

Games for Adults: 'The Talos Principle' Asks How You Know You're a Person

By [Phil Hornshaw](#)
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Video games can be great and important works, but not all of them are. Games For Adults is Playboy.com's regular column highlighting the ones that can make you think about more than hit points and head shots.

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Lots of video games start with fantastic, even nonsensical premises. Super Mario Bros. is about a pair of plumbers who rescue a woman from a dragon-trutle and his army of sentient mushrooms. In Gears of War, monsters carrying machine guns climb up from beneath the surface of the planet to wage war on humans. And in *The Talos Principle*, a booming voice belonging to someone called Elohim instructs you that you were created for the sole purpose of completing arbitrary tasks to gather what appear to be Tetris blocks.

Even within a few minutes, however, it becomes very apparent there's more going on in *Talos* than meets the eye. As you slowly explore a huge garden filled with what look like crumbling Roman statues and structures, you stumble on advanced technology: force fields, gun turrets, and floating mines. You'll come across computer terminals that look straight out of 1992, all the more out of place among the grassy yards and aging brick walls. You'll read messages left by other confused disciples of Elohim who came here before you, and you'll discover things about your own nature as you follow his path to "enlightenment."

Talos quickly becomes about more than just maneuvering objects around to solve each of its intricate puzzles. Tap into the terminals and you begin to gather and arrange puzzle pieces of a different nature: bits of philosophy that focus on ideas of being and personhood, research into artificial intelligence and computer science, and emails between computer engineers who discuss the coming end of the world. Questions like "What is this place and why am I here?" begin to morph into something else: "Am I a person, and how do I know?"

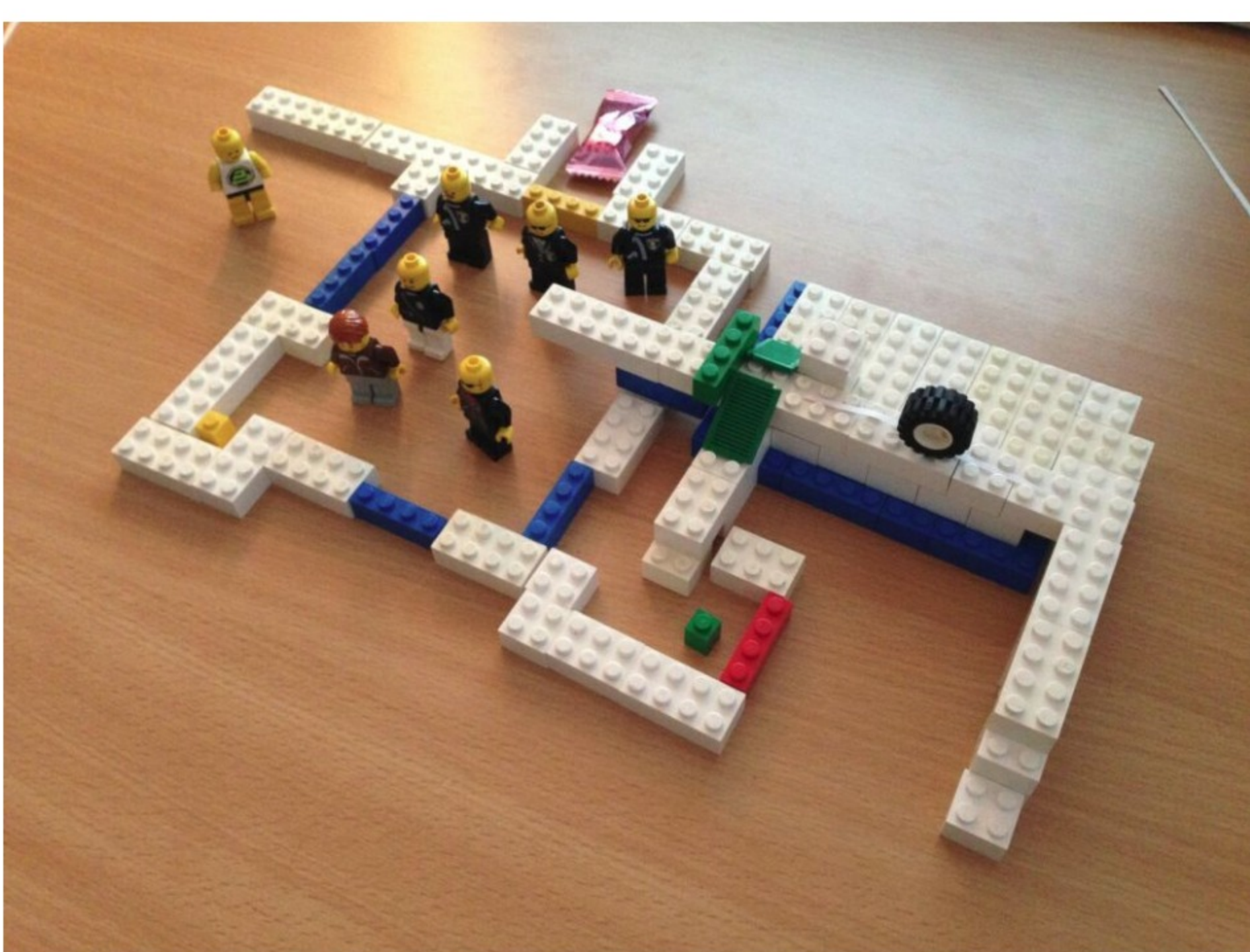
SERIOUS DETOUR



Talos is the work of Croatian developer Croteam, which up to now has been known pretty much for a single game franchise: *Serious Sam*, which consists of arcade shooters of the loud, frantic, bloody and goofy kind. Think *Duke Nukem*, but funnier. Croteam has been working on those kinds of games for the last 15 years.

The Talos Principle—a calm, contemplative, mostly nonviolent puzzle game—is as far from *Serious Sam* as possible.

But *Talos* actually started its life as yet another *Serious Sam* game. Croteam's Damjan Mravunac told me during an interview. The earliest levels of the game spawned from the desire to add puzzle elements to the shooter franchise. It all started with a new mechanic called the jammer, which looked like a camera on a tripod, and which interrupted the workings of machines like force fields and mines.



"We prototyped some smaller levels without any enemies, without any fights, and it actually became very fun to play them," Mravunac said. "It was very relaxed. People in the office, they were really heated up to this new kind of play. So we just decided to expand this. Let's try doing something new. And eventually it didn't resemble the *Serious Sam* franchise anymore."

Croteam expanded on the puzzles and their mechanics and the new game began to take shape. For the most part, each of these puzzles takes place in its own room, and players have the option to tackle most in whatever order they like.

To create so many puzzles—over 100 in all, with several optional challenges hidden throughout the game—Croteam expanded its methods beyond just building levels in the game's engine. They took to drawing puzzle rooms by hand, and found a good use for the LEGO blocks they'd been accumulating in the office.

"When you just sit in front of a computer, it can get a bit boring," Mravunac said. "It takes a long time to do something, to prototype it, and you need to have the guys coding it. [Building levels with LEGO] is more like a board game. You just sit around a table and you just have a few beers...It's a very colorful process, a tactile process, and it's very rewarding."

SIMULATING THE SIMULATION



Working on *Talos* offered something of a unique challenge to Croteam. The game's pacing, difficulty, frustration level: they were all things the team needed to understand and control, but couldn't objectively gauge themselves as they built the game.

"Two months before release, we actually disassembled the game and assembled it again," Mravunac explained. "We had to do it, because there are like 20 of us in the office, and when we play, one guy's saying 'everything is perfect,' and another guy is saying 'nothing is good.' It was hard to get the average to know what works and what doesn't."

Croteam was working to create what Mravunac called a "nonlinear linear game." They needed to make sure players could leave a puzzle room if they got stuck and try something else, while still progressing through the game in such a way that puzzles ramped up and became more complex overall with time.

Mravunac said Croteam spent four months beta testing the game to get it tuned perfectly, and even created some special technology within the custom *Talos* engine to help get the job done.

"A certain part of our engine was sending statistics to our in-game server, so we knew how much time (a tester) spent inside a puzzle. We knew if he exited the puzzle out of frustration and then came back the day after, or something like that," he said. "So we had all these elements and all these parameters that we could use to create a perfect nonlinear—but still linear—increase in difficulty."

The work paid off, leaving *The Talos Principle* a calm, easygoing experience that's still full of intricate challenges. But the most fascinating part of the game is how its puzzle-filled simulated world interacts with its mysterious, intelligent story.

HUMANITY 101



"In the beginning, there were the puzzles," Mravunac said. "That was how the game came into existence. But we had this background idea about this world that was a simulation. We actually had some of the premises set up when we started designing the puzzles. And then what happened was, because we couldn't write a good story if our lives depended on it, we had to call some people who knew how to write a great script."

Those writers were Tom Jubert and Jonas Kyratzes, who helped fill in the world Croteam was painting in broad strokes. Both are seasoned indie game writers with impressive pedigrees: Jubert worked on *The Swapper*, another game that asks some deep questions about the idea of "self"; and Kyratzes is responsible for indie games including *The Sea Will Claim Everything*. Mravunac said the developers gave Kyratzes and Jubert the elevator pitch on their idea, and the two writers ran with it, delving into the philosophical underpinnings and fleshing out the more human, emotional side of the tale.

As the story started to take shape, at some point, *Talos* stopped being just another entry into the puzzle game genre. It became, as Croteam describes it, a "philosophical puzzler."

At first, *The Talos Principle* is just mysterious. A voice claiming to be God imparts instructions and you follow them. Elements of the world around you stutter and twitch, quickly giving you the impression that what you're seeing isn't strictly "real." And then there are the computer terminals, which offer glimpses of information from something called the Milton Library Assistant that seem related to what you're doing—until, eventually, you hit a wall.



The computers require admin privileges for you to continue delving into their hidden secrets, but in order to prove you deserve access to them, you have to answer questions to prove to the computer you're human. It's a normally perfunctory task players perform just about every day when surfing the internet, but the hands you see on the in-game keyboard, typing your responses, are mechanical. Suddenly, the question "are you human?" takes on new meaning.

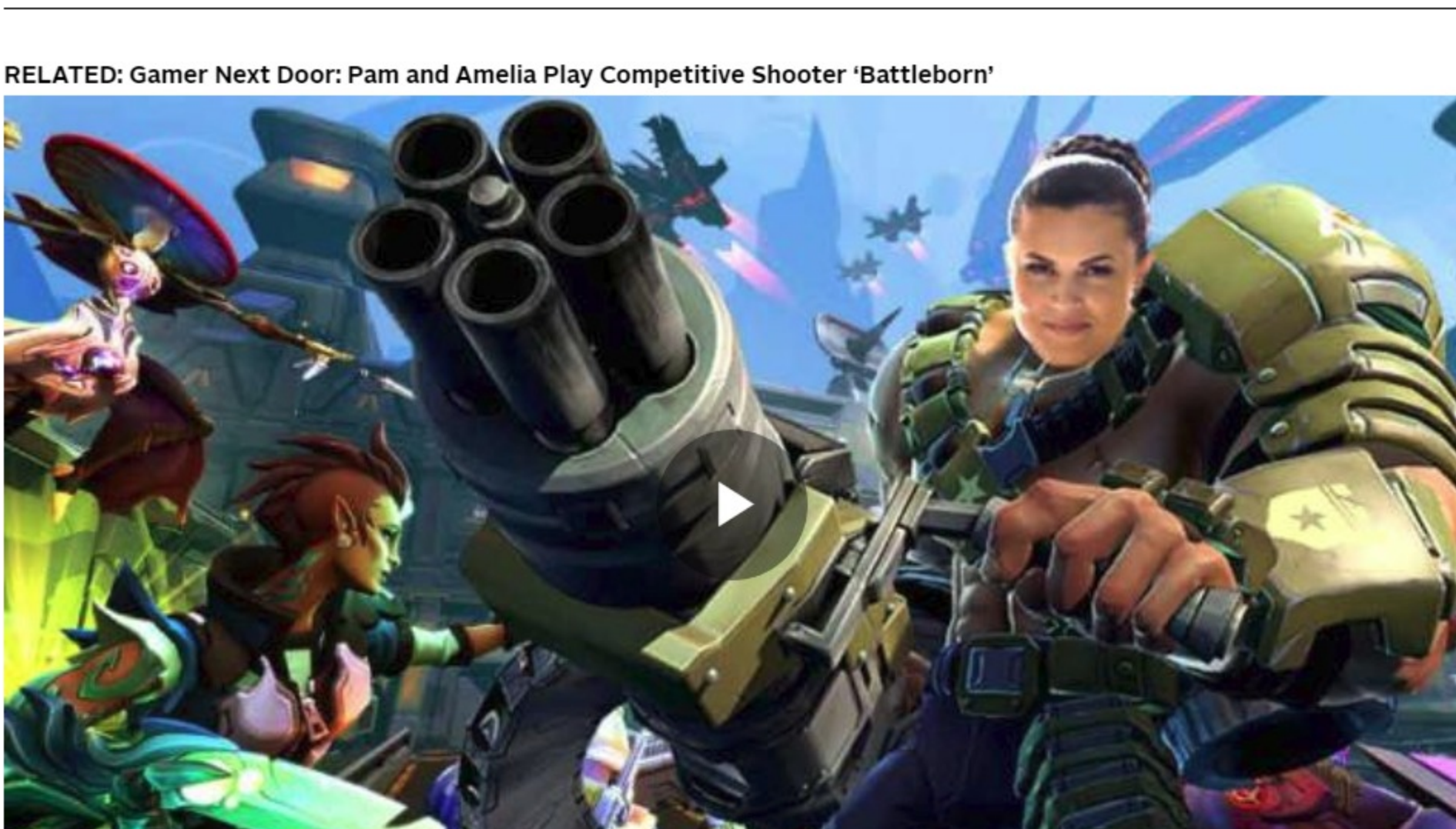
What is it, exactly, that makes you a person, the computer asks. Every time you present the Library program an answer, it poses another logical paradox, and soon you realize you're interacting with this Garden of Eden's serpent.

As you work through the world of *Talos*, entering new areas modeled after medieval Europe and ancient Egypt, you'll also encounter messages left by others who've been here before you (and even other players from your online friends list). Others have faced these questions and puzzles, and found either success or failure. Some trust Elohim and implore you to do the same; others question everything they see, adamantly determined to earn the chance to climb the forbidden tower that stands at the center of this simulated world.

It's up to you to interpret what you see, be it the logical conundrums posed by the contrarian computer, the booming instructions from Elohim, or the snatches of diaries and emails hinting at the experiences of the people who built the simulation. The question of what it means to be a person is ultimately the puzzle at the center of *Talos*—but you'll have to decide the answer for yourself.

Phil Hornshaw is a freelance writer and the co-author of So You Created a Wormhole: The Time Traveler's Guide to Time Travel and The Space Hero's Guide to Glory. He was hoping the latter would help him get Han Solo hair, but so far he's been unsuccessful. He lives with his wife and annoying cats in Los Angeles.

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