Chapter 10

Independent Games (1997–Present)

The Scratchware Manifesto and Dimensions of "Indie"

In the summer of 2000, a group of anonymous game designers published a three-part essay, *The Scratchware Manifesto*, on the abandonware archive site, Home of the Underdogs. The declaration delivered a scathing critique of practices in the digital game industry: it criticized publishers who chose game genres with safe investment returns over innovative ones, who made demands on workers with long periods of crunch time, and who shipped buggy games that resulted from rushed production schedules. The essay called for an alternative type of game described as "scratchware." It was to be accessible, high quality, replayable, short, and created by teams of three or less individuals with multiple skill sets. Scratchware games were to focus on 2D art, which allowed for economical and rapid development while providing the opportunity to explore untapped aesthetic avenues. Key to scratchware games would be their cost and method of distribution: $25 or less and deliverable without retailers, via the Internet. Each element was intended to break the practices of the game industry by producing easy-to-acquire games with greater novelty in design, at lower cost to players. In short, it was a rallying cry for the creation of independent games.

The growth of independent games in the mid to late 2000s appeared, on the surface, to have answered the manifesto's call. Many *had* operated at

lower budgets and with smaller development teams; pixel art, 2D graphics, and other flat styles *did* allow for efficient development times and a critique of photorealistic 3D imagery; many independent game developers *were* able to exercise creative control, retain ownership, and develop ideas that large developers were not interested in pursuing. In addition to the growth of Internet distribution, alternative funding streams such as the crowd-funding site Kickstarter allowed developers to further bypass traditional methods of seeking bank loans or other forms of seed money.

The development of the contemporary independent games scene, however, was much more complicated than fulfilling the prescriptions from The Scratchware Manifesto. Motivations of individual developers varied, some were former industry professionals inspired by The Scratchware Manifesto, while others had no industry experience and simply saw an opportunity in a changing market. Promoters of independent games ranged from populist entities, like niche Internet communities to major corporate players like Valve, Microsoft, Nintendo, and Sony who actively promoted independent games based on their marketability to the larger gaming audience. Even the words "independent" and "indie" carried different connotations that ranged from games that were simply self-funded, self-published, and self-promoted, to games that provided deeply intellectual commentary and criticism. These complex and contradictory elements associated with independent games, nonetheless, created a vibrant context as the barriers for game creation became progressively lower throughout the 2000s.

The Early Independent Game Scene

Success with Shareware

As discussed in Chapter 8, shareware was a form of marketing in which users were able to try a limited version of a program before they bought the full edition. Despite the fact that most shareware games did not generate reliable funding and that the popularity of the model had declined significantly by the late 1990s, some shareware games earned enough to support their makers as full-time, independent game developers.

Jeff Vogel founded Spiderweb Software in the mid-1990s and specialized in the creation of CRPGs. Rather than compete with the detailed, pre-rendered graphics and recorded dialog of large budget games like *Diablo* or the 3D open world environments of *Daggerfall*, Vogel's games, such as *Exile III: Ruined World* (1997, Spiderweb Software) represented a continuation in the development of the 1980s Ultima-Style CRPGs (see Chapter 6). The games featured pixelated graphics, contextual details, and dialog delivered via windows of richly written text and, most

significantly, a systems-heavy, tactical approach to gameplay involving party management. These older design elements were partnered with refinements to the interface and to the design of interaction that matched contemporary expectations, many of which were inspired by larger big budget games.

Unable to compete based on the superiority of its graphics, *Exile III* relied on shareware to allow potential customers to experience a portion of the game's engrossing narrative and evaluate the gameplay. Players who wanted the full version used a credit card to purchase a key code that unlocked the remainder of the game—a difficult setup, as banks in the mid-1990s were leery of online commerce. Nonetheless, the game found a niche audience that was substantial enough to earn *Exile III* two shareware *Game of the Year* awards. Vogel's later games in the Geneforge, Nethergate, Avadon, and Avernum series also succeeded by following the same model.

Other shareware independent games also received accolades. *Tread Marks* (2000, Longbow Games) combined armored tanks, racing games, and fast multiplayer, tournament-style, deathmatches similar to *Unreal Tournament* (Figure 9.6). The game's high-end 3D graphics, a rarity for independent games of the time, featured terrain that deformed with each explosion and other dazzling visual effects by Longbow Games' president and programmer, Seumas McNally (Figure 10.1). While *Tread Marks* was distributed as shareware the full version was sent through the mail on CD as the game was too large to directly download at the time through the predominant dial-up Internet connections.

FIGURE 10.1 **A tank battle in *Tread Marks* (2000, Longbow Games). (Courtesy of Longbow Games.)**

THE SEUMAS McNALLY GRAND PRIZE

Since 1999, the Independent Games Festival at the Game Developers Conference has given awards for games in categories for excellence in visual art, audio, design, and others including a grand prize for the year's "best game." Seumas McNally's *Tread Marks* was the second independent game to win the IGF's grand prize along with best design and best programming, raising its profile and eventually leading to a retail release through a publisher. McNally, however, tragically passed away in 2000 after a 3-year ordeal with Hodgkin's lymphoma only weeks after *Tread Marks* won the three awards. Shortly thereafter, the Independent Games Festival's grand prize was renamed "The Seumas McNally Grand Prize" in his honor and continues to be awarded annually to the year's best independent game.

Flash and 2D Freeware Games

Talented artists and programmers at the turn of the millennium also developed games for sheer creative enjoyment and released them free-of-charge as browser-based Flash games or as downloadable freeware. The typical small size and short game length made it easy to quickly enact changes and add content, leading to a vibrant development context as games could reciprocally influence and be influenced by each other over the course of different release versions. Web sites and online communities like Newgrounds, Jay Is Games, Kongregate, and the Independent Gaming weblog, helped establish an amateur game developer scene in the early 2000s by facilitating conversations among designers across the world and providing a means for dissemination.

Flash and Struggles for Legitimacy

Flash was one of the most popular development platforms available to amateur game designers for 2D games through the early 2000s. It was simple to use and had a visual-friendly layout. The prospect of company sponsorship in exchange for placing advertising banners in the games also helped draw developers to the platform and provided a small amount of revenue for independent game creation. The initial versions of Flash were focused on producing animation and supported clickable buttons; thus, the first set of Flash games consisted of minimally interactive "click games" that used mouse movement and clicking input. Using these capabilities, designers created simple shooting galleries, short narrative-based games with branching dialog choices, and even point-and-click adventures. Many amateur developers in the nascent Flash communities used pre-existing images and/or music taken from popular culture rather than original art and sound assets, leading to a "mash-up" aesthetic common to many games. Since dial-up modems imposed a practical limitation on the size of the

games one could produce, most early Flash games typically contained only a few minutes' worth of gameplay.

Despite these limitations, some creators were able to exploit the abilities of Flash to create games with an unexpected depth of gameplay. Tom Fulp, who founded the Flash portal Newgrounds in 1995, also created one of the most sophisticated early Flash games, *Pico's School* (1999). The objective of *Pico's School* was to survive a school shooting perpetuated by ninjas and aliens disguised as Goth teenagers. Despite the game's theme, which pushed the limits of black humor and political correctness (like much of the content on Newgrounds), it exhibited a complexity of design and polish in presentation that was virtually unseen in amateur Flash game development. After a brief cutscene that introduced the game's setting, players of *Pico's School* could choose multiple pathways through the school's halls, have conversations that affected game outcomes and engage in boss fights, all of which were driven by simple mouse clicks.

Later versions of Flash added options that allowed the programming of advanced behaviors and interactions. Developers then created more ambitious games that led to a healthy Flash gaming scene focused on Fulp's Newgrounds site. Flash-based games, regardless of complexity, however, were seen as illegitimate relative to downloadable freeware games made in more traditional, software-creation programs. Honorific bodies charged with recognizing accomplishments in independent games such as the Independent Games Festival, for example, did not initially accept browser-based Flash game submissions for award consideration. Publishers, meanwhile, refused to port Flash games to consoles because they did not look or play like console games. Tom Fulp and Dan Paladin's Flash game *Alien Hominid* (2002), however, helped change these perceptions.

Alien Hominid (Figure 10.2), was a fast-paced action platformer in the style of 2D run 'n gun games like *Contra* and *Metal Slug* (1996, SNK). The game, like *Pico's School*, began with a brief, animated cutscene showing a flying saucer crash landing on Earth and the alien pilot's encounter with a friendly boy. Gameplay, after the introduction, launched into chaotic, side-scrolling, shooting action, as waves of FBI men in black streamed in from the sides, attempting to capture and study the alien. The technical ability of the game was beyond expectations for Flash games: players could jump, duck, fire their alien blasters in four directions, and move in a highly responsive manner. There was great variety in gameplay: players could receive brief power-ups for their guns, earn extra lives, destroy moving cars, and fight gigantic boss characters. *Alien Hominid* also featured a distinctive art style created by game artist Dan Paladin. Rather than the simple geometric shapes or mouse-drawn graphics of Flash games of the time, Paladin used a stylus and drawing tablet, which led to the game's hand-drawn, cartoon-like visuals. While the single-level Flash game could be completed in a

FIGURE 10.2 The Flash version of *Alien Hominid*. (Courtesy of Newgrounds/The Behemoth.)

number of minutes, *Alien Hominid* became one of the most popular games on Newgrounds and received millions of plays.

Alien Hominid's online release caught the attention of John Baez, an environment artist who worked for the same company as Dan Paladin. Since few games then available for consoles looked and played like *Alien Hominid*, Baez saw potential in releasing it in console version. When Baez and Paladin were both laid off, Baez convinced Paladin and Fulp to pursue full-time independent development. The result was The Behemoth founded in 2003. The Behemoth secured a publisher and *Alien Hominid* was reworked and expanded for commercial release on consoles and handhelds in 2004 and 2005. It was the first adaptation of a browser-based Flash game to game consoles. Although the Behemoth felt *Alien Hominid* would only generate niche appeal, it gained popularity across a wide audience due to its retro-style gameplay and unique visuals, proving to publishers that independent games could be financially successful despite a radical deviation from expectations.

The improved capabilities of Flash also allowed game designers to add new sensations of speed and velocity in moving objects. Raigan Burns and Mare Sheppard of Metanet felt that the development of 2D platforming games had been cut short by the industry's rush to adopt 3D graphics, leading to *N* (2004, Metanet), a freeware platforming game developed in Flash that featured a visually abstract ninja (Figure 10.3). Inspired by the classic computer platformer *Lode Runner* (1983, Brøderbund Software, Inc.) as well as other contemporary freeware games, *N* required the player to navigate increasingly difficult, single-screen puzzle-like levels collecting gold, while avoiding the game's many cleverly placed hazards.

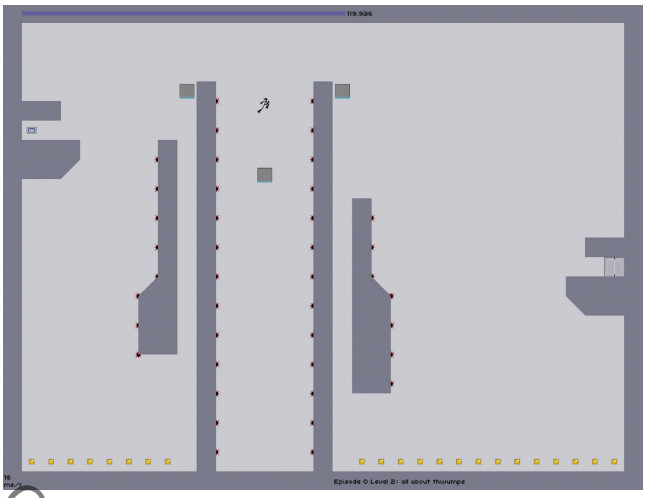

FIGURE 10.3 An early level in *N* (2004, Metanet Software). (Courtesy of Metanet Software Inc. www.metanetsoftware.com)

N was unconventional in its radical simplicity: the visuals were predominantly black and gray abstract shapes while controls were limited to horizontal movement and jumping. The game, nonetheless, contained depth, as its "elastic" feel of the jump and run provided the player with a sense of acceleration through space. This provided new opportunities for level design, as the player could use the built-up inertia to jump and sail through the air of levels with unconventionally far off platforms and hazards. *N* also included an editor that, like the earlier *Lode Runner*, allowed users to create and distribute new levels. Many community-designed levels were included in the game's version 2.0, making the play experience of *N* a community project within the online Flash-based game scene.

N, like *Alien Hominid*, gained a significant online following that resulted in millions of plays and was similarly ported to home consoles, handheld systems, and online digital marketplaces. Both won Audience Choice awards at the 2005 IGF and *Alien Hominid* also won for Technical Excellence and Excellence in Art. This recognition brought Flash-based games further legitimacy and created a path for the commercial release of later games originating in Flash such as *flOw*, *Super Meat Boy*, and *VVVVVV*.

Japan's Doujin Soft and Freeware Scene

Unlike independent games in North America in the early 2000s, *doujin soft*, Japan's rough equivalent of independent games, had highly developed channels that allowed game developers not affiliated with large companies to bring their games to customers. *Doujin soft* games, like many Flash games, were small, self-published, hobbyist projects that commonly used pre-existing images, characters, and sounds from popular culture such as

manga and *anime* series. Many of these Japanese hobbyist games, however, were openly sold at specialized retail locations and conventions, despite their use of trademarked characters. *Doujin soft* game makers worked in all genres but many gravitated toward visual novels and classic 2D games such as RPGs, shoot 'em ups and platformers. The 2D pixel art, head-to-head fighting game, *Melty Blood* (2002, Type-Moon/Watanabe Seisakusho), for example, was created with characters from the visual novel *Tsukihime* and followed many of the design conventions established in Capcom's 2D fighting games of the later 1990s. The high production values and anime-inspired flair earned it instant praise among the PC-based *doujin soft* community and a version was brought to the arcades and published on home consoles. Other games in the *Melty Blood* series also received mass publication, however, *doujin soft* games were typically unavailable outside of Japan due to their extreme niche appeal, distribution in physical form, limited locations, and difficulties in obtaining internationally compatible formats.

While *doujin soft* was regarded as commercialized "fan work," several Japanese game developers released a number of games with original design concepts and graphics as freeware, many of which had a significant influence on the developing North American independent games scene. Shoot 'em up games were particularly well suited for experimentation with new ideas since established game mechanics could be modified in simple ways that produced innovative changes in gameplay. Hikoza Ohkubo's freeware *Warning Forever* (2003, Hikware) consisted solely of boss fights but utilized a unique system in which every boss evolved different offensive capabilities depending on how the player destroyed its predecessor (Figure 10.4). Kanta Matsuhisa (a.k.a. "Omega") designed *Every Extend* (2004), which replaced the ability to shoot with a single-use, self-destruct mechanic employed by

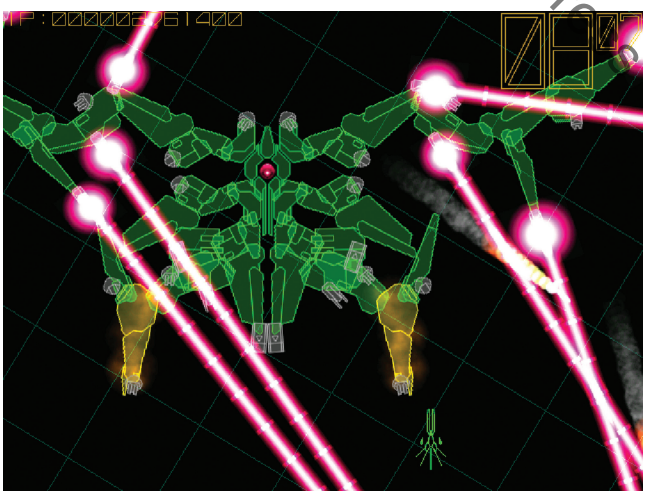

FIGURE 10.4 ***Warning Forever*** **(2003, Hikware). (Courtesy of Hikoza Ohkubo.)**

the player to create explosive chains among moving formations of enemies. Kenta Cho, one of the most prolific designers of the Japanese freeware game scene, gained recognition for innovative shooters like *TUMIKI Fighters* (2004, ABA Games), which allowed the player to collect the parts of fallen enemies and use them as upgraded firepower and armor. Many of Cho's other shoot 'em up games, such as *Parsec 47* (2003), *Torus Trooper* (2004), and *Gunroar* (2005), also gained a wide following.

While many freeware shoot 'em ups influenced North American game developers, Daisuke Amaya's 2004 adventure game, *Doukutsu Monogatari* or *Cave Story*, proved to be a galvanizing title. *Cave Story* was developed over the course of 5 years and featured an unusually large amount of content for a freeware game. It contained a complex cast of characters situated in an engrossing narrative represented through bright, pixilated visuals. The game's concept grew from Amaya's admiration for the original 1986 *Metroid* that allowed players to explore and learn about the gameworld through their own actions. According to Amaya, this approach made each of the player's accomplishments, whether major or minor, meaningful. *Cave Story* represented a design form that has since been dubbed *Metroidvania*, games that drew inspiration from the construction of space and flow of gameplay seen in action platformers *Metroid* and *Super Metroid* as well as *Castlevania: Symphony of the Night* (1997, Konami). In *Cave Story* like many other Metroidvania games, players crisscrossed and backtracked through large, continuous 2D game spaces and attempted to find power-up items that opened previously closed areas for play. This approach to design emphasized game mechanics as the functions of the various weapon and item upgrades were directly worked into progression through the game.

The art, design, and scope of *Cave Story* caught the immediate attention of Japanese freeware aficionados in North America. Within a month, these communities created a translation hack that brought *Cave Story* to English-speaking audiences. Word of *Cave Story* spread rapidly online; it led to ports to various operating systems, playthrough videos on YouTube, and numerous dedicated fan sites. Although *Cave Story* was not completely unique among Japanese freeware games, it struck a chord in North American independent communities and became seen as the embodiment of "indie": a labor of love created entirely by a single designer, which utilized a retro visual style and focused on game mechanics.

Freeware Experiments with Games and Art

The mid-2000s saw a number of "art games" that used recognizable genres and mechanics but downplayed the traditional challenge-based elements of gameplay, favoring instead the communication of an experience or concepts between creator and player. As many of the games were unconventional with limited initial commercial appeal, they were frequently released as freeware.

Art games, however, eventually gained a sufficient audience to warrant commercial release and success for a few in the later 2000s and 2010s.

Although developers focused on different elements between art and games, they overwhelmingly made interactivity a primary focus as it distinguished games from other forms of media. *Samorost* (2003) was a short point-and-click adventure created in Flash that carried a thread of the surreal through its photo collage visuals and gameplay. The game, created by Czech film student, Jakub Dvorský, as part of a thesis in animation for the Academy of Arts, Architecture and Design in Prague, undercut many of the point-and-click genre's foundations on logical puzzle solving. The game, instead, placed an emphasis on interactive animations. Play focused on directing a small space elf in a quest to divert an asteroid on a collision course with his home (Figure 10.5). An early section of *Samorost*, for example, featured a verdant mountain landscape that was inhabited by a group of people working near a ski lift. The player's goal, unknown, was to activate the ski lift and allow the space gnome to ski down the hill. To accomplish this, the player needed to click on a hookah-smoking man three times: allowing the man to consume the substance and drop the pipe, which the player then used as a key to start the ski lift and continue on to the remaining puzzles. This illogical thought process invited the player to click on multiple elements of the game space and thus trigger a variety of incidental animations. Through exhibition at art shows and its availability online, *Samorost* received significant recognition among both art and game communities.

Dvorský founded Amanita Design as a freelance design studio after he graduated, but continued to create short Flash games, some commissioned by Nike and Polyphonic Spree. Amanita Design pushed back against what it saw as the game industry's unwillingness to experiment and its overemphasis

FIGURE 10.5 ***Samorost*** **(2003, Amanita Design). (Courtesy of Amanita Design. (C) Samorost by Amanita Design, www.amanita-design.net)**

on 3D, when it introduced its first retail game *Samorost 2* (2005), which followed the same surreal style of the original. It earned numerous awards and, although short, was successful enough to support Amanita Design as a full-time, independent game developer.

Although Amanita Design did not consider its works "art," a number of other game designers consciously created games as art. Belgian developers and digital artists Auriea Harvey and Michaël Samyn, founded Tale of Tales in 2002 seeking to directly engage the audience not through museums or galleries but online through interactive digital art. One of Tale of Tales' early projects, *The Endless Forest* (2005), began as a commission by the *Grand Duke Jean Museum of Modern Art* in Luxembourg and consisted of an MMORPG in which the player controlled a deer running through a fairytale-like forest. The game featured none of the quests or goals typically associated with other MMORPGs: it was, instead, a live performance space. Players interacted with individual elements of the forest and with each other, in a sense of pure play. *The Endless Forest* did not allow players to converse with each other directly; the only mode of in-game communication was a series of emotes and other actions triggered through buttons on an action bar, reminiscent of the interfaces in popular MMORPGs such as *World of Warcraft*. The game could also function as a screensaver, launched during periods of inactivity, and allowing a player to wander the forest for brief periods in a relaxed state.

Tale of Tales created a number of other titles through the late 2000s, which, like Amanita Design, were commercially sold. *The Graveyard* (2008), for example, allowed the player to direct the movement of an old woman in a black and white graveyard to a park bench. Upon sitting, the old woman appeared to have an introspective moment as the game camera showed a close-up of the woman's face superimposed on the gamespace. This action, or lack thereof, continued for as long as the player chose, creating a shared moment with the game character. Following the period of introspection, the player directed the slowly moving old woman out of the graveyard. While the game was entirely free, a commercialized version introduced the random possibility of the old woman's death which otherwise undercut the game's gentle pace with an unexpected and sudden event.

One of the most celebrated freeware art games was Jason Rohrer *Passage* (2007). *Passage* presented life from young adulthood through old age and death, in the span of 5 minutes, using a screen resolution of 100 × 16 pixels (Figure 10.6). The interactive *memento mori*, or meditation on the inevitability of death, was created as an entry to the Gamma 256 event sponsored by Kokoromi, a Montreal-based group dedicated to the promotion of artistic and experimental digital games. In *Passage*, players could chose to go through the digital life alone or with a digital partner, and explore a large space that was visually limited to a narrow band of pixels. In a simple but thought-provoking manner, the right portion of the band became sharper as

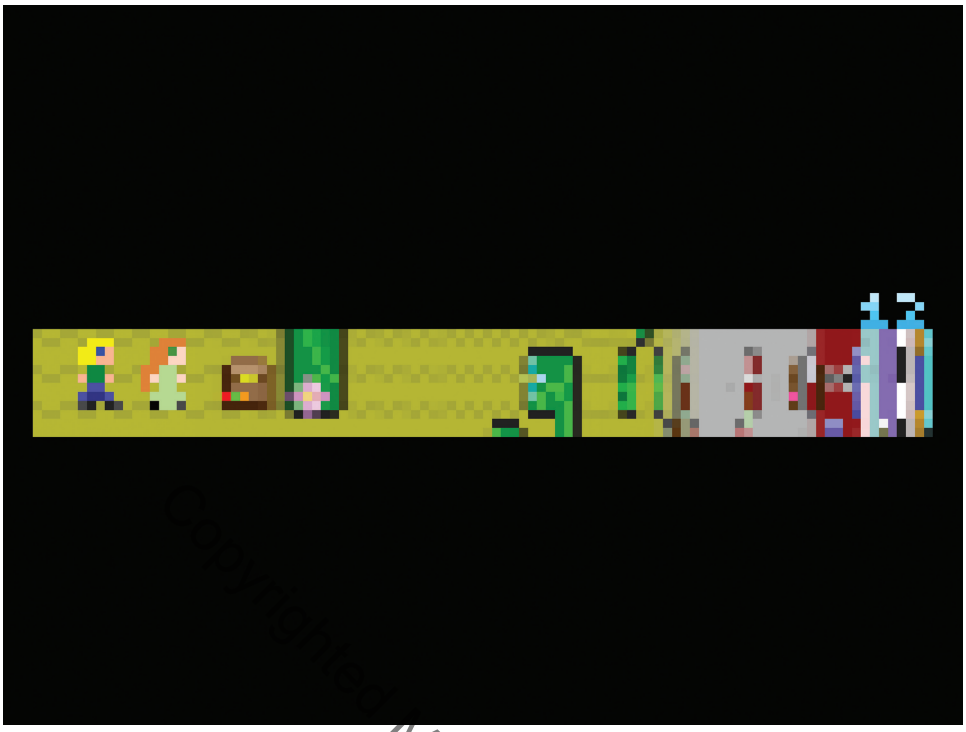

FIGURE 10.6 ***Passage*** **(2007). (Courtesy of Jason Rohrer.)**

the character aged, representing a clearer view of one's future and ultimate fate. This was countered with increased haziness on the left portion of the screen, as memories of the past became more distant.

Unlike the works by Tale of Tales, *Passage* melded symbolism with traditional game mechanics and featured a score accumulator that ascended as one progressed, representing the richness of one's life. The score could increase by journeying with a partner, as well as through the discovery of life-enriching treasure chests in hidden areas of the gamespace. Thus, the player could make many choices on how to spend the 5-minute life. Nonetheless, as the game functioned as a *memento mori*, the accomplishments gained during the life ultimately meant nothing and did not prevent the character's death, no matter how high the score. *Passage* received praise for its simple yet deeply profound message expressed as a game. It was among the first group of games added to the Museum of Modern Art's permanent collection of videogames established in 2012.

The Mainstream Breakout of Independent Games

In 2005, game industry veterans Greg Costikyan and Johnny Wilson launched Manifesto Games, an online marketplace with digital

distribution for computer-based independent games. Born from the spirit of The Scratchware Manifesto (of which Costikyan anonymously contributed to under the name "Designer X"), Manifesto Games was an attempt to provide a home for niche games that would not receive shelf space in retail locations. Thus, games with unconventional or truly innovative ideas could find an audience and help break what Costikyan and Wilson saw as stagnation in the games market. Unfortunately, Manifesto Games was unable to attain the mass of developers and customers needed to support the site and it was shut down in June 2009. Ironically, it was large companies like Valve Corporation, Sony, Microsoft, and Nintendo that completed the work of bringing niche games to players and helped foster the breakout of independent games precisely when Manifesto Games shut its doors.

Steam and Independent Games

As discussed in Chapter 9, Valve's Steam marketplace became one of the main refuges for computer games amid the greater popularity of console gaming and shrinking computer game offerings by retailers. In addition to selling digital-only games, Steam hosted some of the earliest breakout independent game titles. With Valve's high esteem among modding communities coupled with the central role of PCs in game development, Steam quickly became one of the preeminent places for the sale of independent games.

One of the first independent games available on Steam was Introversion Software's *Darwinia* (2005), a winner of the IGF Seumas McNally Grand Prize. *Darwinia* combined multiple modes of gameplay, including elements reminiscent of RTSs and arcade shoot 'em ups, into an experience that defied traditional definitions of genre. The player managed the action of units and gathered resources, but gameplay concentrated on shooting enemies in a manner similar to the Golden Age arcade games, *Robotron 2084* and *Centipede*. The game's story of repelling a virus invasion from within a computer and saving a group of indigenous digital entities was enhanced by visuals that drew inspiration from films like *Tron* through its gridded world of faceted polygons (Figure 10.7).

Steam's basis on home computers allowed independent game developers to take full advantage of the mouse as an input device. Mark Healey's *Rag Doll Kung Fu* (2005), another early independent game on Steam, was a tongue-in-cheek fighting game that parodied kung fu films of the 1970s. Healey, a professional within the game industry, created *Rag Doll Kung Fu* in his spare time out of a desire to design a ridiculous game. Using the mouse, players kicked, punched, and jumped by grabbing and snapping the limbs of the game's puppet-like, 2D rag doll characters.

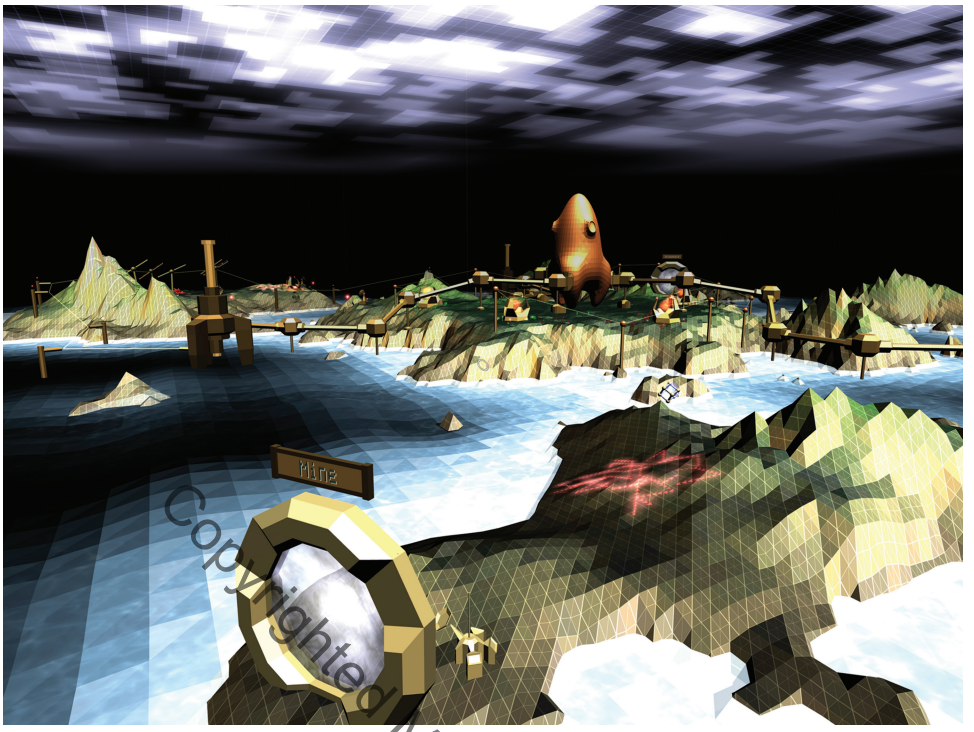

FIGURE 10.7 ***Darwinia*** **(2005, Introversion Software). (Courtesy of Introversion Software.)**

The mouse was prominent in Amanita Design's first full-length game, *Machinarium* (2009), which built on the studio's momentum from the *Samorost* games and helped in the revitalization of the dormant point-and-click adventure genre. In *Machinarium*, the player directed a small robot on a quest to rescue his robot girlfriend and stop a group of evil robots from bombing the city. *Machinarium* was unlike the simple "click game" approach of the studio's previous titles. It utilized a more conventional approach to point-and-click adventure games with more logical puzzle solving and the use of items collected and combined from an inventory. *Machinarium*, however, retained the studio's emphasis on animation and unique 2D visuals by using a digital version of cut-out animation and placing characters in atmospheric, hand-drawn environments (Figure 10.8). Like the studio's earlier point-and-click games, the player never experienced defeat in the form of death: progress was interrupted only through the inability to decipher the puzzle, a concept the developers had taken from *Myst*. Amanita Design continued its Flash-based, point-and-click adventures through *Botanicula* (2012), which was a return to form as it emphasized playful exploration over logical puzzle solving and used visuals focused on nature and microbial life. Point-and-click adventures were further strengthened with other games such as *Primordia* (2012, Wormwood Studios) a game created in the style of LucasArts adventure games of the 1990s.

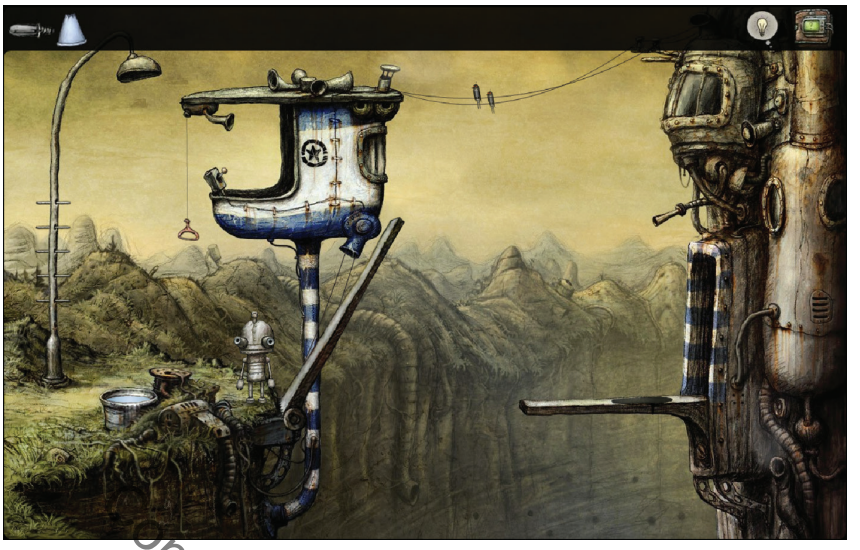

FIGURE 10.8 ***Machinarium*** **(2009, Amanita Design). (Courtesy of Amanita Design. (C) Machinarium by Amanita Design, www.amanita-design.net)**

Console Manufacturers Pursue Independent Developers

Aside from *Alien Hominid* and a handful of other titles, non-puzzle-based independent games did not have a significant presence on consoles until the popularization of online marketplaces and game services such as Microsoft's XBLA, Sony's PSN, and Nintendo's Wii Shop Channel (see Chapter 9). Following the success of casual titles such as *Bejeweled*, console-based online game services built a library of small, downloadable independent games with arcade-like gameplay and niche appeal. Many had already won awards from the IGF or received other forms of recognition; characteristics that posed a minimal financial risk compared to the predominant big budget games.

Two early independent game releases on the PlayStation Network, *flOw* (2007, thatgamecompany) and *Everyday Shooter* (2007, Queasy Games) featured gameplay that was familiar and easy to understand while employing innovative mechanics and visuals. In *flOw*, the player directed a bioluminescent organism through deep-sea waters in search of creatures to devour (Figure 10.9). The organism grew in complexity as it consumed like *Blockade* and *Snake* (see Chapter 3), allowing the player to dive deeper to hunt larger, more challenging prey. *FlOw*, unlike conventional game design, allowed the player to adjust the game's difficulty by traveling into deeper or shallower waters at will. This simple design concept subverted the convention of game difficulty that grew greater the longer one played. This more gentle form of difficulty progression, combined with the game's minimalist graphics and tranquil soundtrack, created a Zen-like play experience that promoted feelings of relaxation rather than tension.

Chapter 10

Independent Games (1997–Present)

The Scratchware Manifesto and Dimensions of "Indie"

In the summer of 2000, a group of anonymous game designers published a three-part essay, *The Scratchware Manifesto*, on the abandonware archive site, Home of the Underdogs. The declaration delivered a scathing critique of practices in the digital game industry: it criticized publishers who chose game genres with safe investment returns over innovative ones, who made demands on workers with long periods of crunch time, and who shipped buggy games that resulted from rushed production schedules. The essay called for an alternative type of game described as "scratchware." It was to be accessible, high quality, replayable, short, and created by teams of three or less individuals with multiple skill sets. Scratchware games were to focus on 2D art, which allowed for economical and rapid development while providing the opportunity to explore untapped aesthetic avenues. Key to scratchware games would be their cost and method of distribution: $25 or less and deliverable without retailers, via the Internet. Each element was intended to break the practices of the game industry by producing easy-to-acquire games with greater novelty in design, at lower cost to players. In short, it was a rallying cry for the creation of independent games.

The growth of independent games in the mid to late 2000s appeared, on the surface, to have answered the manifesto's call. Many *had* operated at

Chapter 10

Independent Games (1997–Present)

The Scratchware Manifesto and Dimensions of "Indie"

In the summer of 2000, a group of anonymous game designers published a three-part essay, *The Scratchware Manifesto*, on the abandonware archive site, Home of the Underdogs. The declaration delivered a scathing critique of practices in the digital game industry: it criticized publishers who chose game genres with safe investment returns over innovative ones, who made demands on workers with long periods of crunch time, and who shipped buggy games that resulted from rushed production schedules. The essay called for an alternative type of game described as "scratchware." It was to be accessible, high quality, replayable, short, and created by teams of three or less individuals with multiple skill sets. Scratchware games were to focus on 2D art, which allowed for economical and rapid development while providing the opportunity to explore untapped aesthetic avenues. Key to scratchware games would be their cost and method of distribution: $25 or less and deliverable without retailers, via the Internet. Each element was intended to break the practices of the game industry by producing easy-to-acquire games with greater novelty in design, at lower cost to players. In short, it was a rallying cry for the creation of independent games.

The growth of independent games in the mid to late 2000s appeared, on the surface, to have answered the manifesto's call. Many *had* operated at

lower budgets and with smaller development teams; pixel art, 2D graphics, and other flat styles *did* allow for efficient development times and a critique of photorealistic 3D imagery; many independent game developers *were* able to exercise creative control, retain ownership, and develop ideas that large developers were not interested in pursuing. In addition to the growth of Internet distribution, alternative funding streams such as the crowd-funding site Kickstarter allowed developers to further bypass traditional methods of seeking bank loans or other forms of seed money.

The development of the contemporary independent games scene, however, was much more complicated than fulfilling the prescriptions from The Scratchware Manifesto. Motivations of individual developers varied, some were former industry professionals inspired by The Scratchware Manifesto, while others had no industry experience and simply saw an opportunity in a changing market. Promoters of independent games ranged from populist entities, like niche Internet communities to major corporate players like Valve, Microsoft, Nintendo, and Sony who actively promoted independent games based on their marketability to the larger gaming audience. Even the words "independent" and "indie" carried different connotations that ranged from games that were simply self-funded, self-published, and self-promoted, to games that provided deeply intellectual commentary and criticism. These complex and contradictory elements associated with independent games, nonetheless, created a vibrant context as the barriers for game creation became progressively lower throughout the 2000s.

The Early Independent Game Scene

Success with Shareware

As discussed in Chapter 8, shareware was a form of marketing in which users were able to try a limited version of a program before they bought the full edition. Despite the fact that most shareware games did not generate reliable funding and that the popularity of the model had declined significantly by the late 1990s, some shareware games earned enough to support their makers as full-time, independent game developers.

Jeff Vogel founded Spiderweb Software in the mid-1990s and specialized in the creation of CRPGs. Rather than compete with the detailed, pre-rendered graphics and recorded dialog of large budget games like *Diablo* or the 3D open world environments of *Daggerfall*, Vogel's games, such as *Exile III: Ruined World* (1997, Spiderweb Software) represented a continuation in the development of the 1980s Ultima-Style CRPGs (see Chapter 6). The games featured pixelated graphics, contextual details, and dialog delivered via windows of richly written text and, most

significantly, a systems-heavy, tactical approach to gameplay involving party management. These older design elements were partnered with refinements to the interface and to the design of interaction that matched contemporary expectations, many of which were inspired by larger big budget games.

Unable to compete based on the superiority of its graphics, *Exile III* relied on shareware to allow potential customers to experience a portion of the game's engrossing narrative and evaluate the gameplay. Players who wanted the full version used a credit card to purchase a key code that unlocked the remainder of the game—a difficult setup, as banks in the mid-1990s were leery of online commerce. Nonetheless, the game found a niche audience that was substantial enough to earn *Exile III* two shareware *Game of the Year* awards. Vogel's later games in the Geneforge, Nethergate, Avadon, and Avernum series also succeeded by following the same model.

Other shareware independent games also received accolades. *Tread Marks* (2000, Longbow Games) combined armored tanks, racing games, and fast multiplayer, tournament-style, deathmatches similar to *Unreal Tournament* (Figure 9.6). The game's high-end 3D graphics, a rarity for independent games of the time, featured terrain that deformed with each explosion and other dazzling visual effects by Longbow Games' president and programmer, Seumas McNally (Figure 10.1). While *Tread Marks* was distributed as shareware the full version was sent through the mail on CD as the game was too large to directly download at the time through the predominant dial-up Internet connections.

FIGURE 10.1 **A tank battle in *Tread Marks* (2000, Longbow Games). (Courtesy of Longbow Games.)**

THE SEUMAS McNALLY GRAND PRIZE

Since 1999, the Independent Games Festival at the Game Developers Conference has given awards for games in categories for excellence in visual art, audio, design, and others including a grand prize for the year's "best game." Seumas McNally's *Tread Marks* was the second independent game to win the IGF's grand prize along with best design and best programming, raising its profile and eventually leading to a retail release through a publisher. McNally, however, tragically passed away in 2000 after a 3-year ordeal with Hodgkin's lymphoma only weeks after *Tread Marks* won the three awards. Shortly thereafter, the Independent Games Festival's grand prize was renamed "The Seumas McNally Grand Prize" in his honor and continues to be awarded annually to the year's best independent game.

Flash and 2D Freeware Games

Talented artists and programmers at the turn of the millennium also developed games for sheer creative enjoyment and released them free-of-charge as browser-based Flash games or as downloadable freeware. The typical small size and short game length made it easy to quickly enact changes and add content, leading to a vibrant development context as games could reciprocally influence and be influenced by each other over the course of different release versions. Web sites and online communities like Newgrounds, Jay Is Games, Kongregate, and the Independent Gaming weblog, helped establish an amateur game developer scene in the early 2000s by facilitating conversations among designers across the world and providing a means for dissemination.

Flash and Struggles for Legitimacy

Flash was one of the most popular development platforms available to amateur game designers for 2D games through the early 2000s. It was simple to use and had a visual-friendly layout. The prospect of company sponsorship in exchange for placing advertising banners in the games also helped draw developers to the platform and provided a small amount of revenue for independent game creation. The initial versions of Flash were focused on producing animation and supported clickable buttons; thus, the first set of Flash games consisted of minimally interactive "click games" that used mouse movement and clicking input. Using these capabilities, designers created simple shooting galleries, short narrative-based games with branching dialog choices, and even point-and-click adventures. Many amateur developers in the nascent Flash communities used pre-existing images and/or music taken from popular culture rather than original art and sound assets, leading to a "mash-up" aesthetic common to many games. Since dial-up modems imposed a practical limitation on the size of the

games one could produce, most early Flash games typically contained only a few minutes' worth of gameplay.

Despite these limitations, some creators were able to exploit the abilities of Flash to create games with an unexpected depth of gameplay. Tom Fulp, who founded the Flash portal Newgrounds in 1995, also created one of the most sophisticated early Flash games, *Pico's School* (1999). The objective of *Pico's School* was to survive a school shooting perpetuated by ninjas and aliens disguised as Goth teenagers. Despite the game's theme, which pushed the limits of black humor and political correctness (like much of the content on Newgrounds), it exhibited a complexity of design and polish in presentation that was virtually unseen in amateur Flash game development. After a brief cutscene that introduced the game's setting, players of *Pico's School* could choose multiple pathways through the school's halls, have conversations that affected game outcomes and engage in boss fights, all of which were driven by simple mouse clicks.

Later versions of Flash added options that allowed the programming of advanced behaviors and interactions. Developers then created more ambitious games that led to a healthy Flash gaming scene focused on Fulp's Newgrounds site. Flash-based games, regardless of complexity, however, were seen as illegitimate relative to downloadable freeware games made in more traditional, software-creation programs. Honorific bodies charged with recognizing accomplishments in independent games such as the Independent Games Festival, for example, did not initially accept browser-based Flash game submissions for award consideration. Publishers, meanwhile, refused to port Flash games to consoles because they did not look or play like console games. Tom Fulp and Dan Paladin's Flash game *Alien Hominid* (2002), however, helped change these perceptions.

Alien Hominid (Figure 10.2), was a fast-paced action platformer in the style of 2D run 'n gun games like *Contra* and *Metal Slug* (1996, SNK). The game, like *Pico's School*, began with a brief, animated cutscene showing a flying saucer crash landing on Earth and the alien pilot's encounter with a friendly boy. Gameplay, after the introduction, launched into chaotic, side-scrolling, shooting action, as waves of FBI men in black streamed in from the sides, attempting to capture and study the alien. The technical ability of the game was beyond expectations for Flash games: players could jump, duck, fire their alien blasters in four directions, and move in a highly responsive manner. There was great variety in gameplay: players could receive brief power-ups for their guns, earn extra lives, destroy moving cars, and fight gigantic boss characters. *Alien Hominid* also featured a distinctive art style created by game artist Dan Paladin. Rather than the simple geometric shapes or mouse-drawn graphics of Flash games of the time, Paladin used a stylus and drawing tablet, which led to the game's hand-drawn, cartoon-like visuals. While the single-level Flash game could be completed in a

FIGURE 10.2 The Flash version of *Alien Hominid*. (Courtesy of Newgrounds/The Behemoth.)

number of minutes, *Alien Hominid* became one of the most popular games on Newgrounds and received millions of plays.

Alien Hominid's online release caught the attention of John Baez, an environment artist who worked for the same company as Dan Paladin. Since few games then available for consoles looked and played like *Alien Hominid*, Baez saw potential in releasing it in console version. When Baez and Paladin were both laid off, Baez convinced Paladin and Fulp to pursue full-time independent development. The result was The Behemoth founded in 2003. The Behemoth secured a publisher and *Alien Hominid* was reworked and expanded for commercial release on consoles and handhelds in 2004 and 2005. It was the first adaptation of a browser-based Flash game to game consoles. Although the Behemoth felt *Alien Hominid* would only generate niche appeal, it gained popularity across a wide audience due to its retro-style gameplay and unique visuals, proving to publishers that independent games could be financially successful despite a radical deviation from expectations.

The improved capabilities of Flash also allowed game designers to add new sensations of speed and velocity in moving objects. Raigan Burns and Mare Sheppard of Metanet felt that the development of 2D platforming games had been cut short by the industry's rush to adopt 3D graphics, leading to *N* (2004, Metanet), a freeware platforming game developed in Flash that featured a visually abstract ninja (Figure 10.3). Inspired by the classic computer platformer *Lode Runner* (1983, Brøderbund Software, Inc.) as well as other contemporary freeware games, *N* required the player to navigate increasingly difficult, single-screen puzzle-like levels collecting gold, while avoiding the game's many cleverly placed hazards.

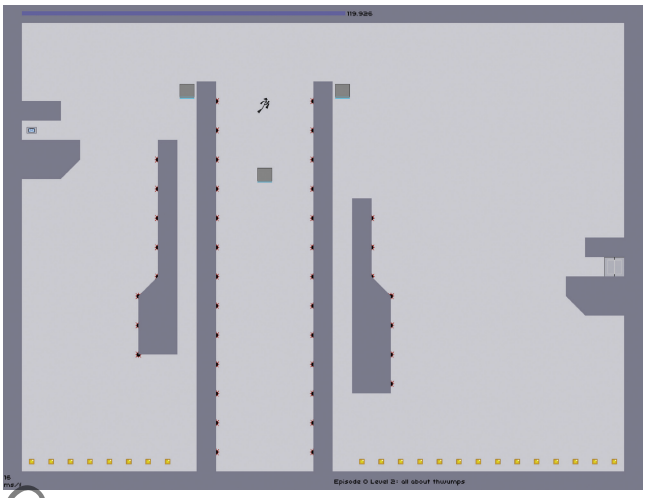

FIGURE 10.3 An early level in *N* (2004, Metanet Software). (Courtesy of Metanet Software Inc. www.metanetsoftware.com)

N was unconventional in its radical simplicity: the visuals were predominantly black and gray abstract shapes while controls were limited to horizontal movement and jumping. The game, nonetheless, contained depth, as its "elastic" feel of the jump and run provided the player with a sense of acceleration through space. This provided new opportunities for level design, as the player could use the built-up inertia to jump and sail through the air of levels with unconventionally far off platforms and hazards. *N* also included an editor that, like the earlier *Lode Runner*, allowed users to create and distribute new levels. Many community-designed levels were included in the game's version 2.0, making the play experience of *N* a community project within the online Flash-based game scene.

N, like *Alien Hominid*, gained a significant online following that resulted in millions of plays and was similarly ported to home consoles, handheld systems, and online digital marketplaces. Both won Audience Choice awards at the 2005 IGF and *Alien Hominid* also won for Technical Excellence and Excellence in Art. This recognition brought Flash-based games further legitimacy and created a path for the commercial release of later games originating in Flash such as *flOw*, *Super Meat Boy*, and *VVVVVV*.

Japan's Doujin Soft and Freeware Scene

Unlike independent games in North America in the early 2000s, *doujin soft*, Japan's rough equivalent of independent games, had highly developed channels that allowed game developers not affiliated with large companies to bring their games to customers. *Doujin soft* games, like many Flash games, were small, self-published, hobbyist projects that commonly used pre-existing images, characters, and sounds from popular culture such as

manga and *anime* series. Many of these Japanese hobbyist games, however, were openly sold at specialized retail locations and conventions, despite their use of trademarked characters. *Doujin soft* game makers worked in all genres but many gravitated toward visual novels and classic 2D games such as RPGs, shoot 'em ups and platformers. The 2D pixel art, head-to-head fighting game, *Melty Blood* (2002, Type-Moon/Watanabe Seisakusho), for example, was created with characters from the visual novel *Tsukihime* and followed many of the design conventions established in Capcom's 2D fighting games of the later 1990s. The high production values and anime-inspired flair earned it instant praise among the PC-based *doujin soft* community and a version was brought to the arcades and published on home consoles. Other games in the *Melty Blood* series also received mass publication, however, *doujin soft* games were typically unavailable outside of Japan due to their extreme niche appeal, distribution in physical form, limited locations, and difficulties in obtaining internationally compatible formats.

While *doujin soft* was regarded as commercialized "fan work," several Japanese game developers released a number of games with original design concepts and graphics as freeware, many of which had a significant influence on the developing North American independent games scene. Shoot 'em up games were particularly well suited for experimentation with new ideas since established game mechanics could be modified in simple ways that produced innovative changes in gameplay. Hikoza Ohkubo's freeware *Warning Forever* (2003, Hikware) consisted solely of boss fights but utilized a unique system in which every boss evolved different offensive capabilities depending on how the player destroyed its predecessor (Figure 10.4). Kanta Matsuhisa (a.k.a. "Omega") designed *Every Extend* (2004), which replaced the ability to shoot with a single-use, self-destruct mechanic employed by

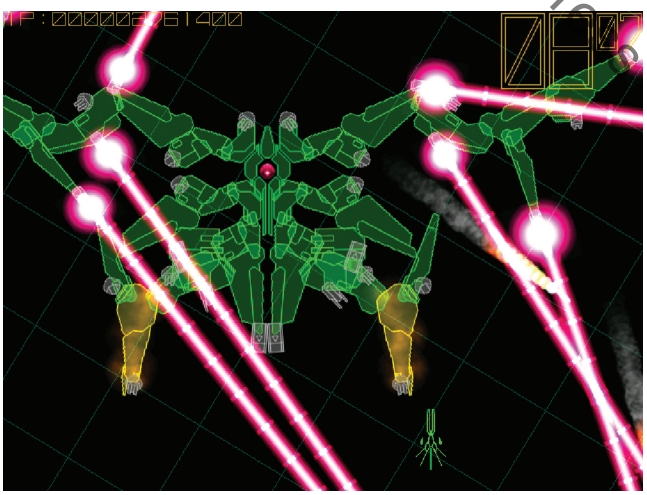

FIGURE 10.4 ***Warning Forever*** **(2003, Hikware). (Courtesy of Hikoza Ohkubo.)**

the player to create explosive chains among moving formations of enemies. Kenta Cho, one of the most prolific designers of the Japanese freeware game scene, gained recognition for innovative shooters like *TUMIKI Fighters* (2004, ABA Games), which allowed the player to collect the parts of fallen enemies and use them as upgraded firepower and armor. Many of Cho's other shoot 'em up games, such as *Parsec 47* (2003), *Torus Trooper* (2004), and *Gunroar* (2005), also gained a wide following.

While many freeware shoot 'em ups influenced North American game developers, Daisuke Amaya's 2004 adventure game, *Doukutsu Monogatari* or *Cave Story*, proved to be a galvanizing title. *Cave Story* was developed over the course of 5 years and featured an unusually large amount of content for a freeware game. It contained a complex cast of characters situated in an engrossing narrative represented through bright, pixilated visuals. The game's concept grew from Amaya's admiration for the original 1986 *Metroid* that allowed players to explore and learn about the gameworld through their own actions. According to Amaya, this approach made each of the player's accomplishments, whether major or minor, meaningful. *Cave Story* represented a design form that has since been dubbed *Metroidvania*, games that drew inspiration from the construction of space and flow of gameplay seen in action platformers *Metroid* and *Super Metroid* as well as *Castlevania: Symphony of the Night* (1997, Konami). In *Cave Story* like many other Metroidvania games, players crisscrossed and backtracked through large, continuous 2D game spaces and attempted to find power-up items that opened previously closed areas for play. This approach to design emphasized game mechanics as the functions of the various weapon and item upgrades were directly worked into progression through the game.

The art, design, and scope of *Cave Story* caught the immediate attention of Japanese freeware aficionados in North America. Within a month, these communities created a translation hack that brought *Cave Story* to English-speaking audiences. Word of *Cave Story* spread rapidly online; it led to ports to various operating systems, playthrough videos on YouTube, and numerous dedicated fan sites. Although *Cave Story* was not completely unique among Japanese freeware games, it struck a chord in North American independent communities and became seen as the embodiment of "indie": a labor of love created entirely by a single designer, which utilized a retro visual style and focused on game mechanics.

Freeware Experiments with Games and Art

The mid-2000s saw a number of "art games" that used recognizable genres and mechanics but downplayed the traditional challenge-based elements of gameplay, favoring instead the communication of an experience or concepts between creator and player. As many of the games were unconventional with limited initial commercial appeal, they were frequently released as freeware.

Art games, however, eventually gained a sufficient audience to warrant commercial release and success for a few in the later 2000s and 2010s.

Although developers focused on different elements between art and games, they overwhelmingly made interactivity a primary focus as it distinguished games from other forms of media. *Samorost* (2003) was a short point-and-click adventure created in Flash that carried a thread of the surreal through its photo collage visuals and gameplay. The game, created by Czech film student, Jakub Dvorský, as part of a thesis in animation for the Academy of Arts, Architecture and Design in Prague, undercut many of the point-and-click genre's foundations on logical puzzle solving. The game, instead, placed an emphasis on interactive animations. Play focused on directing a small space elf in a quest to divert an asteroid on a collision course with his home (Figure 10.5). An early section of *Samorost*, for example, featured a verdant mountain landscape that was inhabited by a group of people working near a ski lift. The player's goal, unknown, was to activate the ski lift and allow the space gnome to ski down the hill. To accomplish this, the player needed to click on a hookah-smoking man three times: allowing the man to consume the substance and drop the pipe, which the player then used as a key to start the ski lift and continue on to the remaining puzzles. This illogical thought process invited the player to click on multiple elements of the game space and thus trigger a variety of incidental animations. Through exhibition at art shows and its availability online, *Samorost* received significant recognition among both art and game communities.

Dvorský founded Amanita Design as a freelance design studio after he graduated, but continued to create short Flash games, some commissioned by Nike and Polyphonic Spree. Amanita Design pushed back against what it saw as the game industry's unwillingness to experiment and its overemphasis

FIGURE 10.5 ***Samorost*** **(2003, Amanita Design). (Courtesy of Amanita Design. (C) Samorost by Amanita Design, www.amanita-design.net)**

on 3D, when it introduced its first retail game *Samorost 2* (2005), which followed the same surreal style of the original. It earned numerous awards and, although short, was successful enough to support Amanita Design as a full-time, independent game developer.

Although Amanita Design did not consider its works "art," a number of other game designers consciously created games as art. Belgian developers and digital artists Auriea Harvey and Michaël Samyn, founded Tale of Tales in 2002 seeking to directly engage the audience not through museums or galleries but online through interactive digital art. One of Tale of Tales' early projects, *The Endless Forest* (2005), began as a commission by the *Grand Duke Jean Museum of Modern Art* in Luxembourg and consisted of an MMORPG in which the player controlled a deer running through a fairytale-like forest. The game featured none of the quests or goals typically associated with other MMORPGs: it was, instead, a live performance space. Players interacted with individual elements of the forest and with each other, in a sense of pure play. *The Endless Forest* did not allow players to converse with each other directly; the only mode of in-game communication was a series of emotes and other actions triggered through buttons on an action bar, reminiscent of the interfaces in popular MMORPGs such as *World of Warcraft*. The game could also function as a screensaver, launched during periods of inactivity, and allowing a player to wander the forest for brief periods in a relaxed state.

Tale of Tales created a number of other titles through the late 2000s, which, like Amanita Design, were commercially sold. *The Graveyard* (2008), for example, allowed the player to direct the movement of an old woman in a black and white graveyard to a park bench. Upon sitting, the old woman appeared to have an introspective moment as the game camera showed a close-up of the woman's face superimposed on the gamespace. This action, or lack thereof, continued for as long as the player chose, creating a shared moment with the game character. Following the period of introspection, the player directed the slowly moving old woman out of the graveyard. While the game was entirely free, a commercialized version introduced the random possibility of the old woman's death which otherwise undercut the game's gentle pace with an unexpected and sudden event.

One of the most celebrated freeware art games was Jason Rohrer *Passage* (2007). *Passage* presented life from young adulthood through old age and death, in the span of 5 minutes, using a screen resolution of 100 × 16 pixels (Figure 10.6). The interactive *memento mori*, or meditation on the inevitability of death, was created as an entry to the Gamma 256 event sponsored by Kokoromi, a Montreal-based group dedicated to the promotion of artistic and experimental digital games. In *Passage*, players could chose to go through the digital life alone or with a digital partner, and explore a large space that was visually limited to a narrow band of pixels. In a simple but thought-provoking manner, the right portion of the band became sharper as

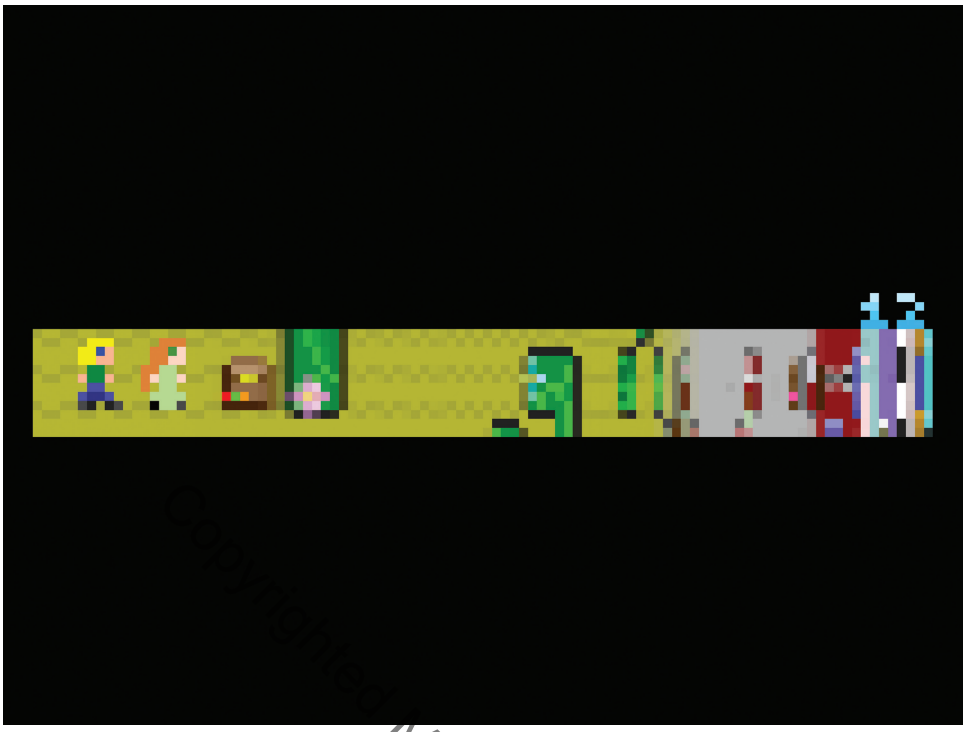

FIGURE 10.6 ***Passage*** **(2007). (Courtesy of Jason Rohrer.)**

the character aged, representing a clearer view of one's future and ultimate fate. This was countered with increased haziness on the left portion of the screen, as memories of the past became more distant.

Unlike the works by Tale of Tales, *Passage* melded symbolism with traditional game mechanics and featured a score accumulator that ascended as one progressed, representing the richness of one's life. The score could increase by journeying with a partner, as well as through the discovery of life-enriching treasure chests in hidden areas of the gamespace. Thus, the player could make many choices on how to spend the 5-minute life. Nonetheless, as the game functioned as a *memento mori*, the accomplishments gained during the life ultimately meant nothing and did not prevent the character's death, no matter how high the score. *Passage* received praise for its simple yet deeply profound message expressed as a game. It was among the first group of games added to the Museum of Modern Art's permanent collection of videogames established in 2012.

The Mainstream Breakout of Independent Games

In 2005, game industry veterans Greg Costikyan and Johnny Wilson launched Manifesto Games, an online marketplace with digital

distribution for computer-based independent games. Born from the spirit of The Scratchware Manifesto (of which Costikyan anonymously contributed to under the name "Designer X"), Manifesto Games was an attempt to provide a home for niche games that would not receive shelf space in retail locations. Thus, games with unconventional or truly innovative ideas could find an audience and help break what Costikyan and Wilson saw as stagnation in the games market. Unfortunately, Manifesto Games was unable to attain the mass of developers and customers needed to support the site and it was shut down in June 2009. Ironically, it was large companies like Valve Corporation, Sony, Microsoft, and Nintendo that completed the work of bringing niche games to players and helped foster the breakout of independent games precisely when Manifesto Games shut its doors.

Steam and Independent Games

As discussed in Chapter 9, Valve's Steam marketplace became one of the main refuges for computer games amid the greater popularity of console gaming and shrinking computer game offerings by retailers. In addition to selling digital-only games, Steam hosted some of the earliest breakout independent game titles. With Valve's high esteem among modding communities coupled with the central role of PCs in game development, Steam quickly became one of the preeminent places for the sale of independent games.

One of the first independent games available on Steam was Introversion Software's *Darwinia* (2005), a winner of the IGF Seumas McNally Grand Prize. *Darwinia* combined multiple modes of gameplay, including elements reminiscent of RTSs and arcade shoot 'em ups, into an experience that defied traditional definitions of genre. The player managed the action of units and gathered resources, but gameplay concentrated on shooting enemies in a manner similar to the Golden Age arcade games, *Robotron 2084* and *Centipede*. The game's story of repelling a virus invasion from within a computer and saving a group of indigenous digital entities was enhanced by visuals that drew inspiration from films like *Tron* through its gridded world of faceted polygons (Figure 10.7).

Steam's basis on home computers allowed independent game developers to take full advantage of the mouse as an input device. Mark Healey's *Rag Doll Kung Fu* (2005), another early independent game on Steam, was a tongue-in-cheek fighting game that parodied kung fu films of the 1970s. Healey, a professional within the game industry, created *Rag Doll Kung Fu* in his spare time out of a desire to design a ridiculous game. Using the mouse, players kicked, punched, and jumped by grabbing and snapping the limbs of the game's puppet-like, 2D rag doll characters.

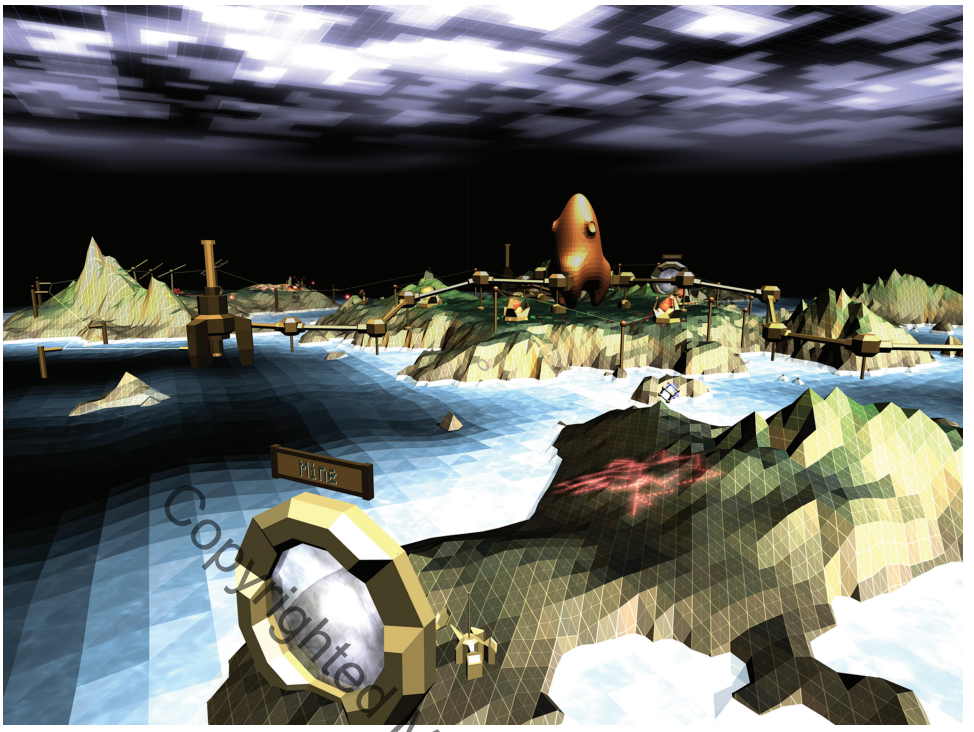

FIGURE 10.7 ***Darwinia*** **(2005, Introversion Software). (Courtesy of Introversion Software.)**

The mouse was prominent in Amanita Design's first full-length game, *Machinarium* (2009), which built on the studio's momentum from the *Samorost* games and helped in the revitalization of the dormant point-and-click adventure genre. In *Machinarium*, the player directed a small robot on a quest to rescue his robot girlfriend and stop a group of evil robots from bombing the city. *Machinarium* was unlike the simple "click game" approach of the studio's previous titles. It utilized a more conventional approach to point-and-click adventure games with more logical puzzle solving and the use of items collected and combined from an inventory. *Machinarium*, however, retained the studio's emphasis on animation and unique 2D visuals by using a digital version of cut-out animation and placing characters in atmospheric, hand-drawn environments (Figure 10.8). Like the studio's earlier point-and-click games, the player never experienced defeat in the form of death: progress was interrupted only through the inability to decipher the puzzle, a concept the developers had taken from *Myst*. Amanita Design continued its Flash-based, point-and-click adventures through *Botanicula* (2012), which was a return to form as it emphasized playful exploration over logical puzzle solving and used visuals focused on nature and microbial life. Point-and-click adventures were further strengthened with other games such as *Primordia* (2012, Wormwood Studios) a game created in the style of LucasArts adventure games of the 1990s.

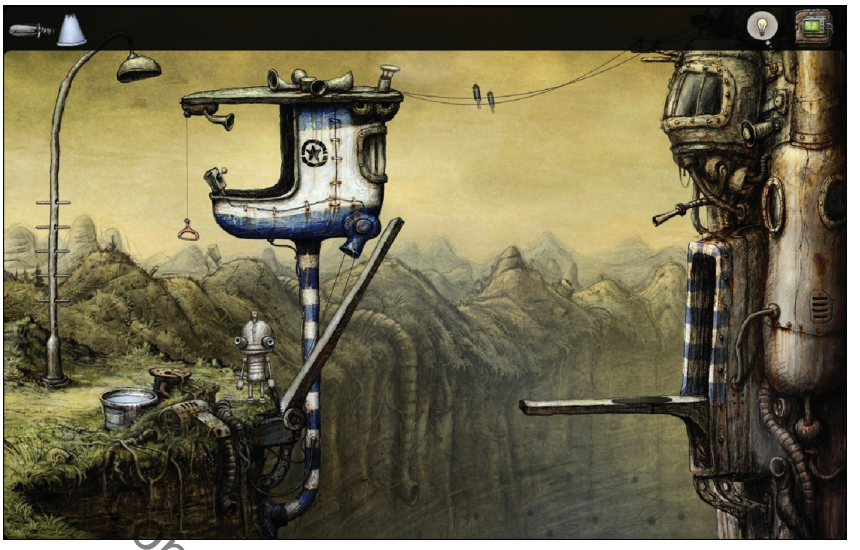

FIGURE 10.8 ***Machinarium*** **(2009, Amanita Design). (Courtesy of Amanita Design. (C) Machinarium by Amanita Design, www.amanita-design.net)**

Console Manufacturers Pursue Independent Developers

Aside from *Alien Hominid* and a handful of other titles, non-puzzle-based independent games did not have a significant presence on consoles until the popularization of online marketplaces and game services such as Microsoft's XBLA, Sony's PSN, and Nintendo's Wii Shop Channel (see Chapter 9). Following the success of casual titles such as *Bejeweled*, console-based online game services built a library of small, downloadable independent games with arcade-like gameplay and niche appeal. Many had already won awards from the IGF or received other forms of recognition; characteristics that posed a minimal financial risk compared to the predominant big budget games.

Two early independent game releases on the PlayStation Network, *flOw* (2007, thatgamecompany) and *Everyday Shooter* (2007, Queasy Games) featured gameplay that was familiar and easy to understand while employing innovative mechanics and visuals. In *flOw*, the player directed a bioluminescent organism through deep-sea waters in search of creatures to devour (Figure 10.9). The organism grew in complexity as it consumed like *Blockade* and *Snake* (see Chapter 3), allowing the player to dive deeper to hunt larger, more challenging prey. *FlOw*, unlike conventional game design, allowed the player to adjust the game's difficulty by traveling into deeper or shallower waters at will. This simple design concept subverted the convention of game difficulty that grew greater the longer one played. This more gentle form of difficulty progression, combined with the game's minimalist graphics and tranquil soundtrack, created a Zen-like play experience that promoted feelings of relaxation rather than tension.

lower budgets and with smaller development teams; pixel art, 2D graphics, and other flat styles *did* allow for efficient development times and a critique of photorealistic 3D imagery; many independent game developers *were* able to exercise creative control, retain ownership, and develop ideas that large developers were not interested in pursuing. In addition to the growth of Internet distribution, alternative funding streams such as the crowd-funding site Kickstarter allowed developers to further bypass traditional methods of seeking bank loans or other forms of seed money.

The development of the contemporary independent games scene, however, was much more complicated than fulfilling the prescriptions from The Scratchware Manifesto. Motivations of individual developers varied, some were former industry professionals inspired by The Scratchware Manifesto, while others had no industry experience and simply saw an opportunity in a changing market. Promoters of independent games ranged from populist entities, like niche Internet communities to major corporate players like Valve, Microsoft, Nintendo, and Sony who actively promoted independent games based on their marketability to the larger gaming audience. Even the words "independent" and "indie" carried different connotations that ranged from games that were simply self-funded, self-published, and self-promoted, to games that provided deeply intellectual commentary and criticism. These complex and contradictory elements associated with independent games, nonetheless, created a vibrant context as the barriers for game creation became progressively lower throughout the 2000s.

The Early Independent Game Scene

Success with Shareware

As discussed in Chapter 8, shareware was a form of marketing in which users were able to try a limited version of a program before they bought the full edition. Despite the fact that most shareware games did not generate reliable funding and that the popularity of the model had declined significantly by the late 1990s, some shareware games earned enough to support their makers as full-time, independent game developers.

Jeff Vogel founded Spiderweb Software in the mid-1990s and specialized in the creation of CRPGs. Rather than compete with the detailed, pre-rendered graphics and recorded dialog of large budget games like *Diablo* or the 3D open world environments of *Daggerfall*, Vogel's games, such as *Exile III: Ruined World* (1997, Spiderweb Software) represented a continuation in the development of the 1980s Ultima-Style CRPGs (see Chapter 6). The games featured pixelated graphics, contextual details, and dialog delivered via windows of richly written text and, most

significantly, a systems-heavy, tactical approach to gameplay involving party management. These older design elements were partnered with refinements to the interface and to the design of interaction that matched contemporary expectations, many of which were inspired by larger big budget games.

Unable to compete based on the superiority of its graphics, *Exile III* relied on shareware to allow potential customers to experience a portion of the game's engrossing narrative and evaluate the gameplay. Players who wanted the full version used a credit card to purchase a key code that unlocked the remainder of the game—a difficult setup, as banks in the mid-1990s were leery of online commerce. Nonetheless, the game found a niche audience that was substantial enough to earn *Exile III* two shareware *Game of the Year* awards. Vogel's later games in the Geneforge, Nethergate, Avadon, and Avernum series also succeeded by following the same model.

Other shareware independent games also received accolades. *Tread Marks* (2000, Longbow Games) combined armored tanks, racing games, and fast multiplayer, tournament-style, deathmatches similar to *Unreal Tournament* (Figure 9.6). The game's high-end 3D graphics, a rarity for independent games of the time, featured terrain that deformed with each explosion and other dazzling visual effects by Longbow Games' president and programmer, Seumas McNally (Figure 10.1). While *Tread Marks* was distributed as shareware the full version was sent through the mail on CD as the game was too large to directly download at the time through the predominant dial-up Internet connections.

FIGURE 10.1 **A tank battle in *Tread Marks* (2000, Longbow Games). (Courtesy of Longbow Games.)**

THE SEUMAS McNALLY GRAND PRIZE

Since 1999, the Independent Games Festival at the Game Developers Conference has given awards for games in categories for excellence in visual art, audio, design, and others including a grand prize for the year's "best game." Seumas McNally's *Tread Marks* was the second independent game to win the IGF's grand prize along with best design and best programming, raising its profile and eventually leading to a retail release through a publisher. McNally, however, tragically passed away in 2000 after a 3-year ordeal with Hodgkin's lymphoma only weeks after *Tread Marks* won the three awards. Shortly thereafter, the Independent Games Festival's grand prize was renamed "The Seumas McNally Grand Prize" in his honor and continues to be awarded annually to the year's best independent game.

Flash and 2D Freeware Games

Talented artists and programmers at the turn of the millennium also developed games for sheer creative enjoyment and released them free-of-charge as browser-based Flash games or as downloadable freeware. The typical small size and short game length made it easy to quickly enact changes and add content, leading to a vibrant development context as games could reciprocally influence and be influenced by each other over the course of different release versions. Web sites and online communities like Newgrounds, Jay Is Games, Kongregate, and the Independent Gaming weblog, helped establish an amateur game developer scene in the early 2000s by facilitating conversations among designers across the world and providing a means for dissemination.

Flash and Struggles for Legitimacy

Flash was one of the most popular development platforms available to amateur game designers for 2D games through the early 2000s. It was simple to use and had a visual-friendly layout. The prospect of company sponsorship in exchange for placing advertising banners in the games also helped draw developers to the platform and provided a small amount of revenue for independent game creation. The initial versions of Flash were focused on producing animation and supported clickable buttons; thus, the first set of Flash games consisted of minimally interactive "click games" that used mouse movement and clicking input. Using these capabilities, designers created simple shooting galleries, short narrative-based games with branching dialog choices, and even point-and-click adventures. Many amateur developers in the nascent Flash communities used pre-existing images and/or music taken from popular culture rather than original art and sound assets, leading to a "mash-up" aesthetic common to many games. Since dial-up modems imposed a practical limitation on the size of the

games one could produce, most early Flash games typically contained only a few minutes' worth of gameplay.

Despite these limitations, some creators were able to exploit the abilities of Flash to create games with an unexpected depth of gameplay. Tom Fulp, who founded the Flash portal Newgrounds in 1995, also created one of the most sophisticated early Flash games, *Pico's School* (1999). The objective of *Pico's School* was to survive a school shooting perpetuated by ninjas and aliens disguised as Goth teenagers. Despite the game's theme, which pushed the limits of black humor and political correctness (like much of the content on Newgrounds), it exhibited a complexity of design and polish in presentation that was virtually unseen in amateur Flash game development. After a brief cutscene that introduced the game's setting, players of *Pico's School* could choose multiple pathways through the school's halls, have conversations that affected game outcomes and engage in boss fights, all of which were driven by simple mouse clicks.

Later versions of Flash added options that allowed the programming of advanced behaviors and interactions. Developers then created more ambitious games that led to a healthy Flash gaming scene focused on Fulp's Newgrounds site. Flash-based games, regardless of complexity, however, were seen as illegitimate relative to downloadable freeware games made in more traditional, software-creation programs. Honorific bodies charged with recognizing accomplishments in independent games such as the Independent Games Festival, for example, did not initially accept browser-based Flash game submissions for award consideration. Publishers, meanwhile, refused to port Flash games to consoles because they did not look or play like console games. Tom Fulp and Dan Paladin's Flash game *Alien Hominid* (2002), however, helped change these perceptions.

Alien Hominid (Figure 10.2), was a fast-paced action platformer in the style of 2D run 'n gun games like *Contra* and *Metal Slug* (1996, SNK). The game, like *Pico's School*, began with a brief, animated cutscene showing a flying saucer crash landing on Earth and the alien pilot's encounter with a friendly boy. Gameplay, after the introduction, launched into chaotic, side-scrolling, shooting action, as waves of FBI men in black streamed in from the sides, attempting to capture and study the alien. The technical ability of the game was beyond expectations for Flash games: players could jump, duck, fire their alien blasters in four directions, and move in a highly responsive manner. There was great variety in gameplay: players could receive brief power-ups for their guns, earn extra lives, destroy moving cars, and fight gigantic boss characters. *Alien Hominid* also featured a distinctive art style created by game artist Dan Paladin. Rather than the simple geometric shapes or mouse-drawn graphics of Flash games of the time, Paladin used a stylus and drawing tablet, which led to the game's hand-drawn, cartoon-like visuals. While the single-level Flash game could be completed in a

FIGURE 10.2 The Flash version of *Alien Hominid*. (Courtesy of Newgrounds/The Behemoth.)

number of minutes, *Alien Hominid* became one of the most popular games on Newgrounds and received millions of plays.

Alien Hominid's online release caught the attention of John Baez, an environment artist who worked for the same company as Dan Paladin. Since few games then available for consoles looked and played like *Alien Hominid*, Baez saw potential in releasing it in console version. When Baez and Paladin were both laid off, Baez convinced Paladin and Fulp to pursue full-time independent development. The result was The Behemoth founded in 2003. The Behemoth secured a publisher and *Alien Hominid* was reworked and expanded for commercial release on consoles and handhelds in 2004 and 2005. It was the first adaptation of a browser-based Flash game to game consoles. Although the Behemoth felt *Alien Hominid* would only generate niche appeal, it gained popularity across a wide audience due to its retro-style gameplay and unique visuals, proving to publishers that independent games could be financially successful despite a radical deviation from expectations.

The improved capabilities of Flash also allowed game designers to add new sensations of speed and velocity in moving objects. Raigan Burns and Mare Sheppard of Metanet felt that the development of 2D platforming games had been cut short by the industry's rush to adopt 3D graphics, leading to *N* (2004, Metanet), a freeware platforming game developed in Flash that featured a visually abstract ninja (Figure 10.3). Inspired by the classic computer platformer *Lode Runner* (1983, Brøderbund Software, Inc.) as well as other contemporary freeware games, *N* required the player to navigate increasingly difficult, single-screen puzzle-like levels collecting gold, while avoiding the game's many cleverly placed hazards.

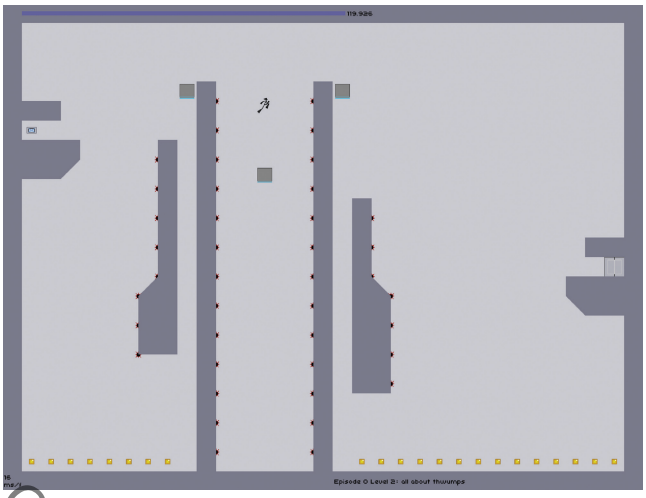

FIGURE 10.3 An early level in *N* (2004, Metanet Software). (Courtesy of Metanet Software Inc. www.metanetsoftware.com)

N was unconventional in its radical simplicity: the visuals were predominantly black and gray abstract shapes while controls were limited to horizontal movement and jumping. The game, nonetheless, contained depth, as its "elastic" feel of the jump and run provided the player with a sense of acceleration through space. This provided new opportunities for level design, as the player could use the built-up inertia to jump and sail through the air of levels with unconventionally far off platforms and hazards. *N* also included an editor that, like the earlier *Lode Runner*, allowed users to create and distribute new levels. Many community-designed levels were included in the game's version 2.0, making the play experience of *N* a community project within the online Flash-based game scene.

N, like *Alien Hominid*, gained a significant online following that resulted in millions of plays and was similarly ported to home consoles, handheld systems, and online digital marketplaces. Both won Audience Choice awards at the 2005 IGF and *Alien Hominid* also won for Technical Excellence and Excellence in Art. This recognition brought Flash-based games further legitimacy and created a path for the commercial release of later games originating in Flash such as *flOw*, *Super Meat Boy*, and *VVVVVV*.

Japan's Doujin Soft and Freeware Scene

Unlike independent games in North America in the early 2000s, *doujin soft*, Japan's rough equivalent of independent games, had highly developed channels that allowed game developers not affiliated with large companies to bring their games to customers. *Doujin soft* games, like many Flash games, were small, self-published, hobbyist projects that commonly used pre-existing images, characters, and sounds from popular culture such as

manga and *anime* series. Many of these Japanese hobbyist games, however, were openly sold at specialized retail locations and conventions, despite their use of trademarked characters. *Doujin soft* game makers worked in all genres but many gravitated toward visual novels and classic 2D games such as RPGs, shoot 'em ups and platformers. The 2D pixel art, head-to-head fighting game, *Melty Blood* (2002, Type-Moon/Watanabe Seisakusho), for example, was created with characters from the visual novel *Tsukihime* and followed many of the design conventions established in Capcom's 2D fighting games of the later 1990s. The high production values and anime-inspired flair earned it instant praise among the PC-based *doujin soft* community and a version was brought to the arcades and published on home consoles. Other games in the *Melty Blood* series also received mass publication, however, *doujin soft* games were typically unavailable outside of Japan due to their extreme niche appeal, distribution in physical form, limited locations, and difficulties in obtaining internationally compatible formats.

While *doujin soft* was regarded as commercialized "fan work," several Japanese game developers released a number of games with original design concepts and graphics as freeware, many of which had a significant influence on the developing North American independent games scene. Shoot 'em up games were particularly well suited for experimentation with new ideas since established game mechanics could be modified in simple ways that produced innovative changes in gameplay. Hikoza Ohkubo's freeware *Warning Forever* (2003, Hikware) consisted solely of boss fights but utilized a unique system in which every boss evolved different offensive capabilities depending on how the player destroyed its predecessor (Figure 10.4). Kanta Matsuhisa (a.k.a. "Omega") designed *Every Extend* (2004), which replaced the ability to shoot with a single-use, self-destruct mechanic employed by

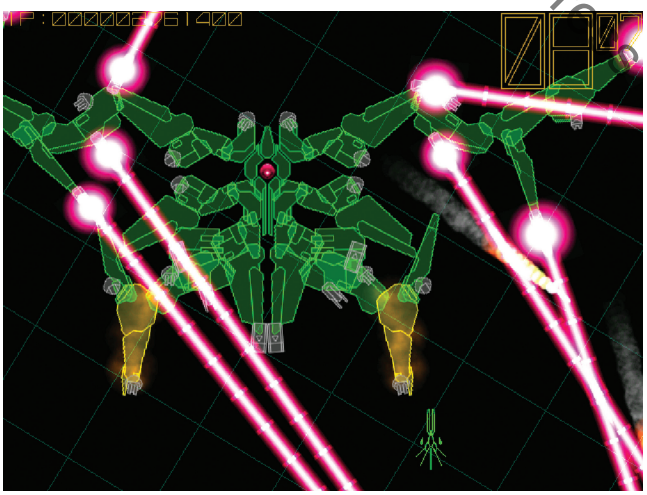

FIGURE 10.4 ***Warning Forever*** **(2003, Hikware). (Courtesy of Hikoza Ohkubo.)**

the player to create explosive chains among moving formations of enemies. Kenta Cho, one of the most prolific designers of the Japanese freeware game scene, gained recognition for innovative shooters like *TUMIKI Fighters* (2004, ABA Games), which allowed the player to collect the parts of fallen enemies and use them as upgraded firepower and armor. Many of Cho's other shoot 'em up games, such as *Parsec 47* (2003), *Torus Trooper* (2004), and *Gunroar* (2005), also gained a wide following.

While many freeware shoot 'em ups influenced North American game developers, Daisuke Amaya's 2004 adventure game, *Doukutsu Monogatari* or *Cave Story*, proved to be a galvanizing title. *Cave Story* was developed over the course of 5 years and featured an unusually large amount of content for a freeware game. It contained a complex cast of characters situated in an engrossing narrative represented through bright, pixilated visuals. The game's concept grew from Amaya's admiration for the original 1986 *Metroid* that allowed players to explore and learn about the gameworld through their own actions. According to Amaya, this approach made each of the player's accomplishments, whether major or minor, meaningful. *Cave Story* represented a design form that has since been dubbed *Metroidvania*, games that drew inspiration from the construction of space and flow of gameplay seen in action platformers *Metroid* and *Super Metroid* as well as *Castlevania: Symphony of the Night* (1997, Konami). In *Cave Story* like many other Metroidvania games, players crisscrossed and backtracked through large, continuous 2D game spaces and attempted to find power-up items that opened previously closed areas for play. This approach to design emphasized game mechanics as the functions of the various weapon and item upgrades were directly worked into progression through the game.

The art, design, and scope of *Cave Story* caught the immediate attention of Japanese freeware aficionados in North America. Within a month, these communities created a translation hack that brought *Cave Story* to English-speaking audiences. Word of *Cave Story* spread rapidly online; it led to ports to various operating systems, playthrough videos on YouTube, and numerous dedicated fan sites. Although *Cave Story* was not completely unique among Japanese freeware games, it struck a chord in North American independent communities and became seen as the embodiment of "indie": a labor of love created entirely by a single designer, which utilized a retro visual style and focused on game mechanics.

Freeware Experiments with Games and Art

The mid-2000s saw a number of "art games" that used recognizable genres and mechanics but downplayed the traditional challenge-based elements of gameplay, favoring instead the communication of an experience or concepts between creator and player. As many of the games were unconventional with limited initial commercial appeal, they were frequently released as freeware.

Art games, however, eventually gained a sufficient audience to warrant commercial release and success for a few in the later 2000s and 2010s.

Although developers focused on different elements between art and games, they overwhelmingly made interactivity a primary focus as it distinguished games from other forms of media. *Samorost* (2003) was a short point-and-click adventure created in Flash that carried a thread of the surreal through its photo collage visuals and gameplay. The game, created by Czech film student, Jakub Dvorský, as part of a thesis in animation for the Academy of Arts, Architecture and Design in Prague, undercut many of the point-and-click genre's foundations on logical puzzle solving. The game, instead, placed an emphasis on interactive animations. Play focused on directing a small space elf in a quest to divert an asteroid on a collision course with his home (Figure 10.5). An early section of *Samorost*, for example, featured a verdant mountain landscape that was inhabited by a group of people working near a ski lift. The player's goal, unknown, was to activate the ski lift and allow the space gnome to ski down the hill. To accomplish this, the player needed to click on a hookah-smoking man three times: allowing the man to consume the substance and drop the pipe, which the player then used as a key to start the ski lift and continue on to the remaining puzzles. This illogical thought process invited the player to click on multiple elements of the game space and thus trigger a variety of incidental animations. Through exhibition at art shows and its availability online, *Samorost* received significant recognition among both art and game communities.

Dvorský founded Amanita Design as a freelance design studio after he graduated, but continued to create short Flash games, some commissioned by Nike and Polyphonic Spree. Amanita Design pushed back against what it saw as the game industry's unwillingness to experiment and its overemphasis

FIGURE 10.5 ***Samorost*** **(2003, Amanita Design). (Courtesy of Amanita Design. (C) Samorost by Amanita Design, www.amanita-design.net)**

on 3D, when it introduced its first retail game *Samorost 2* (2005), which followed the same surreal style of the original. It earned numerous awards and, although short, was successful enough to support Amanita Design as a full-time, independent game developer.

Although Amanita Design did not consider its works "art," a number of other game designers consciously created games as art. Belgian developers and digital artists Auriea Harvey and Michaël Samyn, founded Tale of Tales in 2002 seeking to directly engage the audience not through museums or galleries but online through interactive digital art. One of Tale of Tales' early projects, *The Endless Forest* (2005), began as a commission by the *Grand Duke Jean Museum of Modern Art* in Luxembourg and consisted of an MMORPG in which the player controlled a deer running through a fairytale-like forest. The game featured none of the quests or goals typically associated with other MMORPGs: it was, instead, a live performance space. Players interacted with individual elements of the forest and with each other, in a sense of pure play. *The Endless Forest* did not allow players to converse with each other directly; the only mode of in-game communication was a series of emotes and other actions triggered through buttons on an action bar, reminiscent of the interfaces in popular MMORPGs such as *World of Warcraft*. The game could also function as a screensaver, launched during periods of inactivity, and allowing a player to wander the forest for brief periods in a relaxed state.

Tale of Tales created a number of other titles through the late 2000s, which, like Amanita Design, were commercially sold. *The Graveyard* (2008), for example, allowed the player to direct the movement of an old woman in a black and white graveyard to a park bench. Upon sitting, the old woman appeared to have an introspective moment as the game camera showed a close-up of the woman's face superimposed on the gamespace. This action, or lack thereof, continued for as long as the player chose, creating a shared moment with the game character. Following the period of introspection, the player directed the slowly moving old woman out of the graveyard. While the game was entirely free, a commercialized version introduced the random possibility of the old woman's death which otherwise undercut the game's gentle pace with an unexpected and sudden event.

One of the most celebrated freeware art games was Jason Rohrer *Passage* (2007). *Passage* presented life from young adulthood through old age and death, in the span of 5 minutes, using a screen resolution of 100 × 16 pixels (Figure 10.6). The interactive *memento mori*, or meditation on the inevitability of death, was created as an entry to the Gamma 256 event sponsored by Kokoromi, a Montreal-based group dedicated to the promotion of artistic and experimental digital games. In *Passage*, players could chose to go through the digital life alone or with a digital partner, and explore a large space that was visually limited to a narrow band of pixels. In a simple but thought-provoking manner, the right portion of the band became sharper as

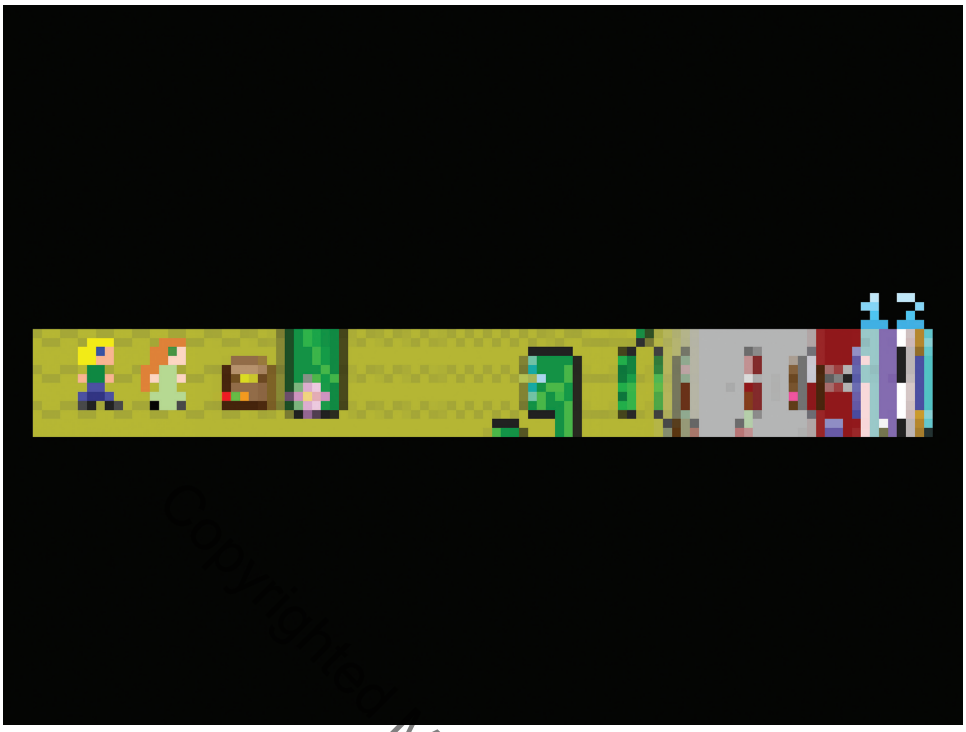

FIGURE 10.6 ***Passage*** **(2007). (Courtesy of Jason Rohrer.)**

the character aged, representing a clearer view of one's future and ultimate fate. This was countered with increased haziness on the left portion of the screen, as memories of the past became more distant.

Unlike the works by Tale of Tales, *Passage* melded symbolism with traditional game mechanics and featured a score accumulator that ascended as one progressed, representing the richness of one's life. The score could increase by journeying with a partner, as well as through the discovery of life-enriching treasure chests in hidden areas of the gamespace. Thus, the player could make many choices on how to spend the 5-minute life. Nonetheless, as the game functioned as a *memento mori*, the accomplishments gained during the life ultimately meant nothing and did not prevent the character's death, no matter how high the score. *Passage* received praise for its simple yet deeply profound message expressed as a game. It was among the first group of games added to the Museum of Modern Art's permanent collection of videogames established in 2012.

The Mainstream Breakout of Independent Games

In 2005, game industry veterans Greg Costikyan and Johnny Wilson launched Manifesto Games, an online marketplace with digital

distribution for computer-based independent games. Born from the spirit of The Scratchware Manifesto (of which Costikyan anonymously contributed to under the name "Designer X"), Manifesto Games was an attempt to provide a home for niche games that would not receive shelf space in retail locations. Thus, games with unconventional or truly innovative ideas could find an audience and help break what Costikyan and Wilson saw as stagnation in the games market. Unfortunately, Manifesto Games was unable to attain the mass of developers and customers needed to support the site and it was shut down in June 2009. Ironically, it was large companies like Valve Corporation, Sony, Microsoft, and Nintendo that completed the work of bringing niche games to players and helped foster the breakout of independent games precisely when Manifesto Games shut its doors.

Steam and Independent Games

As discussed in Chapter 9, Valve's Steam marketplace became one of the main refuges for computer games amid the greater popularity of console gaming and shrinking computer game offerings by retailers. In addition to selling digital-only games, Steam hosted some of the earliest breakout independent game titles. With Valve's high esteem among modding communities coupled with the central role of PCs in game development, Steam quickly became one of the preeminent places for the sale of independent games.

One of the first independent games available on Steam was Introversion Software's *Darwinia* (2005), a winner of the IGF Seumas McNally Grand Prize. *Darwinia* combined multiple modes of gameplay, including elements reminiscent of RTSs and arcade shoot 'em ups, into an experience that defied traditional definitions of genre. The player managed the action of units and gathered resources, but gameplay concentrated on shooting enemies in a manner similar to the Golden Age arcade games, *Robotron 2084* and *Centipede*. The game's story of repelling a virus invasion from within a computer and saving a group of indigenous digital entities was enhanced by visuals that drew inspiration from films like *Tron* through its gridded world of faceted polygons (Figure 10.7).

Steam's basis on home computers allowed independent game developers to take full advantage of the mouse as an input device. Mark Healey's *Rag Doll Kung Fu* (2005), another early independent game on Steam, was a tongue-in-cheek fighting game that parodied kung fu films of the 1970s. Healey, a professional within the game industry, created *Rag Doll Kung Fu* in his spare time out of a desire to design a ridiculous game. Using the mouse, players kicked, punched, and jumped by grabbing and snapping the limbs of the game's puppet-like, 2D rag doll characters.

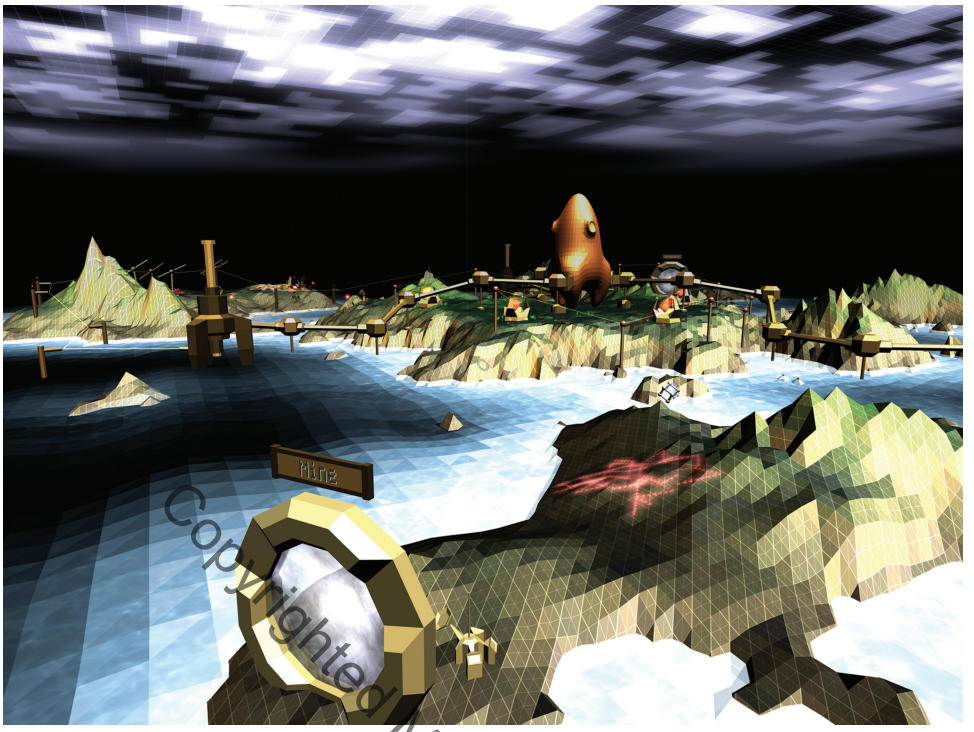

FIGURE 10.7 ***Darwinia*** **(2005, Introversion Software). (Courtesy of Introversion Software.)**

The mouse was prominent in Amanita Design's first full-length game, *Machinarium* (2009), which built on the studio's momentum from the *Samorost* games and helped in the revitalization of the dormant point-and-click adventure genre. In *Machinarium*, the player directed a small robot on a quest to rescue his robot girlfriend and stop a group of evil robots from bombing the city. *Machinarium* was unlike the simple "click game" approach of the studio's previous titles. It utilized a more conventional approach to point-and-click adventure games with more logical puzzle solving and the use of items collected and combined from an inventory. *Machinarium*, however, retained the studio's emphasis on animation and unique 2D visuals by using a digital version of cut-out animation and placing characters in atmospheric, hand-drawn environments (Figure 10.8). Like the studio's earlier point-and-click games, the player never experienced defeat in the form of death: progress was interrupted only through the inability to decipher the puzzle, a concept the developers had taken from *Myst*. Amanita Design continued its Flash-based, point-and-click adventures through *Botanicula* (2012), which was a return to form as it emphasized playful exploration over logical puzzle solving and used visuals focused on nature and microbial life. Point-and-click adventures were further strengthened with other games such as *Primordia* (2012, Wormwood Studios) a game created in the style of LucasArts adventure games of the 1990s.

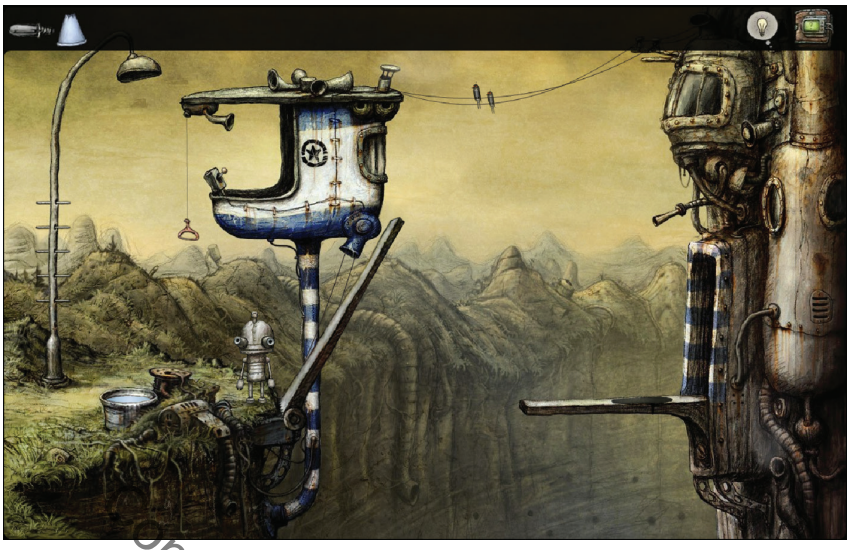

FIGURE 10.8 ***Machinarium*** **(2009, Amanita Design). (Courtesy of Amanita Design. (C) Machinarium by Amanita Design, www.amanita-design.net)**

Console Manufacturers Pursue Independent Developers

Aside from *Alien Hominid* and a handful of other titles, non-puzzle-based independent games did not have a significant presence on consoles until the popularization of online marketplaces and game services such as Microsoft's XBLA, Sony's PSN, and Nintendo's Wii Shop Channel (see Chapter 9). Following the success of casual titles such as *Bejeweled*, console-based online game services built a library of small, downloadable independent games with arcade-like gameplay and niche appeal. Many had already won awards from the IGF or received other forms of recognition; characteristics that posed a minimal financial risk compared to the predominant big budget games.

Two early independent game releases on the PlayStation Network, *flOw* (2007, thatgamecompany) and *Everyday Shooter* (2007, Queasy Games) featured gameplay that was familiar and easy to understand while employing innovative mechanics and visuals. In *flOw*, the player directed a bioluminescent organism through deep-sea waters in search of creatures to devour (Figure 10.9). The organism grew in complexity as it consumed like *Blockade* and *Snake* (see Chapter 3), allowing the player to dive deeper to hunt larger, more challenging prey. *FlOw*, unlike conventional game design, allowed the player to adjust the game's difficulty by traveling into deeper or shallower waters at will. This simple design concept subverted the convention of game difficulty that grew greater the longer one played. This more gentle form of difficulty progression, combined with the game's minimalist graphics and tranquil soundtrack, created a Zen-like play experience that promoted feelings of relaxation rather than tension.

FIGURE 10.9 ***flOw*** **(2007, thatgamecompany). (Courtesy of Sony Interactive Entertainment America LLC.)**

FlOw's unique gameplay was based on a Flash game designed by Jenova Chen, a University of Southern California graduate student, to accompany his MFA thesis. Chen sought ways to quickly induce "flow" in players, a psychological state of total absorption and optimal task performance entered only when a task is neither too difficult nor too easy. Based on this concept, the Flash game contained the "Embedded Dynamic Difficulty Adjustment" system mentioned above that gave players direct control over the game's difficulty. Thus, players, regardless of individual skill, could theoretically experience a flow state.

Sony's other early independent hit was *Everyday Shooter* by Jonathan Mak. *Everyday Shooter* closely followed the twin-stick shooter format popularized in Eugene Jarvis' Golden Age arcade game, *Robotron 2084*, as gameplay consisted of shooting and maneuvering around enemies in an enclosed, top-down perspective game space. The game was distinctive for its conceptual nature and abstract aesthetics, as Mak designed the game along the lines of a music album composed of game levels for musical tracks. During play, each destroyed enemy unleashed an abstract explosion of color and a short set of acoustic guitar notes that meshed with each level's minimalist songs. Each level of *Everyday Shooter,* like tracks on an album, featured different sounds, color themes, and rules for interacting with the enemies. The stages were influenced by Japanese freeware shoot 'em ups, including *Every Extend*, *Warning Forever*, and the games of Kenta Cho. The end result was an interactive, improvisational soundscape that made the player a creator of music through gameplay (Figure 10.10).

Beat 'em up independent games made an appearance on Microsoft's XBLA with The Behemoth's *Castle Crashers* (2008) and James Silva's *The Dishwasher: Dead Samurai* (2009, Ska Studios). *Castle Crashers* used the core gameplay seen in the Famicom/NES title, *River City Ransom* (1989, Technōs Japan) but added traditional RPG elements of experience points, a leveling system, inventory items, and weapon upgrades. The game's four-player

FIGURE 10.10 ***Everyday Shooter*** **(2007, Queasy Games). (Courtesy of Sony Interactive Entertainment America LLC.)**

cooperative mode, isometric perspective, brightly colored protagonists and large-scale boss fights recalled The Behemoth's earlier *Alien Hominid* as well as the licensed beat 'em ups of the early 1990s by Konami and Capcom. The hand-drawn art style of Dan Paladin, meanwhile, presented a fresh and comical take on the pixel art-dominated genre. *The Dishwasher: Dead Samurai* was created when James Silva won Microsoft's inaugural Dream Build Play competition aimed at courting independent developers. Silva's independent game development career began in 2001 with the shareware *Zombie Smashers X*, another isometric beat 'em up also inspired by *River City Ransom*. The 2D gamespace in *The Dishwasher: Dead Samurai*, however, was filled with hypercharged, over-the-top bloody action that, like *Castle Crashers*, was rendered in a hand-drawn art style.

The title that brought the most attention to independent games, both within and outside of the context of gaming, was Jonathan Blow's *Braid* (2008, Number None, Inc.). *Braid*'s gameworld and design referenced platformers like *Super Mario Bros.* with piranha plants in green tubes and the ability to defeat enemies by jumping on them, however, at its core *Braid* was a series of unique logic puzzles solvable by speeding up or reversing the flow of time. Players who fell into a pit or ran into an enemy could simply reverse time and make the appropriate adjustments to prevent death. Following Miyamoto's approach to platformers, Blow created complexity in gameplay by individually layering simple systems and behaviors. Rather than power-ups, however, the player encountered different sets of mechanics for the puzzles of each world: levels with objects immune to the effects of time manipulation, levels where time moved forward and backward as the player moved right and left, and levels that granted the ability to create a localized bubble of slow time, all of which were accompanied by the basic rewind mechanic.

The depth of game design seen in *Braid* was matched by its introspective and mature narrative. The game involved a search for a kidnapped princess,

but deconstructed this typical trope and focused instead on the difficulties encountered in an adult relationship. It explored concepts of doubt, the obsessive search for fulfillment, conflict in mastering one's drives and ambition, the inability to reverse mistakes, and growth resulting from learning from mistakes. The themes were connected in varying degrees to gameplay and *Braid*'s mechanics: mistakes and learning from them, for example, was explicitly connected to the game's main rewind mechanic. *Braid*'s highly lauded art was created by David Hellman and rendered in an expressive, painterly style that further reinforced the focus on subjective human experience. The game's music, also a departure from the traditional 8-bit, chip tune beats, featured string instruments, drums, and soft piano suites that Blow had licensed from a music provider.

Braid's success stemmed from its contrast of intellectual puzzle solving, emotional storytelling, and unique art and musical style, qualities that helped legitimize independent games and their developers in the mainstream. For a number of years 2D puzzle-platformers with unique art styles and mechanics proliferated across online marketplaces and proved to be highly popular; many, like *Braid*, explored themes related to the human condition. *Limbo* (2010, Playdead) featured a black and white expressionist world with a heavy emphasis on brooding. Terry Cavanagh's *VVVVVV* (2010) featured a gravity-flipping mechanic and imagery recalling the color palette of the Commodore 64 computer. Mike Bithell's *Thomas Was Alone* (2012), focused on moving a colorful cast of characters, represented as geometric shapes, through various maze layouts, while the protracted *Fez* (2012, Polytron Corporation) used pixel art graphics and a game mechanic that allowed the player to rotate the 2D game world on an axis. Other 2D games of the time such as *Super Meat Boy* (2010, Team Meat), and the Bit Trip series used brightly colored pixel art, often ironically, to enhance the fast-paced, frantic gameplay.

The meteoric rise of independent games in the mainstream reached a fevered pitch with *Journey* (2012, thatgamecompany). *Journey*, like thatgamecompany's earlier *flOw* and follow-up, *Flower* (2009), challenged notions about videogames by focusing on emotional experiences over competitive or combative gameplay. The game's concept involved a spiritual pilgrimage to a distant mountain, partially inspired by the monomyth of the "hero's journey," formulated by the prominent scholar of mythology, Joseph Campbell. According to Campbell, the hero's journey began by departing from the ordinary and entering a world of supernatural wonder where the hero encounters challenges, emerges victorious, and returns home with new powers or abilities. In the game *Journey*, the player entered a world full of ancient monuments that had been claimed by the desert (Figure 10.11). The game's environment created feelings of awe as it artfully used a range of colors matched with large landscape vistas dominated

FIGURE 10.11 ***Journey*** **(2012, thatgamecompany). (Courtesy of Sony Interactive Entertainment America LLC.)**

by a distant mountain. The distant mountain beckoned the player toward it and, through the course of play, allowed the player to gain insight into the world's mythology. After a number of dangers, the player reached their final goal and returned to the game's beginning in preparation for another journey.

In addition to its stylized visuals and immersive environments, *Journey* was praised for its unique gameplay that allowed pairs of strangers to not only embark on the arduous journey together, but also to forge an emotional bond with one another. This was accomplished through a number of art and design choices. Players saw their companion as they saw themselves. Outward signs of difference were removed, as each player was an identical abstracted figure wearing a robe and trailing scarf. The game allowed players to temporarily fly in the air, an ability which was depleted with each flight but could be recharged by the player's proximity to each other, providing motivation to stay together. The game featured shared experiences that elicited feelings of joy and ranged from playfully sliding together down long pathways made of sand, to feelings of tension and fear as enemies threatened the characters, requiring them to hide, together, in makeshift shelters. Most poignantly, players could keep each other warm during the final snowy ascent up the mountain by walking closely together. Similar to Tale of Tales' *The Endless Forest*, players in *Journey* could not directly speak to each other; the only outward form of communication was through a single sound that varied in volume. Underscoring the gameplay was a superb soundtrack that changed with the game's many moods, providing an essential emotional cue for the players.

Although other multiplayer games such as the MMORPG, *World of Warcraft*, contained cooperative gameplay between strangers, magic items or currency incentivized most group tasks. *Journey*'s focus on exploration and discovery, rather than personal gain, allowed players to progress with a different mindset. Despite its unconventional features such as noncompetitive gameplay and a focus on emotion, *Journey* was popular among players and helped illustrate the rapid changes and diversification of gaming in the early 2010s.

Success beyond "Games"

The independent gaming landscape became increasingly diverse and specialized as games without goals or traditional concepts of winning and losing found commercial success in creative sandboxes and first-person narrative adventures.

Creative Sandboxes

Sandbox games allowed players freedom of play through building virtual worlds and gained their highest profile with the independent titles, *Garry's Mod* (2006, Facepunch Studios) and *Minecraft* (2011, Mojang). Community input during each game's development, as well as after official release, was key to their success. The Steam-based *Garry's Mod* by Garry Newman, began in 2004 as a free mod for Valve's *Half-Life 2*. Players were granted access to the game's library of character and object models and could change their properties, weld them together, and manipulate them in space. The Source engine for *Half-Life 2*, designed with a special emphasis on physics, allowed players of *Garry's Mod* to set up elaborate Rube Goldberg-like machines, create moving vehicles from parts, erect buildings, and execute other experiments. Valve approached Newman in the hope that a stand-alone version with enhanced capabilities could be produced. Over time, *Garry's Mod* grew into a unique multiplayer platform as players could import user-created maps as well as add *their own* mods and items to the game. In addition to creating animated movies and designing games within the game, players created everything from cinemas that allowed groups to virtually watch YouTube videos together to elaborate role-playing worlds where players chose from a variety of professions, bought property, and earned income. As such, the popularity of *Garry's Mod* depended wholly on community involvement to continuously generate new, creative content.

Swedish programmer Markus "Notch" Persson released the alpha version of *Minecraft* in 2009 as a "toy" that allowed players to stack pixelated blocks and create structures in randomly generated worlds. *Minecraft,* although simple, generated a significant amount of attention as players engaged in pure, creative unstructured play similar to *Garry's Mod*. Persson's vision for

his game, however, was much greater. During its development between 2009 and 2010, *Minecraft* featured new additions such as multiplayer support, monsters, items, a crafting system, and a more structured "survival mode" of gameplay which required the player to find or create food and shelter while dealing with monsters that came out at night. Like *Garry's Mod*, the development of *Minecraft* was strongly influenced by its growing and devoted fan base as Persson polled the community concerning the development of upcoming features, responded to feedback, and implemented popular requests in the game.

One of the results of this collaborative approach led by Persson, resulted in the formation of the expansive crafting system, which allowed players to refine materials gathered from the world such as wood, stone, and diamonds and create a variety of objects like weapons, decorative household items, and tools. The game grew to include systems for cultivating plants and trees, breeding animals, building structures, and making programmable creations using switches, motors, and simple logic statements. *Minecraft,* unlike previous RPGs with crafting systems, contained no instructions for how to combine materials or even what was possible for players to create. The unconventional approach attracted numerous players who felt that the larger game industry had sacrificed the element of challenge for an emphasis on accessibility. "Hard-core" players reveled in the opportunity to decipher the game's systems through experimentation, the results of which were published on community-created wiki pages. This knowledge base, wholly generated and shaped by the community, created a sense of shared ownership.

The influence of *Minecraft* was felt strongly in the proliferation of random generation, crafting systems, and survival-based gameplay in wilderness settings in independent games during *Minecraft*'s several-year development. Further, the construction-based systems and flexibility offered through mods facilitated *Minecraft's* expansion beyond the confines of games into other applications. Teachers utilized the *MinecraftEdu* educational mod to teach core competencies in elementary and middle schools while the Danish Geodata Agency created a model of the entire country of Denmark in a 1:1 scale, complete with roads and buildings with the help of map data and algorithms.

Narrative Exploration

Narrative exploration games further expanded and challenged the definition of games by virtually eliminating the mathematical core that governed rules and strategy. Instead the games emphasized mood and narrative leading to interactive experiences based on complex emotions. Related to art games, narrative explorations often focused on the human condition by combining philosophical thought with storytelling that moved beyond the power fantasy themes commonly represented in commercial digital games.

The ready availability of mod tools for first-person shooters, in particular, allowed a greater sense of narrative immersion through near total control over character movement. In many ways, these games represented the continuation of the ideas featured in *Myst* and its sequels through the elimination of player death.

One of the first major titles of narrative exploration games produced in this context was *Dear Esther* (2012, The Chinese Room). *Dear Esther* began as a free mod for *Half-Life 2* in 2008 and after winning numerous awards, was turned into a stand-alone game by British developer, The Chinese Room. Rather than action or puzzle-based gameplay, *Dear Esther* was an immersive mood poem situated on a deserted island located in the Hebrides off the West coast of Ireland. The game's atmosphere was dark and brooding with stormy clouds, a constant wind, and brief but haunting musical themes that played at certain points. The game's main feature was the narration of a letter to a woman named Esther, delivered in randomly selected segments throughout the player's island wanderings. This experimental form of interactive narrative created a shifting ambiguity of interpretation concerning the identity of the player's character as well as the order of the events described as each playthrough yielded a different set of readings.

The concept of balancing narrative with interactivity was explored in a number of other games of the time as well. *Proteus* (2013), by British designer/programmer Ed Key and American composer David Kanga, eschewed traditional narrative entirely and focused on the experience of traversing an abstract natural world, where falling leaves, animals, and rain created musical sound effects. The environment in *Proteus* transitioned through four seasons, each with its own color palette, music, and set of sound effects (Figure 10.12). The contrast, for example, between the vibrant color, abundant animals, and active music of summer, with the muted palette, stillness, and minimal music of winter, artistically reinforced notions of change and

FIGURE 10.12 Ed Key and David Kanga's *Proteus* (2013). (Courtesy of Ed Key.)

FIGURE 10.13 **An unpredictable player is given a line to follow in *The Stanley Parable* (2013, Galactic Cafe). (Courtesy of Galactic Cafe.)**

the cycles of the natural world that reflected Key's interest in Taoist philosophy. As the game randomly generated the game space, each playthrough and each season led to a unique musical narrative of one's wanderings.

Gone Home (2013, The Fulbright Company), designed by a team featuring former game industry professionals, featured a story set in 1995 that revealed its engrossing narrative through the examination of objects in an empty house. Using limited narration, the game dealt with a number of real-world relationship conflicts and elements of prejudice, rather than supernatural or fantastic elements. *The Stanley Parable* (2013, Galactic Cafe) originated, like *Dear Esther*, as a mod for *Half-Life 2*, but took a different approach by humorously deconstructing narrative and interactivity in games. The player, as an unremarkable office worker named Stanley, moved through a mundane setting of cubicles and break rooms while a narrator prompted player choices with a story told in the past tense. Players could either defy or follow the narrator's words through their choices and subsequent actions, creating a form of nonverbal communication with the game's narrator. Players who continuously frustrated the narrator with their choices experienced a number of surreal fourth wall-breaking situations including, among others, the game attempting to reassert control through placing a bright yellow line on the ground for the player to follow (Figure 10.13). This, however, fails as the line itself becomes disorderly and freely scrawls paths on the walls and ceiling.

Meeting Challenges in the Contemporary

The success of games like *Braid*, *Journey*, and *Minecraft* coupled with a number of industry professionals forming their own studios, the ease of accessing online tutorials, and the spread of game design curricula in universities, contributed to a dramatic rise in the number of people involved

FIGURE 10.14 ***Everybody's Gone to the Rapture*** **(2015, The Chinese Room). (Courtesy of Sony Interactive Entertainment America LLC.)**

in independent game development in the late 2000s and 2010s. As a result, the environment became more competitive and new challenges centered on discoverability became a significant barrier to success. The derivative and mediocre comingled with the thoughtful and excellent, stoking fears of an independent game market collapse that would mirror the North American console crash of 1983.

As a result, certain independent game developers attempted to distinguish themselves by increasing the production value of their games. The first-person investigation game *The Vanishing of Ethan Carter* (2014, The Astronauts) and The Chinese Room's narrative exploration game, *Everybody's Gone to the Rapture* (2015), for example, used high resolution photorealistic imagery with complex lighting effects, professional music composers, and larger production teams (Figure 10.14). Other solutions included developing games for the new generation of consumer model, virtual reality headsets such as in *Keep Talking and Nobody Explodes* (2015, Steel Crate Games), a cooperative game in which players wearing an HMD needed to defuse a bomb while receiving instructions on how to do it from others reading from a manual. The requirement, however, for greater technical complexity, longer development times, and larger production budgets, began to carry many of the same financial risks as big budget games. Other avenues of independent game design will undoubtedly emerge in the coming years as the market continues to mature.