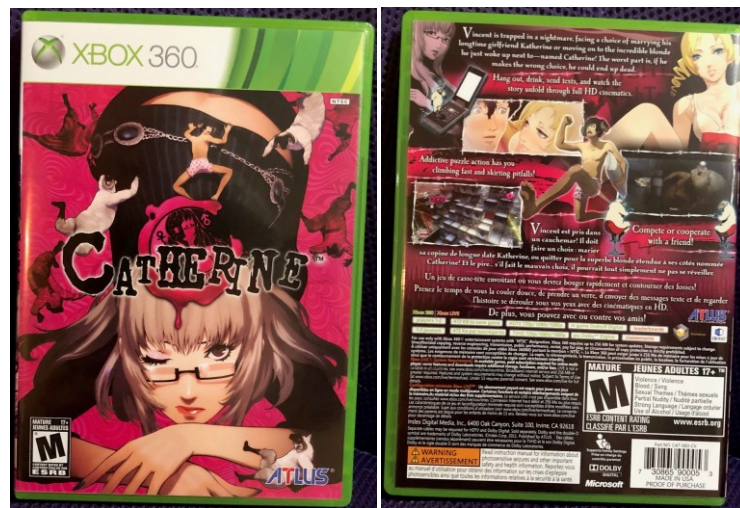
Comments: After the success of *Goldeneye* on the N64, games based on the *James Bond* 007 franchise have continued to be a thing. It seems like they fell out of favor for a few years, but IO Interactive's new *007 – First Light* is set to release in just a few weeks. *Goldeneye* is, in fact, the only *Bond* game I've played. This one is supposed to be moderately good, I think.



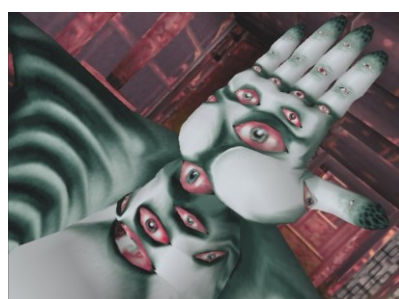
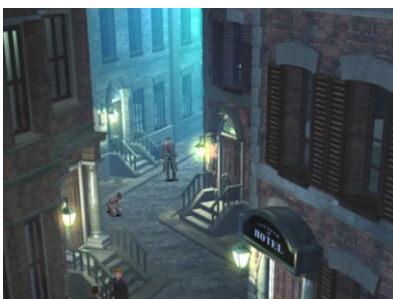
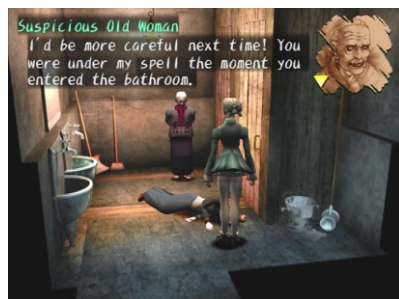
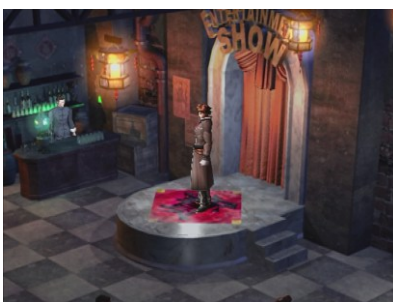
Catherine – Love is Over – Deluxe Edition

Platform: Xbox 360 / **Edition:** Collector's Edition

Comments: This edition of the original Catherine (before it was re-released as Catherine – Full Body with a third girl and a third spelling, Qatherine or Rin for short) is really something. It's in a large box with an outer cardboard slip cover, which is made to look a bit like a delivery pizza box. Inside is the standard edition of the game, an art book with a soundtrack CD inside, a large-sized T-Shirt, and white boxer underwear with pink circles all over. No, I never wore either item of clothing, but I did open the game (which I tend not to do with collector's editions) because I wanted to play it. It's a super weird block-moving puzzle game with a wild storyline and a really unique style and vibe.



Mini-Review: Shadow Hearts



It wouldn't surprise me if this started life as a PS1 game before the developers decided to switch over to PS2. That's not criticism, though. It has all the trappings of classic PS1 RPG's, including pre-rendered backgrounds and cut-scenes, turn-based combat, random enemy encounters, and cool music.

While of course lacking some quality-of-life features you might see in modern games, I found that it holds up really well. In fact, the characters, story, and just the nostalgic vibe in general was enough to pull me away from other more recent games I'm playing.

The timing-based "judgment ring" system was probably pretty inventive back in 2001.

It was an entertaining 35 or so hours for me.

I look forward to playing its PS1 predecessor (*Koudelka*) and its two PS2 follow-ups in the coming months.

Played on console: PlayStation 2.

Originally posted on social media: 05/22/2024.

Mini-Review: Shadow Hearts – Covenant



Also Known As:
Shadow Hearts II

I can't believe I never got around to this game (and this series) until now, twenty years after it released on PS2.

Simply put, it's fantastic.

It's a turn-based RPG with a real-time element in the form of a judgment ring system (enhanced from the first game).

Party members are more unique, each with their own personal twist in combat.

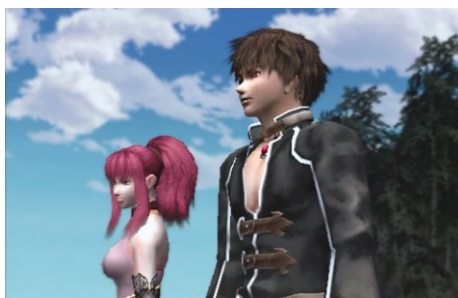
Each "dungeon" (and there are many) has its own twist or gimmick.

The story takes many turns, including a post-credits twist that all but confirms a theory I had half-way through. Granted, there were plenty of clues along the way, but still.

My play-through was a bit over 50 hours. It's one of the few PS2 games spanning two discs.

I could heap praise on *SH2* for hours but I'll just say this: if you can play it, you should.

Played on console: PlayStation 2.
Originally posted: 07/02/2024.



Mini-Review: Shadow Hearts – New World



Full Title:

Shadow Hearts - From the New World

Less a sequel and more a stand-alone follow-up, *FTNW* marks the end of what should have been a long-lasting RPG series but wasn't.

This one has it all: a huge playable talking cat, Al Capone as a sympathetic figure with a fictional sister, iconic locations like Times Square, Roswell, Alcatraz prison and the Grand Canyon, a party of heroes made up of various stereotypes that could just as easily have formed a band and started singing "YMCA", and the return of a turn-based battle system that's among the best in the genre, especially for its time.

An argument could be made that the *Shadow Hearts* series could stand shoulder to shoulder with other PS2 RPG greats like *Kingdom Hearts*, *Persona*, and *Final Fantasy*. I liked this one almost as much as *SH: Covenant*.

Weird, cool, very fun.

Played on console: PlayStation 2.

Originally posted: 09/10/2024.

The Final Stage

Gaming Hype for 2026

I've still been playing *Aidyn Chronicles: The First Mage* (N64) on Analogue 3D, but it's been slow going with longer days at work. I wanted to finish it by now and fit in a couple more N64 games before *Resident Evil: Requiem* releases on the 27th, but I'm becoming more and more convinced I'll be lucky just to finish this game by then. I worry that as this year's big new games release, I won't get back to my N64 nostalgia trip at all.

My son keeps insisting I play the *Outer Wilds* DLC, *Echoes of the Eye*. I want to, but *when*? *Outer Wilds* is an incredible game. I loved it, but it's been several years since I played and I don't remember where to go or what to do. He says the DLC is mostly stand-alone, so we'll see. Also, I have it for PS5 but I originally played the base game on Xbox. Maybe that won't matter. Add to that a slate of games from 2025 that I never got around to (*The Alters*, *The Outer Worlds 2*, *Doom: The Dark Ages*, *Avowed*, the *Oblivion* remake, *Ghost of Yōtei* if I ever pick up a copy, *Hollow Knight: Silksong*, and so many others) and I'm already way behind on catching up.

I've already missed *Romeo is a Dead Man* this year. I love a fun Suda51 game, but there's no word yet on a physical release, so I've waited. I also opted to wait on *Nioh 3* despite liking the first *Nioh* and loving *Nioh 2*.

There's *Resident Evil 9*, *Crimson Desert*, *Pragmata*, *007: First Light*, *Saros* (maybe), *Beast of Reincarnation*, *Mina the Hollower* (at some point this year), *Control: Resonant* (assuming it isn't delayed), *Castlevania: Belmont's Curse*, *Silent Hill: Townfall*, and of course *Grand Theft Auto VI* right around my birthday in November.

Gaming To Stay Sane

There have been times in my life when I really think video games helped pull me through a rough time. One of the worst experiences I've had at work involved a new project I was tasked with completing alone over the course of a year, without any assistance even in the form of QA (or beta-testing). When it launched, there were major issues I couldn't have predicted (or at least didn't). I of course took the brunt of the backlash – not my manager, of course, who was basically responsible for making my life miserable at that point. I was working around the clock for days with almost no time to sleep, and it marks one of the lowest points I've ever reached on an emotional level.

Persona 4 Golden on Vita was there for me, and it might be the only reason I didn't have a mental breakdown. Actually no, I think I did, but at least I had Chie and Yukiko and the rest of the gang to help see me through it all.

I went through those non-stop work days a couple years ago after catastrophic data corruption affected multiple servers, but at least I had a supportive team then. I'm in a milder version of those stressful times again now. At least I still have video games.

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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