

GAMER GUNK

ARC RAIDERS[®]

TAKE THE PLUNGE WITH

**EUROPA
UNIVERSALIS V**

CAST YOUR VOTE FOR

**GUNK
OF THE YEAR**

**Staying
Independent**
What is an Indie
Game?

DEC 2025

Intro

with Cameron Harizal

Hey y'all, Award Season is officially upon us so it's time to get out there and participate in democracy! *Expedition 33* will be winning all of the awards this year whether you wanted them to or not, but the process is still important nonetheless. Regardless of who wins, there will be some bigger announcements

at the Game Awards this year, at least according to some conspiracy theorists. Both *Elder Scrolls 6* and *Half-Life 3* are alleged to be getting announced at this show. Based on a screenshot from Jeff Keighley released showing what looks to be a Daedra shrine, *Elder Scrolls 6* could get a trailer. As for *Half-Life 3*,

people saw that Gabe Newell's yacht was heading toward Los Angeles meaning that he's definitely coming for the Game Awards and is definitely announcing *Half-Life 3*. Sounds like a bunch of cope to me, but I lost hope for a new Elder Scrolls a long time ago so don't look to me for hope. The ramble over now, the magazine starts.

MONTHLY ROUND UP

EXTRACTION SHOOTERS ARE BACK... WITH A CLANK



Cameron Harizal

There has been a lot of discussion online about whether or not generative AI should be used in video games. That discussion has picked up in recent weeks because of the game, *Arc Raiders*, made by Embark Studios and its use of TTS in the pinging system. Embark has used AI in their previous title, *The Finals*, with mixed to negative results, with players noting that the AI announcers were at best bland and at worst annoying. Many found it completely pointless, adding nothing of value to the game experience and opening a genie bottle best left shut. In their second game the tune sung by the player might be a bit different.

Now at first glance I could see how some might say that *Arc Raiders*' AI voice acting isn't necessary in any way and should be left out of the experience. However, players are finding that there is a tangible positive impact with its

inclusion, a small but noticeable one. Here's roughly how the pinging system works: when a player pings a location, it takes the closest object in the environment (i.e. tree, couch, hill, building, etc.) and selects a voice line related to that item and then uses TTS to read that voice line in the player characters voice. While walking around and exploring the world this is just pointless filler, because you can see and hear the ping. While in combat, however, it's found to be more useful, giving the player context clues when not looking at the ping and allowing for faster reaction times in certain situations. Now would this feature have been missed if excluded from the game before launch? No, games have been using voiceless pings for years before this game, even with the advantage it gives in combat no one would've said anything about its exclusion. Could you remove this feature now that it's in? Again no, in lobbies where no one is on comms this feature is a game changer, and for the silent few in those lobbies it would hurt their enjoyment of the game. So does that mean that its use was completely fine and should be praised? Again no, when it comes to AI you have to look at impacts

beyond the game itself, looking at environmental impacts and impact on the actors.

On the environmental side, is this TTS a large system like ChatGPT that requires the amount of water found in the Indian Ocean to run? Not according to Embark Studios, their TTS is an isolated system developed in-house, not running on any data farm. The environmental impact could be greater than the average studio still as a lot of information has been revealed about how it works, but certainly less than if they used a larger model. As for the actors, Embark and actors have both stated that a pay package was given out under the agreement that Embark was allowed to use their voices in the TTS model. Because of the amount of objects in the game, the amount of voice acting work that would've had to be done would have taken years to record and been extremely expensive. Does this payment package include royalties or compensation for the TTS when updates add new objects, we can't know for sure. Embark has also promised that they would not use the voices for any other project besides *Arc Raiders*, and would rehire them if they want to use their voice in a new

project. A lot of this section has been taking Embark at their word, how good that is only time will tell.

Now Pandora's Box was gonna be open whether or not Embark existed as a studio, that's not a question, but in this day and age is this a moral use for AI, or is this just the beginning of the end for creativity as we know it? Now for a long while that was the end of the article and there was a lot of uncertainty and hurt, but with all the subtlety of shotgun blast to the head, *Black Ops 7* released with widespread disappointment and laughter. The game is an absolute disaster, complete with AI generated Backgrounds[©], Character Portraits[©], Entire Plotlines[©], and so much more. The game's story mode is a mess barely held together



Arc Raiders (2025)

with what is most likely one writer trying to figure out the characters ChatGPT is making up. Entire characters from previous stories we see get murder or murder ourselves are brought back with a handwave

and a dream. The youtuber known as Brickly commented that this game is a failure that should be celebrated, and the markets seem to agree. *Black Ops 7* is the lowest performing Call of Duty game since *Modern Warfare 3*, and hordes of people are demanding their money back. It's good to laugh at this trainwreck for Activision and Microsoft, because it gives perspective of what AI can't do and can't replace no matter how much AAA developers want them to. Though I personally don't agree with Embark's use of AI in either of its titles, if it has to exist, I'm glad they succeeded where Activision failed... and ate shit. Like oh my god, did you see that skydive animation, it's so bad.

MAJOR RELEASES

December 1st

MARVEL'S COSMIC INVASION NEW, BEAT 'EM UP

December 3rd

LET IT DIE: INFERNO SEQUEL, SOULS-LIKE, INDIE

December 4th

OCTOPATH TRAVELLER 0 SEQUEL, JRPG

METROID PRIME 4: BEYOND SEQUEL, METROID _____

ROUTINE NEW, SURVIVAL HORROR, INDIE

December 5th

YAKUZA 0: DIRECTOR CUT REMASTER, BEAT 'EM UP

December 9th

UNBEATABLE NEW, RHYTHM ADVENTURE, INDIE, GUNK PICK!

EUROPAE UNIVERSALIS® V





Featured Game:
Europa Universalis V

Bryce Goetz

As a fan of grand strategy titles, I am delighted to say, right out the gate, that *Europa Universalis V* scratches an itch that I wasn't even sure I had. When it comes to examining such a game that is undeniably set up for a plethora of additional DLC content, the framework of this game is one of the strongest I have ever seen. There is, however, a pretty large asterisk I need to attach to this praise, and we must talk about it.

Europa Universalis V is the newest in the flagship franchise from Paradox Interactive, placing the player in control of what the game refers to as the 'spirit of a nation' as fledgling states traverse the rocky road from the late medieval era to post-Napoleonic period. From the get-go, it's clear that Paradox has learned some key and integral lessons from the previous title in the franchise. Addressing the common complaint of *EUIV* relying too much on the mana system, this title asks you to interact with several facets of your controlled society directly to resolve your national issues.

The game, at its best, asks you to engage with history in a way that puts you in the cockpit of a complex, barely flying airplane as it rattles through the headwinds of global plague, daunting league wars, and social upheaval. It's both thrilling and deliciously detailed, with interlocking systems offering a dizzying level of depth as players must manage the

economy, trade, market shares and proximity, the military, social policy, and much, much more. Mercifully, Paradox made the insightful and frankly brilliant design choice to let players automate specific systems, or even all of them, to learn each of these compartments at their own pace. Whether it's developing your trade networks meticulously or maneuvering your nation to accept favorable values, the strategy gameplay here is rock solid. It certainly helps that the soundtrack slaps.

Despite my glowing review thus far, however, the game has a major issue: its polish. There's just no way around it— it's clear that certain systems, like those with many International Organizations or Situations, as the game refers to them, are just not working as intended. For example, in a playthrough in which I started as Florence in central Italy, it was inevitable that I'd have to deal with the Italian Wars (as happened historically, in real life). When it was time to form leagues and go to war, the AI in my own alliance instead opted to run a monthly vote on whether mutual allies should abandon each other if attacked, every single time answering "yes!" without fail. The same apparently happened with the opposing coalitions, leading to a 50-year period of odd, stalemated peace as nobody had their shit together. This, of course, irked me, as the Italian Wars ironically became an era of nearly undisturbed non-aggression, clearly highlighting the failure of these mechanics to engulf players in a larger regional conflict with frustrating circular votes and a timid AI.

This is further punctuated by the fact that the game is still receiving frequent, game-changing updates and hotfixes. Over the course of the 60-hour review run for this article, the game went from version 1.0.1 to 1.0.8

at the time of writing this review, each patch adjusting major mechanics such as trade maintenance and levy power. Going through this roller coaster made booting up the game each time a surprise in and of itself, with my country going from raking in dough to nearly bankrupt, or armies going from close but well-balanced matchups to absolute slaughter fests. I can imagine that even attempting to balance a game like this can be an absolute nightmare, with tweaking one core number throwing hundreds of nations out of whack, and props to the Paradox development team for being on the ball with frequent and significant updates. It does beg a good question though of how some of these non-functional key mechanics made it through playtesting in the first place. Some features clearly need a bit more time in the oven.

I do want to reassert though that there is a great game here despite some rough polish. Balancing still is in question, and the game has allowed itself some mechanical room to grow, particularly in the vein of a Paradox-type mechanical DLC. Do not get it twisted though, when you're in the pilot's seat and you just won a mega war to assert your territorial claims or trading hegemony, it is *damn* fun. This game simply does a great job of making the player feel like a mastermind, carefully pulling the various strings of their society to build something truly powerful. The bones of this game are strong, but like actual bones, these ones need a nutritious diet, particularly one of healthy balancing and frequent updates to address some ailments. If Paradox can get these systems working as they are clearly intended to, then *Europa Universalis V* has a real shot to be one of the greatest strategy games of all time. To not do so before charging into further DLC, however, would be a critical mistake.



STAYING INDEPENDENT

What is an Indie Game?

Bryce Goetz

Clair Obscur: Expedition 33 (2025)
Minecraft (2009)
Balatro (2024)

Here at Gamer Gunk, we make no secret about our intentions to highlight great indie and niche games so that we can bring creative works and small studios forward to get their well-deserved flowers. With The Game Awards around the corner and nominations released, however, we face a timeless question resurfacing: what the hell is an indie game anyway? What does that even mean anymore?

This question of course emerged from truly unique and creative gaming works exploding in popularity and scrutiny. *Clair Obscur: Expedition 33* is perhaps one of the most beloved games of this year with several nods for awards across numerous shows, and yet also came with many questions of its origins. Some may intuitively assert that this project is indie, but there are many that dispute this claim. Those debunking the claim that Sandfall is indie cite the developer's funding from the publisher Kepler Interactive as a disqualification of the category as

it allowed access to big-name actors and cutting-edge technology. It may be their debut title with a smaller team, but it's an AA title through and through. This does lead to some interesting outlines for a criterion that I think most can collectively agree on when it comes to determining indie games as the industry starts to blur these lines between what is and is not independently developed.

I think the quintessential recent example of an indie project



Clair Obscur: Expedition 33 (2025)

reaching the limelight is probably *Balatro*. Developed by a single person on an assumed pocket-money budget, this game absolutely exploded into popularity and captured the minds, monitors, and phones of aspiring poker haters. To say that this game is successful is a bit of an understatement, especially considering the fact that a single person made this game from scratch. Certainly making its return on investment by orders of magnitude, it's clear that *Balatro* is the benchmark aspiration for solo developers to make their mark on the gaming industry. This does go back even further though. While not a solo developer, it's truly difficult not to point to the block-shaped empire that Mojang managed to create for themselves with the gargantuan success of *Minecraft*. Undeniably indie by nature at the game's inception, the game mined its way into the hearts and minds of millions upon millions of people, scoring not just billions of dollars

as a franchise, but numerous spin-offs, subcultures, and even a movie. To track the trajectory all the way back to its initial 2009 release, its continual success and enormous popularity, even 16 years later, seems almost impossible. To say that post-Microsoft-acquisition of Mojang that the nature of the franchise's development and funding has not changed, however, would be disingenuous.

With a few examples on the table, I think we can start to draw a couple of boundaries that we can use to identify indie titles. First, I think it is important that we establish that the success of an indie game post-release does not change the nature of its development, and that making millions of dollars or being extremely popular does not exclude a game from being an indie project. What could affect that status, however, is how the game is funded and acquired in continual development, *Minecraft* being a prime example. *Minecraft* in 2009 was surely an indie project, but *Minecraft* in 2025 is hardly so. If we are to take the distinction set forth by the *Expedition 33* controversy seriously, we must consider that funding, especially by large third parties, is absolutely a disqualification of a project from being strictly

independent. Therefore, an indie game must be a game that has not had any financial backing from large donors, whether it be publisher or donation, and the definition of



Minecraft (2009)

'large' is frankly a bit ambiguous. This does not mean, however, that an indie game cannot be crowdfunded; popularity is not a disqualifying factor, and that includes how much a prospective audience chooses to contribute. Finally, indie games by nature require a small development team. This distinction does also require a bit of discretion, but I think we can all agree that a massive studio like Ubisoft self-funding a game, for example, does not, by any stretch of the term, make the project indie. When in doubt, you can always

consult the funding put forward by the developer themselves to make your distinction.

So, with a framework put forward, let's use it in action. Take this month's topic of *The Plunge* for example: *Europa Universalis V*. Is this game an indie game? On the surface, it may seem so. The game had a relatively small development team, likely in the few dozen, if not less, and certainly is a niche game with a current player count of about 30,000 people, not even breaking six figures at its peak. When you look just a little further, though, and you find that the game was developed by Paradox Tinto, a subsidiary of the game's publisher, Paradox Interactive - a 1.7-billion-dollar company - we can likely assign the immediate disqualification of indie, despite the relatively small studio and middling popularity. The game is certainly niche, however, which piqued our interest to cover it, but to call it outright indie would just be dishonest.

As the games industry begins to embrace independent projects as genuine pathways for successful, unique, and beloved games, we find ourselves at an exciting time for gaming. The chokehold that AAA developers had both on the financial success and notoriety of the gaming industry is fading, at least to some degree, allowing more people than ever to step forward and succeed from passion projects. It's not to say that being indie alone is enough to make a project good from a critical standpoint, but what it does mean is we should be willing to uplift these projects whenever we can to make gaming more accessible and varied not just as an industry, but as a form of art. That begins with identifying these projects— and celebrating them.



Largest Video Game Publishers: Ranked by Revenue

E. Latenskaya - data40.com (2024)

THE GUNK

Cameron Harizal

HORSES
NEW, PSYCHOLOGICAL HORROR, INDIE
DECEMBER 2ND



This game would've flown under my radar if not for the controversy surrounding it- but first, the game. This is a game about taking care of a farm and its livestock, where the livestock are people with horse masks. You have to take orders and survive 14 days on this farm in order to get paid... and maybe get to leave. The aesthetic and color composition makes you feel like you're playing through an art house horror film. Despite the simpler graphics, the actions and story feel more gut wrenching than just watching a film. This is one I'm gonna try to pick up on day one, but I might have to figure out how itch.io works first. That is because this game has been inexplicably banned from steam, with only automated messages giving vague explanations. Transgressive art is what allows a medium to progress and evolve and if that art isn't allowed to exist, the medium will grow stagnant. Artists should be allowed to make art that pushes the envelope without fear of having their livelihood threatened. If this game does poorly the developer, Santa Regione, could shut down due to poor profits. If this game or any other in their library seems interesting, I'd highly recommend checking them out!

SKATE STORY

NEW, SKATING SIM, INDIE

DECEMBER 8TH

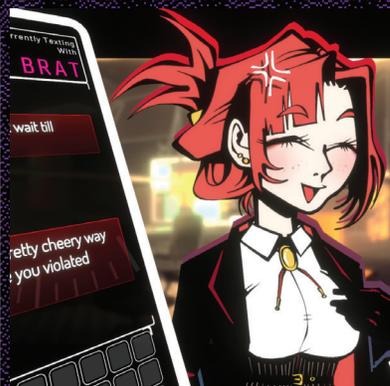


Skateboarding is a deceptively beautiful sport. We get lost in the thrill of seeing people hurl themselves in the air at impossible speeds knowing full well they could leave a skid mark on the pavement if they land wrong. However, if you look past the danger and the speed, you see a mesmerizing waltz between the skater and their board. A waltz where the skater glides across the ground and soars through the sky as the lovely duo dances effortlessly. *Skate Story* shows us a dance that is normally lost in the noise of the pavement. The player character is a demon made of glass which is both visually striking and draws more attention to the board. Each trick done flows more fluidly into the next than in any other skateboarding title I've seen. Performing combos feels so effortless, until you miss the trick and smash to pieces in a frankly spectacular fashion. The story is as bizarre as the premise, you play as a demon whose only goal in death is to eat the moon because he's hungry. So naturally you make a deal with the devil to be turned into glass and in exchange are given a skateboard for shredding rails. One of the weirder games to release the year, and it's all the more reason to pick it up.

OF THE DEVIL: EPISODE 2

MURDER MYSTERY, INDIE

DECEMBER 18TH

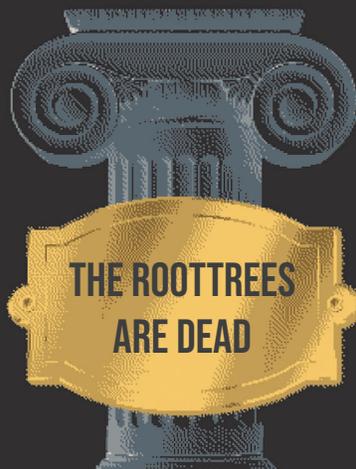


No, this is not new but... I still wanted to talk about it because this is the first time I've actually gotten the chance since it first came out. *Of the Devil* is a visual novel in the same vein of *Ace Attorney*, down to the profession of the main protagonist. However, this takes place in the distant future where AI and the surveillance state have made crime impossible to commit without getting caught (very topical). Anyone who is arrested is assumed guilty and any lawyers that are left are just there for show. Consequentially, the chips are stacked against you as you try to get your client a not guilty verdict. Speaking of chips, there are additional mechanics that are themed around poker that give you advantages if you reveal or withhold evidence at the right time.

GUNK OF THE YEAR

We had the idea for this issue to do a Game of the Year but only do an indie game we all loved. So we all sat down to have a calm and honest discussion about our favorite game from this year... that did not happen. I insisted that the intricate storytelling of *The Roottrees are Dead* deserved this award but Cade just called me a nerd and threw a textbook at my head. Cade talked about *Dispatch* but kept getting interrupted by Bryce screaming "spin the wheel". I think Bryce liked *Clover Pit* but he just kept trying to get us to fly to Las Vegas to "bet it all on black". After that it just devolved as Cade and I began fist fighting and Bryce was betting our entire budget on the Miami Dolphins winning the

NBA Championship (no it's not lost on me that they're a football team). Nik was saying something about the new *Risk of Rain 2* DLC: *Alloyed Collective* I think, but Cade was choking me out at this point so I was fading in and out of consciousness. After the chaos had calmed down, Nik said "we should let the fans decide". Before I could shoot down the Ridiculous Idea, he sent me my parents' home address and an Amazon cart filled with the ingredients for thermite. So, we have decided to put the vote to you, **THE PEOPLE!** Be sure to submit your vote before January 1st to have your voice heard for Gunk of the Year.



**VOTE ON GAMERGUNK.IO
BEFORE JANUARY 1ST**

EVENTS

DECEMBER 2025

SPORTS FEST

Dec 8 - Dec 15, 2025

GAME AWARDS

Dec 11, 2025, 7:30 EST

WINTER NEXT FEST

Dec 18 - Jan 15, 2026

Outro

with Cameron Harizal

Thanks for reading, yeah it's a lighter month but that's to be expected when the year's coming to a close. You'll have plenty of time to finish up those backlogs and spend time with friends and family this season. As for us, we'll be back next year with a brand new magazine

Cameron Harizal, Project Lead & Contributor
Bryce Goetz, Editor & Contributor

and a winner for Gunk of the Year! If you have any suggestions on formatting or the games we include please feel free to let me know. If you played any of the games we recommended please let me know if you liked them. Thank you and Bye <3

Nik Williams, Web Designer
Cade Harris, Art & Layout