

'Gods Will Be Watching' Punished Players, So They Punished its Creators Back

By Phil Hornshaw
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The ax rises, and there's nothing I can do to keep it from falling...undefined

I've taken too much punishment already, spitting blood onto the interrogation room's dirty steel floor. If I tell the truth, there's a good chance the man with the ax will kill us. If I lie, he'll probably know.

So I say nothing, and the ax falls, taking my partner's arm off at the elbow. He screams, spurting blood. I've failed him.

This is *Gods Will Be Watching*, an old school "point-and-click" adventure game of brutal difficulty. At its heart, the game is about solving puzzles involving resource management, like *The Oregon Trail*. But instead of migrating across the country in a covered wagon, it involves intense situations like the above torture scene and being marooned on an inhospitable planet.

The focus, the game's creators tell me, is on putting players into stressful situations where they'll be forced to make tough decisions—like whether it's right to sacrifice your partner's arm in hopes it'll save both your lives.

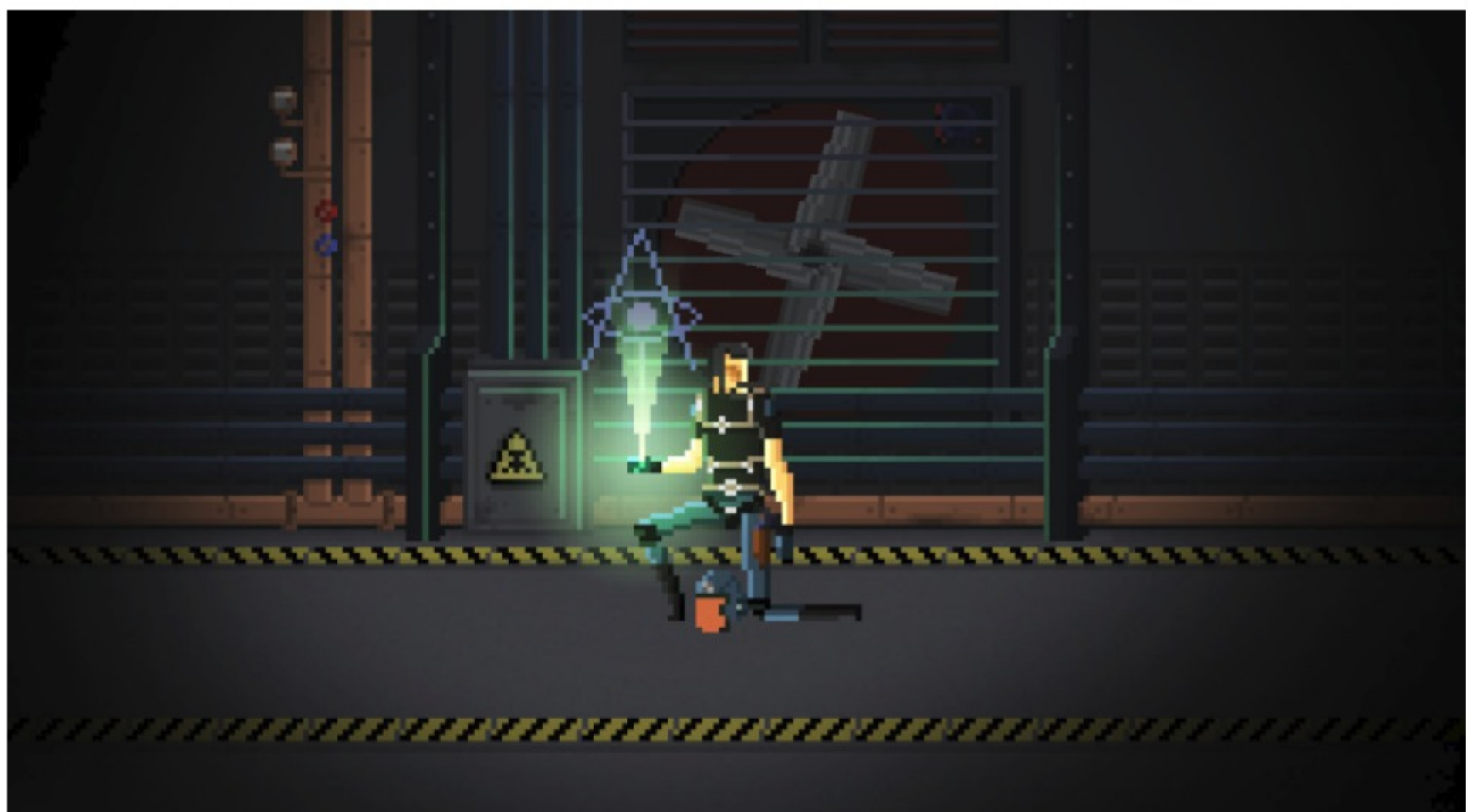
I'm sitting at a small table in a small booth in the relatively small "indie" corner of PAX East 2014 in Boston, a gaming convention attended by tens of thousands. But the blaring music and human din of the space has fallen away thanks to some noise-canceling headphones and *Gods' intense demo scene*.

Even during the short demo, *Gods Will Be Watching* delivers a captivating, intelligent and emotionally charged experience that invites players to get intimate with failure. In that, it's inarguably a success.

"I wanted to achieve true moral decision," the game's designer, Jordi de Paco, told me nine months later during a Skype chat session. He was in Spain, where the five-man development team behind the game, Deconstructeam, is located. "I believe you can only explore those kinds of tough decisions when against the ropes: Are you a hero? Do you justify your sacrifices? Was it okay? Was failure a better option?"

When I played *Gods Will Be Watching* for review a few months after PAX, I found it to be one of the best games of 2014. But while the game went on to be successful, its release was a stressful and traumatic experience for its creators.

'I JUST PANICKED'



The full version of *Gods Will Be Watching* launched on PC in August 2014, three months after PAX East. It quickly garnered a score of 64 out of 100 on review aggregator [Metacritic](#)—a value that would be lethal for a big-budget project. For de Paco, that was painful to see.

Worse were the comments from players, which littered forums, reviews and Steam, the digital portal through which *Gods Will Be Watching* is sold. De Paco said the first batch of reviews were around 80 percent negative.

"We spent 15 months working too many hours a day, and the first 48 hours after the release were full of insults and bad reviews," he said. "People telling us to die, sending very nasty emails, comments on forums, Steam reviews, the comments on websites. It was crazy—really, really traumatic."

Most of the comments focused on perceived issues with the game's design, complaining about the difficulty and elements of randomness—even though those factors were essential in forcing players into difficult decisions, which was the whole point. The developers executed that premise well—but it was the premise itself that many players hated.

De Paco didn't know what to do. The players who might have been fans instead seemed angry at the very idea of what he'd set out to make with *Gods Will Be Watching*.

"I just panicked," he said.

And he began looking for a way to make it stop.

DO YOU KILL THE DOG?



A little before the halfway point, *Gods Will Be Watching* presents players with a moment of relaxation between crises. In it, you play fetch with a dog, Marvin, as you chat with Jack, a fellow soldier.

Marvin is an amiable Rottweiler with a big, goofy dog grin—portrayed adorably despite *Gods'* retro pixel-art style—and simple as the moment is, it's impossible not to take a liking to him in those few calm moments.

Perfect, then, that you're soon asked to weigh the value of Marvin's life. Later, when your team is stranded and low on supplies, he's another mouth to feed—one who can't even contribute to the group by fixing a radio or raising morale. So do you kill the dog?

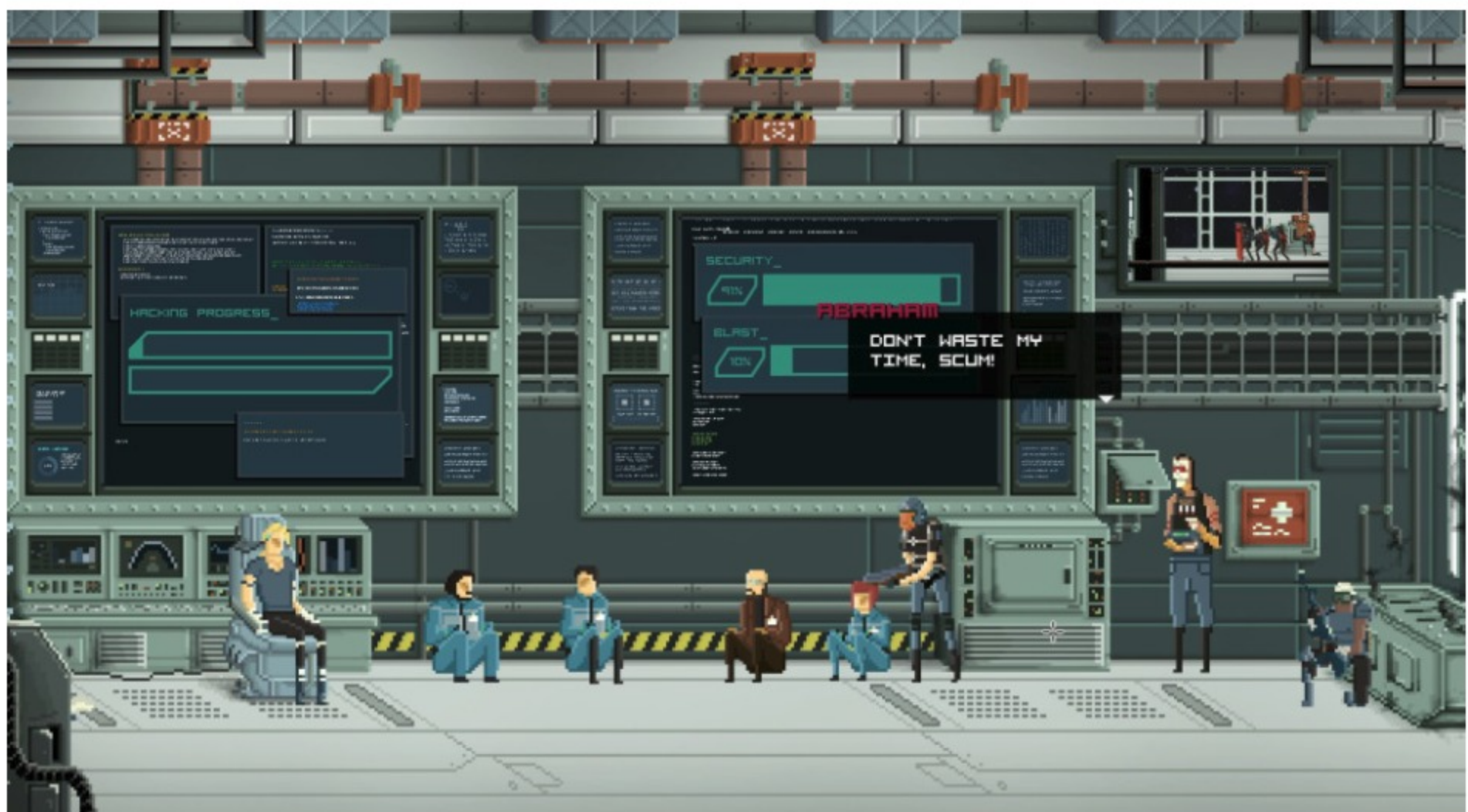
Gods Will Be Watching always gives you the option to kill any member of the team, including Marvin the lovable Rottweiler, any time you want. And because of the game's difficulty and some random elements that can lead to failures beyond the player's control, it might come down to a choice between Marvin's life or someone else's.

After *Gods Will Be Watching's* launch and the flood of negative sentiment, de Paco came up with a solution. He worked furiously for the next two weeks, coding "The Mercy Update." The free download added two new difficulty modes to *Gods Will Be Watching*. One focused purely on puzzles, giving players a randomness-free way to experience solving the logical side of the game; the other made "winning" far easier so players could just focus on *Gods'* story.

Though the original version of the game was still part of the package, playing under the new difficulty modes took out the essential element: the potential for unforeseen failure. In the new modes, you'll probably never have to murder Marvin. After all, who would want to be faced with that choice, even in a game?

That choice and others like it were once essential to *Gods Will Be Watching*, but the Mercy Update fundamentally changed that. It also probably saved the game—and its developers.

'I COULD SLEEP AGAIN'



For de Paco, the decision to compromise his game with the Mercy Update wasn't about whether it served his artistic aims, or whether it would help make the game financially viable. It was just an emotional response.

"I wasn't thinking economically, strategically, or thinking at all," de Paco said. "I just panicked and wanted people to like it. 'Hey, I made 1 game! I put all of me in this shit, we worked... so hard, don't hate us!'"

And when the update went out two weeks after launch, the insults stopped.

"I could sleep again," de Paco said.

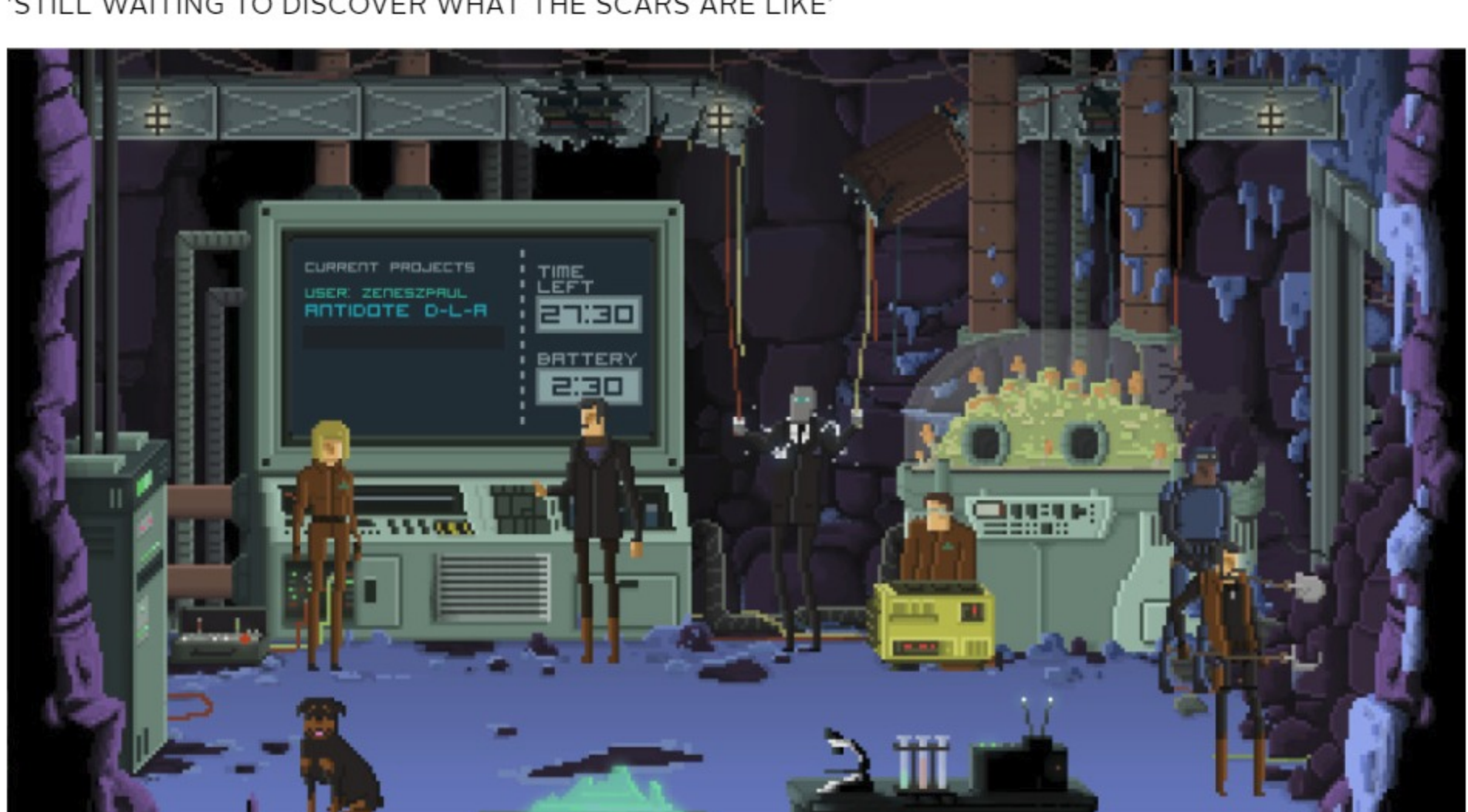
In a way, the Mercy Update compromised *Gods Will Be Watching's* original artistic vision in order to please players who never really seemed to get the game's point in the first place. But there's also a much more complex relationship between developer, game and player at play here: even at the game's genesis, *Gods Will Be Watching* was born of a conversation between creator and audience, de Paco said.

Gods started its life as a one-scene experiment during Ludum Dare 26, a "game jam" in which developers try to make games in just 48 hours. De Paco said that first scene was "like a cool accident," and that when Deconstructeam decided to expand the concept, he had to reverse-engineer his own creation to figure out what made it resonate with players.

"We had tons of feedback from press and YouTubers to examine what the game did that was so attractive and engaging," he said. "I used all that feedback to define what I wanted to empower in the big game."

But while the Mercy Update allows players to avoid the frustration and failure that de Paco intended to be part of the game experience, he said he thought those changes improved the game in the end. With all the work he and the rest of Deconstructeam put into it, he prefers a version that's more accessible and can be experienced by more players.

'STILL WAITING TO DISCOVER WHAT THE SCARS ARE LIKE'



Deconstructeam today released a free downloadable add-on for *Gods Will Be Watching* that was originally promised as part of the game's early crowdfunding campaign.

While de Paco said he's itching to move onto something new, the obligation to make good on that promise has held him back from doing so. But the expansion finally marks the end of the game's development.

And though it might have been a case of delayed gratification, for a team of five, *Gods Will Be Watching* turned out to be a big success. "like hitting the lottery," de Paco said. That success will let Deconstructeam continue to try new experiments like *Gods*, at least for the time being.

But those original, traumatic 48 hours have left a lasting impression, he said—one he won't fully understand until he's able to move on to something new.

"I guess I should be proud and happy with what we achieved," de Paco said. "But, you know, in the end it hurts me to have a 64 on Metacritic, and being insulted way too many times everywhere. I understand frustration leads to that, but—it's harsh, even if you expect it."

"Public opinion, being financially feasible, scores—all that interferes with creativity, and I don't think I have the key to overcome that," he said. "So for now, I'll still keep trying to make what I want within the limits of being able of making a living out of this. Even if I don't want to, I already feel myself a lot more benevolent when designing games. I'm sure I'll discover more about that when I develop a new game. Like I said, I'm still waiting to discover what the *GWBW* scars are like."

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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