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### Agenda:

- Article of the Week—"Road to the IGF: Paper Dino's Save the Date" (Gamasutra)
  - [http://gamasutra.com/view/news/209823/Road\\_to\\_the\\_IGF\\_Paper\\_Dinos\\_Save\\_the\\_Date.php](http://gamasutra.com/view/news/209823/Road_to_the_IGF_Paper_Dinos_Save_the_Date.php)
- Is everyone on a team or in the training group?
- Project Topic brainstorming
- Agile Workshop this Saturday, brought to you by Ron Williams II
  - 2pm in the Game Lab
- Reminders
  - Training group meetup time
  - Member dues must be turned in by February 17<sup>th</sup>
  - Game Design Documents are due next Monday

## Road to the IGF: Paper Dino's *Save the Date* by Christian Nutt

Paper Dino's Chris Cornell did not expect *Save the Date* to become what it is: an IGF Nuovo Award-nominated game that plays with the boundaries of dramatic irony.

To hear him tell it, *Save the Date* was going to be a goofy dating sim exploring what it might be like if the game's protagonist was privy to what the player knows, even through multiple play sessions, deaths and restarts -- even when every other character in the game remained clueless.

*Save the Date* is that, to be sure, but it's also much more. Cornell expected to build it in a weekend, but the project ended up taking much longer. In that sense, at least, the development process of *Save the Date* was very traditional. Little else was, as we learned in this [Road to the IGF](#) interview.

### **Tell me a bit about your background making games.**

Actually, most of my life has been pretty game-centric. I think I technically wrote my first game in kindergarten? (I had help. It wasn't a very impressive game.) In high school and college, I was one of the lucky ones. No dithering around with majors for me -- I knew exactly what I wanted to do.

I wanted to program video games.

My parents, being more pragmatic, (and making frequent reference to the "[Hopeful Parents](#)" Far Side cartoon) suggested that maybe, rather than *game programming*, I should just focus on, you know, *regular* programming. Databases or something, maybe. And then if I got to use it making games, hooray! And if not, well, the world will always need databases programmed.



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The fact that my professional career has been entirely making games, in addition to being basically database-free, is something that I take great pleasure in reminding them of. I try to bring it up at least once per visit. I would obviously never come out and say "I told you so", because that would be small and petty.

But we all know I'm thinking it.

### **What tools did you use to develop *Save the Date*?**

Most of it was Python, using a tool called [Ren'Py](#). I'd heard about it in the past, and knew, in a vague sort of way, that somehow it was supposed to make visual novels easier to write. When I was planning out *Save the Date*, I finally got around to looking it up, and it took all of about five minutes to realize that this was clearly the way to go.

For anyone with an idea for a visual novel burning in your head -- do yourself a favor and download Ren'Py *right now*. It offers a fantastic way to describe the script at a very high level (almost like writing a screenplay), and then dip down into actual program logic seamlessly, as need.

It's seriously an impressive piece of tech, and the fact that Tom toils away maintaining and improving it is amazing.

### **So how much time did you spend building the game?**

I think the total time from inception to launch was about two and a half months? a lot of that was spent waiting for assets, though -- I think it was closer to a month of actual development. Which isn't too bad -- and again, it's a testament to the awesome tools Ren'Py provides for making this sort of game -- but it does highlight how bad I am at estimates.

I had originally planned on throwing it together over a weekend.

### **Where did you get the idea to create *Save the Date*?**

Funny story there. I was chatting with a good friend of mine, Jim Crawford, who you may recognize for also writing games that defy user expectations. We were throwing around ideas for weird dating sims -- "*Alien Love!* It's like *Hatoful Boyfriend* but with xenomorphs instead of birds!"

Anyway, one of our ideas involved a game where you had to manage your information carefully -- maybe you were a government agent with a suspect under surveillance or something. And then you had to talk to them and make normal, casual conversation, and not let on that you actually know everything about them. I think at some point in here, I described it as "it would be like Groundhog Day, except where you're trying to avoid the part where you freak them out by knowing everything about everyone in town, including them!"

Then said "Heck, maybe keep that part in."

Then I said "Or wait. Actually, what if that was the whole game? Freaking them out because you DO know everything about them, because you've replayed the game a bunch?" And then I launched into a



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long description of what was basically *Groundhog Day: The Game*, where you could say things that you the player knew, but that your character shouldn't know about; people would freak out, and you had to somehow use this to accomplish your goal.

I spent a good 5 minutes dumping ideas into that chat window, and then realized I had been disconnected from the internet, and Jim hadn't heard any of them. So when we reconnected, I realized -- I couldn't just describe this to him any more. I liked it too much. I had to make the game and show him directly. I figured it shouldn't take too long to throw together!

To be fair, the original idea of the game was also a bit shorter. I knew I wanted the "Groundhog Day" mechanic, of new options showing up as the player learns about them. But the whole hilltop scene was entirely missing. It was originally just going to be a game about lowering your expectations: you'd go on different dates, and they'd always end horribly. You'd go all Groundhog Day on them and use info you "shouldn't know", and get further, and the dates would STILL end horribly.

Eventually you'd realize that the "bad" option on the main menu (don't go on a date at all) was actually the best option. And that would be it. That would be the game.

About half-way through writing that, I realized that it didn't feel right. It somehow didn't feel like it was shaping up to be a complete experience. It vaguely needed some kind of conclusion, or third act to tie up the whole thing. Both for player satisfaction, and for my own, since by now I had realized that there were a bunch of things I still wanted to say, and needed a place to say them.

After that, it all just sort of came together.

**Is there like a final ending? Be honest. I've read that poor girl dies at least 10 times and I don't know if I can take another run.**

There is absolutely a final ending. Different people tend to disagree about which one it is though.

**Did you intend to provoke that discussion about your game's narrative, or game narrative in general?**

Definitely. Both of those, really.

First off, the ending to my own game is left deliberately...what's a good word here? Flexible, I guess? But also, a large part of the game is trying to get people to stop for a moment and really examine their own motivations as players, and maybe to ask themselves "what am I really hoping to get out of this?"

We play games, and it's easy to just sort of go with the flow, and do what the game says, and complete all your objectives like you're checking off lines on your grocery list. But we don't often stop and think about what we're really trying to accomplish with the experience. I wanted to try to do something about that.

For me, the best part of the game has been the conversations it sparks after people play it. Which should not be taken to mean that everyone agrees with the points I tried to make in the game! I've definitely received plenty emails that basically said "I played your game, and it was interesting, but I



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disagree with your main thesis." Which is still pretty cool, since I didn't make the game because I was trying to convince people to come around to my viewpoint.

I just made it because I thought it was something we should be talking about in general. If they come to different conclusions than I did, that's fine. I'm really just happy that it's now a topic of discussion.

## Have you played any of the other IGF finalists? Any games you've particularly enjoyed?

So let me start off by just saying that all of the other finalists look fantastic, and while I haven't played all -- or even most -- of them, every one I have played has been absolutely incredible. Really, it's extremely humbling to even be on the same list as a lot of these things.

But if you want some specific shout-outs, I have a couple:

First: *Extrasolar*. It took me less than one day to get hooked on that game, and I really like how fundamentally different it is from just about anything else out there. I have a soft-spot for exploration games, and *Extrasolar* managed to scratch it by delivering a pretty pure and undiluted exploration experience. It also managed to hook my Mom, which is no small accomplishment! She's not normally much of a gamer, but I think at this point, she's logged more hours on *Extrasolar* than she has playing *Save the Date*! Lazy-8 studios has made a really cool experience, and I'm really happy to see them on the list!

Second - *Mushroom 11*. I am absolutely in love with the idea of this game, because it's one of those mechanics like *Portal* - it's simple to grasp, but it leads to a whole new kind of problem solving. A lot of puzzles in games occupy fairly well-explored spaces -- I've lost count of how many sets of I've had to light, or switches I've had to weigh down with a heavy object. Games like this are a delight simply because they are full of problems of a sort that I have never solved before. They are exploring a puzzle space full of entirely new puzzles. And that's rad.

Finally, I absolutely have to give mention *Stanley Parable* here. While our games are very different, ultimately, we both are trying to make things that comment on how people play games, and what choices in games really mean. I think that's really cool, and the original mod version of that game was responsible for a lot of the ideas bouncing around in my head which ultimately lead to *Save the Date*.

## What do you think of the current state of the indie scene?

I like it a lot. From my point of view, we are living in a weird, magic, golden age.

It has literally never been easier, in the entire known history of the universe, for someone to sit down and make a game. And that's awesome! It means that the barrier for entry for game making is crazy-low right now. If someone has an idea for an awesome game in their head, they have a good chance of being able to turn that idea into an actual, playable game, that they can show people. We're getting to see a lot of really weird, cool, nontraditional games now, because it turns out that there are a lot of people out there, with really cool, nontraditional ideas about what games can be.

With the rise of digital distribution, and because Kickstarter is a thing, not only are they more likely to be able to make a game, but they even have a decent shot at being able to distribute it and get paid



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for it.

As far as I'm concerned, this is an amazing time to be making games, and I can't wait to see where the industry goes next.

**Me either -- it's a really exciting time to be excited about games. Where do you see yourself going next?**

Heh. I'm actually not sure yet! My philosophy for picking projects has always been basically "whatever I'm really excited about at the time", so we'll probably have to wait and see. Although I fear that whatever it is, it may not be satisfying to anyone hoping for another *Save the Date*. This was a sort of magical project for me -- it popped into my head out of the blue, was (mostly!) fully formed, was fast and painless to develop, and really, turned out to be a much better game than I ever dreamed possible. I'm not sure how to recreate that, so I'll probably just continue on to whatever weird idea catches my eye next.

The current top contenders are another idea I have for an experiment in weird narrative tricks, and a shmup that I've been meaning to finish -- the shmup is actually already about half done, and got put on hold for with *Save the Date*!