

The Wheel of Fortune

serious development of a silly game

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About the game

Development summary

A failed indie game with friends

After almost a year of hard work, the development of our adventure visual novel slowly came to a halt. Expectedly, the scope of the project imagined was too much for the group of four amateur friends to finish. However, inspired by how much we had accomplished and how much I had learned, I decided to try and complete a smaller project, but this time all by myself.

Can I do it all by myself?

As I worked as an artist on the last project, had some experience with both creative writing and music production and barely any programming knowledge I knew that I had just the right skillset to create a visual novel. What I didn't know is how hard it would be to make a video game, but I was about to find that out.

My passion project

The game that I had imagined was again a bit too ambitious. University, work and life left little time for my hobby project and juggling multiple roles slowed the development even more. Learning through the project meant that today's drawings were much better than last year's and the dialogue I wrote two years ago had to be rewritten. Fortunately, I can be a very stubborn person.

Finished after 4 years of perseverance

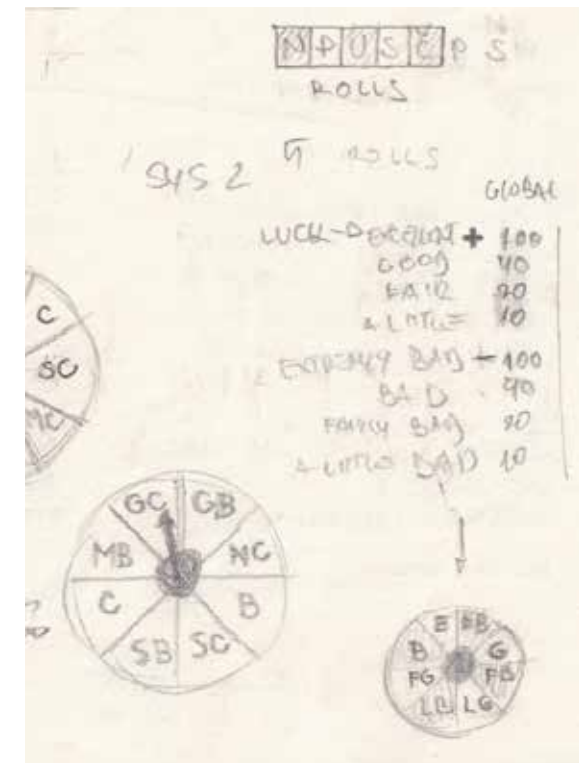
The pandemic freed up my schedule a bit (at least I didn't have to commute) so I decided it was the perfect time to make the final push for the release. After saving some money and quitting my job, I was finally able to focus full-time on my project and finish everything the way I had imagined it. Finally, after 4 years, The Wheel of Fortune was released!



Early scene sketches



A scene from the incomplete visual novel



Early concepts of game mechanics

Outline

Genre	Adventure game
Subgenre	Visual novel, Dating sim
Style	Parody, Comedy, Romance, Slice-of-life
Game type	Singleplayer
Released	December 1st, 2021
Price on release	€7,40
Length of gameplay	4-8 hours
Platforms	PC, Linux, macOS
Distribution	Steam, Itch.io

Description

The Wheel of Fortune is a parody visual novel / dating sim set in the Balkans, with tropey characters, local themes and a Balkan folk-music soundtrack. The story explores themes of luck in life and life choices while making fun of the typical spineless anime protagonist, stereotypes of both Balkan and anime culture as well as the game itself. The player can get one of seven endings by both picking dialogue choices and getting his fortune told for the day by the wheel, a uniquely random element to the game that ties into the theme of the story.

Roles

- Writing
- Illustration
- Game design
- Graphic design
- Music and SFXs
- Simple programming
- Promotion and marketing

This was mainly a solo-project, but I received helped from friends mostly in programming and marketing and also outsourced an illustrator to draw the adult scenes.



1.1 The Wheel of Fortune online store box art

Cultural context

Embracing the Balkan identity

It is important to highlight the cultural context of this game to better understand its concept. The game is a comment on the cultural landscape in Croatia and the West Balkans.

The central theme is the absurd **combination of anime aesthetics and Balkan turbo-folk music**. The two cultural influences are an antithesis to each other – anime representing cosmopolitan, globalist and urban while turbo-folk representing the traditional, historical and rural culture.

Turbo-folk and the Yugoslav wars

Turbo-folk rose to prominence during the 1990's — a time of crime, war and ethnic conflicts in the former Yugoslavia. It was often employed as a propaganda tool by paramilitary forces and is sometimes referred to as the soundtrack of the Yugoslav wars. The genre combines popular music styles with a distinctly Balkan folk melody that has an obvious Ottoman influence.

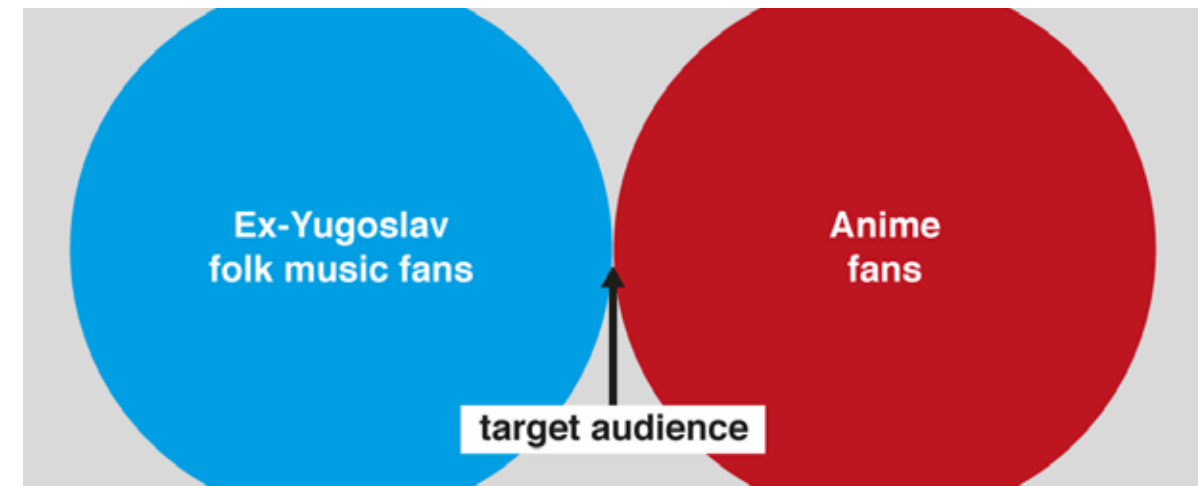
Censorship and hypocrisy in Croatia

Turbo-folk is often looked down upon in Croatia as being a “lower form” of music and is notably absent from the media. This is part of the rise in nationalism and a broader denial of the Croatian Balkan identity and Serbian cultural influence. Despite the censorship, turbo-folk remains one of the most popular genres in the country; a good example being the launch of the first turbo-folk radio station Extra FM in 2018. After receiving much backlash, the radio station almost instantly became the most popular station in the Croatian capital. Almost four years later the station still remains in the top five most listened to radio stations.

What kind of music do you listen to?

—Everything except turbo-folk.

A common answer to this question highlights the perception of turbo-folk in Croatia.



The Wheel of Fortune is a game that is unique at its own expense.



The 90's saw widespread bloody conflicts in the former Yugoslav republics



Singer Ceca, the wife of Serb war criminal Arkan still enjoys popularity in Croatia

Game design

Mechanics

The Wheel of Fortune combines elements of both a visual novel and a dating sim, the main goal of the game being to romance one of the female protagonists and receive a good ending to the story.

Hidden point system

A simple hidden variable determines the final outcome of the story and whether favourable events will happen to the player or not. Another variable is used to determine which girl the player likes. If they are indecisive or wish to court all the girls at once, their efforts will be unsuccessful.

Dialogue choices

The player can choose what to say in crucial moments of dialogue. They are generally rewarded for taking risks and telling the truth. Most choices are weighed depending on their importance and add or subtract a set amount of points from the global variable.

Example choice after player finds that someone has occupied his hotel room:

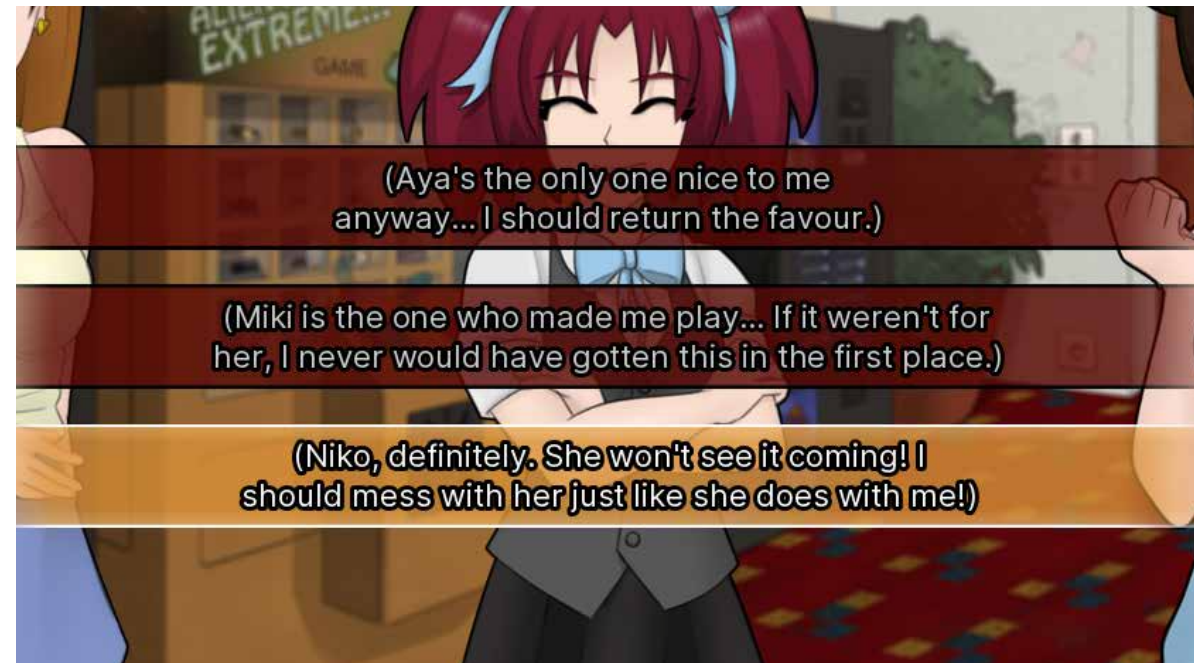
“I should just take a walk and come back later when she’s done. She’ll probably be pissed if I interrupt her...”

-20 points

“I need to check this out... It’s my room, I paid for it! I should be able to go in whenever I want to!”

+20 points

If the player decides to stand up for himself he gets rewarded, regardless of events that follow.



Example of a straight-forward way of finding out what girl the player likes

The Wheel — an element of chance

The Wheel of Fortune spins each night and decides a fortune for the player at random. This also adds or subtracts points from the global variable, except during the introductory chapter where the spins are not random but set to fit the narrative.

Excellent luck	+100
Good luck	+40
Fair luck	+20
A little luck	+10
A little bad luck	-30
Bad luck	-50
Really bad luck	-70
Terrible luck	-100

The points are distributed in such a way that the extreme outcomes have a much more significant impact on the story so that luck is not such a determining factor for players that have understood the dialogue choice mechanics well. For reference, important choices can give the player up to 50 points and there are multiple choices each day.

Unlockable content

The player unlocks special scenes when accessing certain situations in the game. These can be viewed in the gallery menu. Musical tracks are also unlocked while progressing through the story and can also be listened to in the ‘Loops’ section of the Extras menu.



The Wheel displaying ‘Terrible luck’



Gallery of unlockable scenes

Writing

Setting

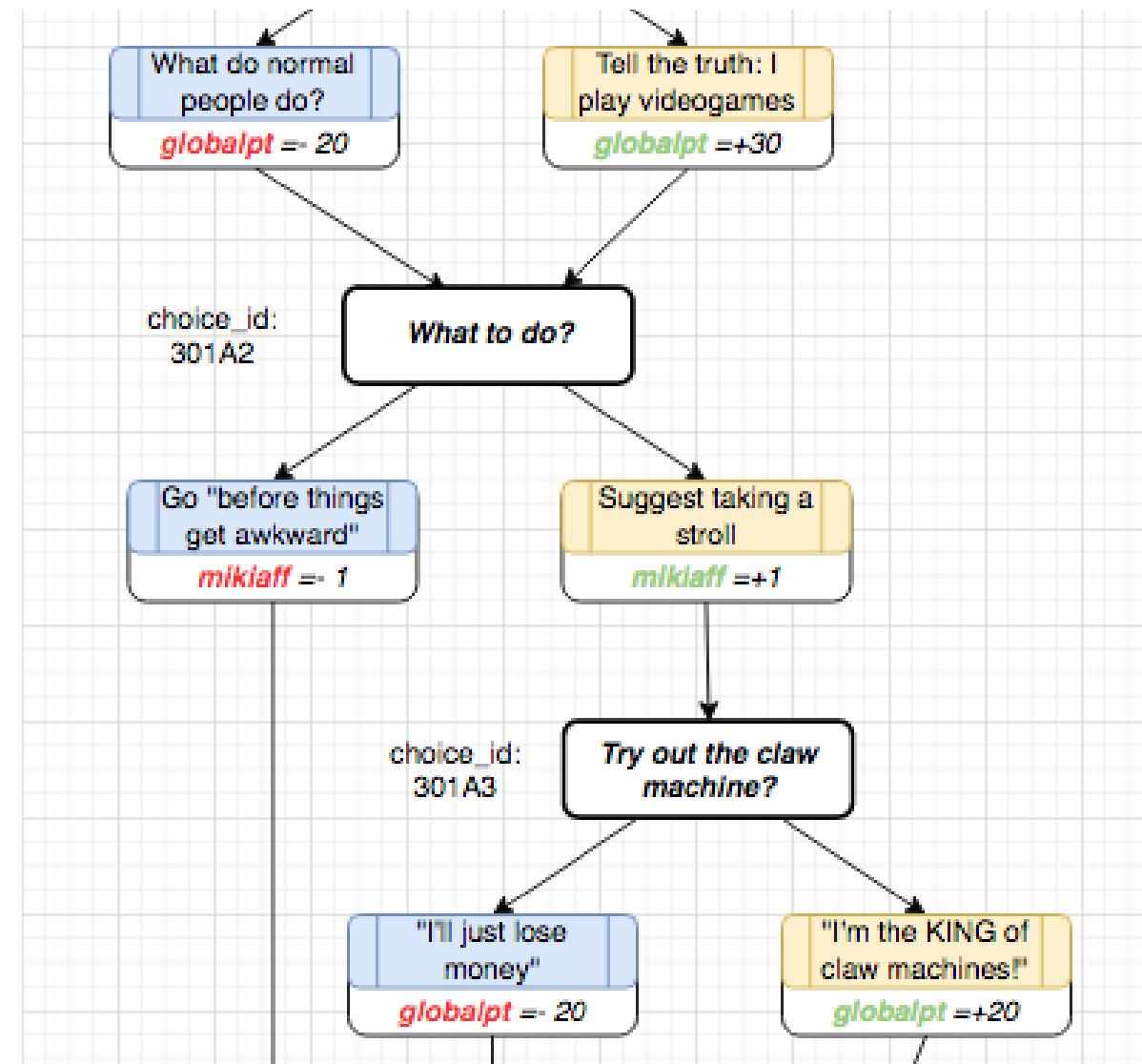
The story is set in the 2010s in an unspecified inland location within the Balkan peninsula. Religion and ethnicity of the characters are purposefully left ambiguous.

Themes

The main theme of the story is the problem of free will and determinism. The main character considers himself to be unlucky and doesn't believe that his efforts can amount to change. The player may or may not change the outcome of the story depending both on his choices and his luck.

Interactive story

There are three short introductory chapters where the story doesn't change depending on the player's choices. After this, the story is structured on a day by day basis in a diamond shape. Days start differently and different things happen depending on the player's points. This means that the gameplay will be slightly different each time, but some core events will always stay the same, making it easier to account for in development.



Example of a diamond-shaped story structure; the parts shown lead back to the same point in the story. Choices often have a negligible difference in dialogue but change the global or affection variables.

Story synopsis

The player takes the role of the pathetic 28 year old unemployed protagonist that lives with his parents and spends all of his time playing video games and browsing online image boards. After his younger brother announces his engagement, the family decides that they will move into a smaller dwelling in order to pay off the loan they plan to take out in order to pay for the wedding. This, in turn, means that the player will soon be forced to share a room with his parents, eliminating even the little privacy he has had until now. This desperation is turned into motivation and the player is adamant to turn his life around, but he is unsure if it will be enough or if his bad luck will stop him once again.

After going to a concert, he meets Miki, a nice girl with shared interests, and wins a backstage pass to meet his musical idol. Upon hearing his plight, the singer gets him an opportunity to help out an unknown man with his computer. There, he meets a sweet and gentle girl, Aya, and successfully completes his task. As gratitude, the man offers him what turns out to be just a meagre discount for a five day hot spring resort getaway which the player accepts.

The player arrives at the resort in poor weather, only to find that he won't have anything to do unless the weather improves. Stuck there with Niko, the quirky resort manager, the player soon finds out that the girls that he met recently are also there. He finally gets the chance to get over his social anxiety and lots of time to contemplate his life decisions. The group gets along well but what happens next is up to the player.

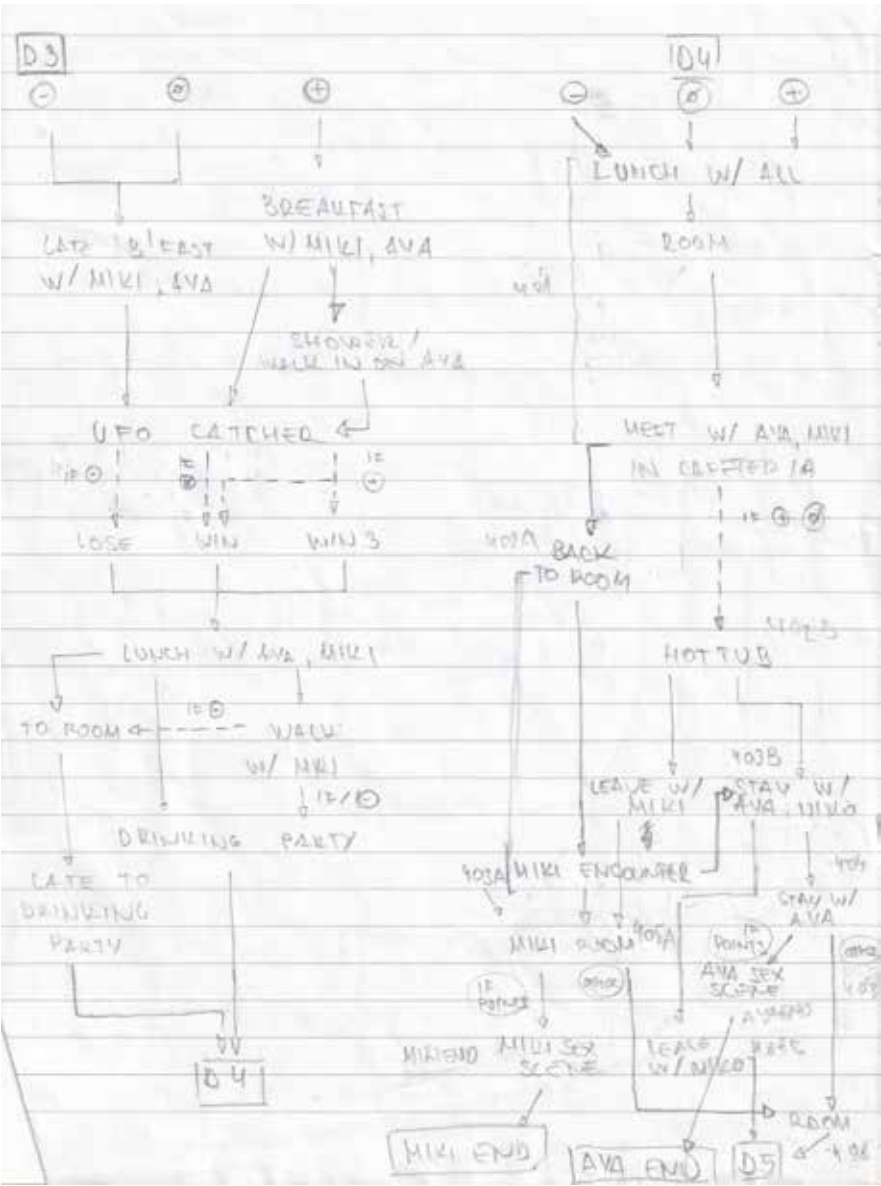
Story endings

Niko ending

The player falls in love with Niko and moves into and starts working at the resort. The truth about the resort is also revealed.

Miki ending

The player falls in love with Miki and moves into her late grandmother's apartment.



Sketches for diagram of day 3 and day 4 at the resort

Aya ending

The player falls in love with Aya and moves into her multi-generational housing apartment.

Status quo ending

The player’s brother’s wedding is postponed indefinitely and things remain as they were. The player remains friends with the girls.

Bad ending

The player moves into the smaller apartment with his parents but remains friends with the girls.

Worst ending

The player moves into the smaller apartment with his parents, his mental health deteriorates and he loses contact with the girls.

There is a seventh, secret ending, accessed only when the player gets ‘Excellent luck’ each spin of the wheel and makes the decision to get into the hot tub. This is hinted in several places throughout the game.

Special ending

The player has a drug fuelled orgy in the hot tub with all the girls and emigrates to Germany.

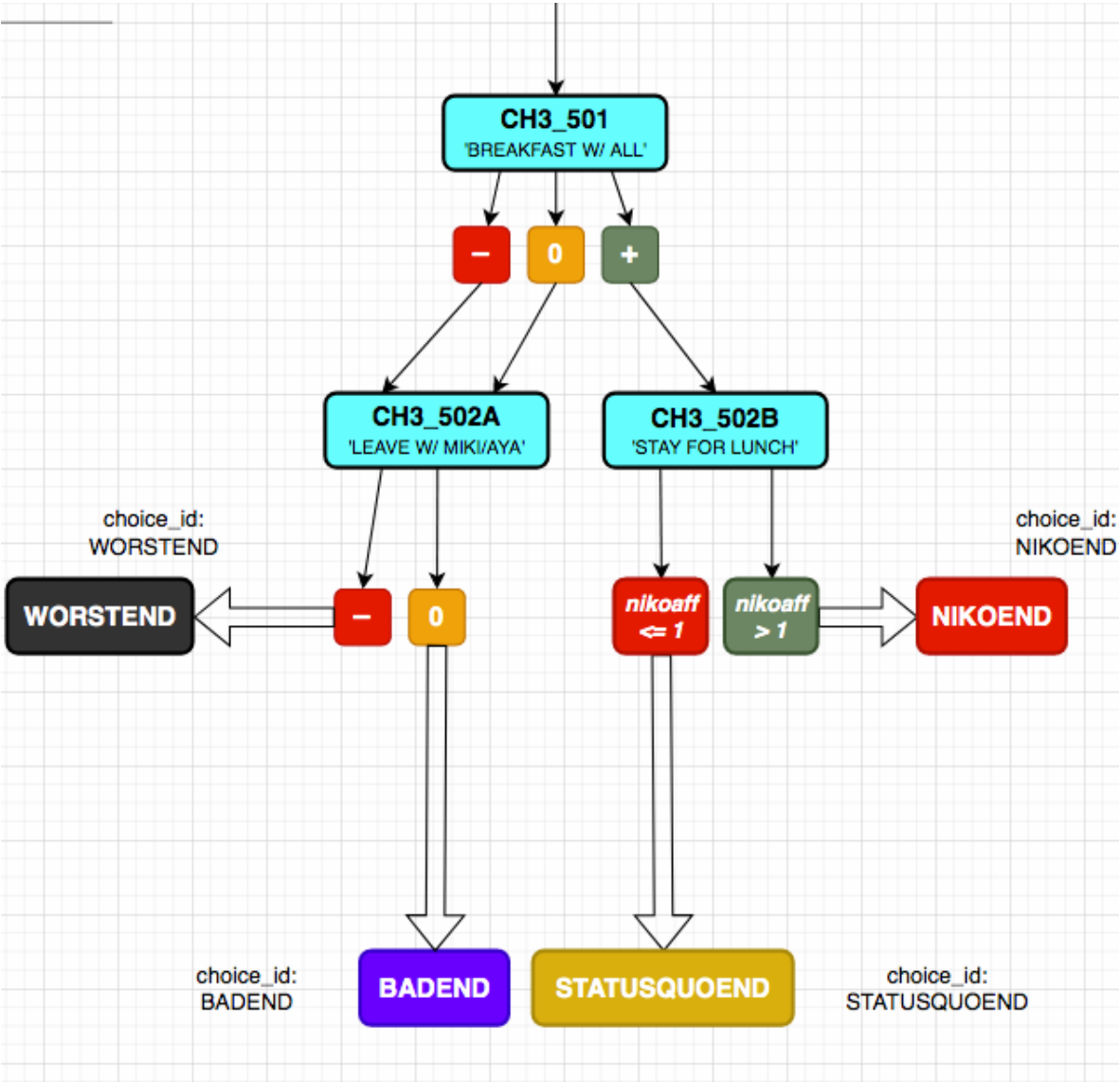


Diagram of final resolution of the story; minus, zero and plus symbols represent variable checks that determine the outcome

Visuals

In a typical visual novel fashion, the characters are displayed with different poses and expressions over illustrated backgrounds that signify where the scene takes place. The game was purposefully designed to look “generic” in order to create an illusion that the developer wasn’t aware of the absurdity of its concept.

Character design

The three main characters are designed according to stereotypical anime character archetypes.

Niko the resort manager, a hot-headed red-haired ‘tsundere’-type girl

Aya the ‘airhead’ character; gentle, feminine and old-fashioned

Miki the short-haired relatable and progressive ‘tomboy’ character

The side characters are more representative of Southeastern European stereotypes:

- The controlling mother character
- The emotionally distant father character
- The successful younger brother character
- Dodo, the shady entrepreneur
- K-man, the folk music star



The main characters Aya and Miki



Niko, the resort manager, lead character



The protagonist's family



Dodo and K-man

Scenography

The background scenes reveal typical Balkan interiors and landscapes. Many scenes contain references and commentary on local and popular culture or have hidden hints about the game and setting.

Special scenes

Also typical for visual novels, some situations in the game are fully illustrated as special scenes. Usually they signify a crucial moment in the story or are present as ‘fan service’.

Adult content

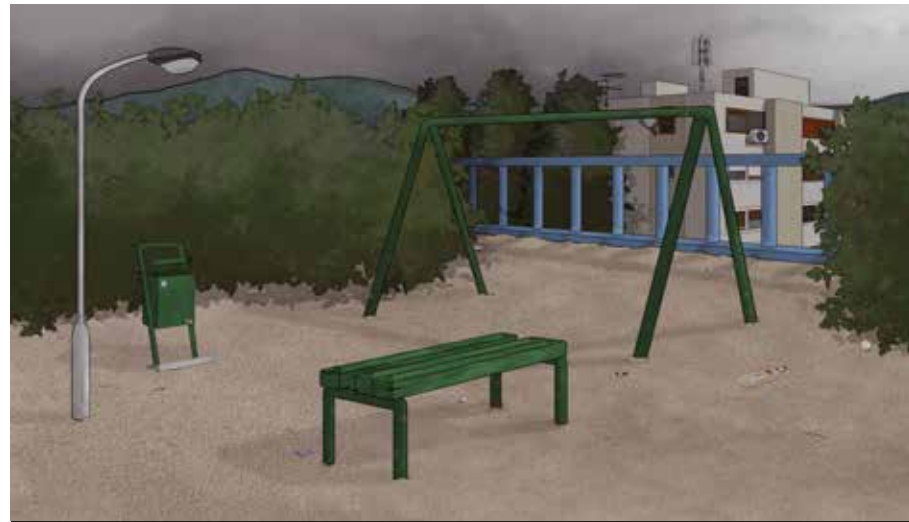
Inspiration for the game was drawn heavily from Japanese visual novels from the 2000s such as Fate/stay night and Devil on the G-string, which are games with a strong emphasis on story but also contain adult scenes. For this reason, I have also decided to include adult scenes in the game. They are not instrumental to the story and an option exists to turn them off since the game functions equally well without them.



Special scene – Drinking party



Background scene – Aya's apartment kitchen



Background scene – Park exterior



Special Scene - Aya laughs at the protagonist's erection



Special scene – Niko hugs the protagonist



Background scene – Concert backstage

Audio

Soundtrack

The soundtrack is comprised of sampled songs from 90's Balkan folk music performers that were edited and remixed. Most of the songs are short loops and change often. As the player progresses through the story, new tracks are played and unlocked.

Legality of samples

Since the game is a parody and distributed on US-based platforms, under US law the fair use exception protects the usage of the songs under copyright law. A similar law also exists in Croatia. Original authors of all songs are credited to further clarify the copyright holders of the songs. Additionally, links to streaming services are also provided to encourage players to listen to the original tracks.

Sound effects

There are some sound effects in the game such as rain and thunder and other, simpler ones like knocks and thuds. The effects were also recorded and edited by me.

Theme song

A theme song was recorded that accompanies the opening animation for the game. The song is a J-rock cover of a popular folk song “Okreće se kolo sreće” (transl. The Wheel of Fortune Turns) by Bosnian singer Kemal Malovčić. The lyrics were translated and sung in Japanese. A music video was released on February 2nd in order to provide more content after the game's release.



Excerpt from music video



Cover of an album that the tracks were sampled from

Release

Publishing

I decided to self-publish the game because I felt that it would be beneficial to my future goals to experience the process by myself. Additionally, I felt that the adult content and potential copyright issues could pose problems while looking for publishers.

Promotion on conventions

The Wheel of Fortune was promoted with a booth at the indie zone of South-eastern Europe's biggest games convention, the Reboot InfoGamer. Alongside a special demo of the game, the visitors were provided with a simple matchmaking app that would tell them whether or not a girl that they like from the game likes them back while also getting them to subscribe to a mailing list. The visitors were also able to spin a physical wheel of fortune which attracted a fair amount of attention. Reactions to the whole experience were very positive, visitors often spending more than 20 minutes with the team, some even claiming that the booth was the best thing that the convention had to offer.

Zero budget marketing campaign

A marketing campaign was planned out with the help of some colleagues and friends about a month prior to release. The campaign mostly focused on the countries of the former Yugoslavia as well as Bulgaria and consisted of press reach out, direct marketing in places like Facebook groups, Discord servers and such, social media posts and ads, reaching out to influencers such as youtubers and streamers and guerrilla marketing with stickers.



Physical wheel used for promotion



Sticker on an abandoned Douglas DC-3



At the Reboot infoGamer convention

Reception

Expectedly, The Wheel of Fortune did not make a big splash in the indie games world but received a fair amount of attention in the local gaming and anime communities and garnered strongly positive reactions from those who noticed it. Some people also reached out to me offering their creative services and wishing to collaborate since they really liked the project which was particularly flattering. The game received almost all of its attention on Steam and almost none of it on Itch.io.

User reviews

The Wheel of Fortune received almost universally positive user reviews, albeit not enough to garner a rating on Steam at this time. The reviews generally praised the writing, humour and music, while opinions were divided about the RNG mechanic and some people found the art to be too amateurish. Players from Croatia expectedly liked the game the most since they were able to understand the full context and all the references.

Press coverage and reviews

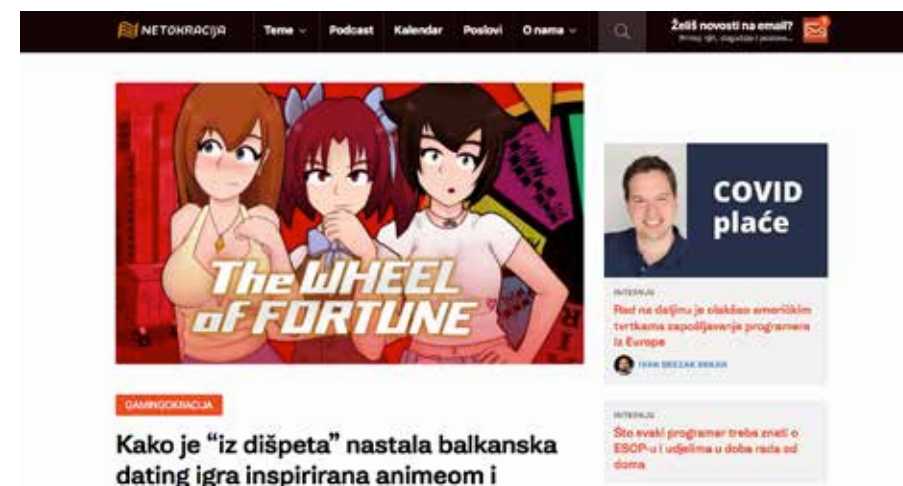
Most local and some foreign gaming media covered the release. A reviewer from the rather unknown Visual Novel Reviews was particularly impressed with the game and still has it featured on his front-page. Additionally, all of the 9 Steam curators who reviewed the game recommended it. In contrast, the only negative review comes from an IGN Adria journalist who wished to remain anonymous. They rated the game 2 out of 10 and called it “disgusting”. More importantly, the game again did not fail to garner an extreme reaction.

“The Wheel of Fortune knows its a ridiculous game and wears that badge on its sleeve. It makes fun of itself and it makes fun of you... and it does a pretty good job of it!”

-LewdGamer



Steam store page



Interview with author on Croatian online news site Netokracija

Links

Store pages

Steam (requires login but safe for work)
https://store.steampowered.com/app/1810230/The_Wheel_of_Fortune/

Itch.io (with age check but safe for work)
<https://takujin.itch.io/wheel-of-fortune>

Animated trailer

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=KhsAzLQ42YA>

Gameplay video

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=8wOy1roQmZQ&t=8s>

Social media pages

<https://www.instagram.com/takujinsoftware/>
<https://www.facebook.com/takujinsoftware>
twitter.com/takujinsoftware

Press coverage

Total Croatia News
<https://www.total-croatia-news.com/lifestyle/58194-the-wheel-of-fortune>

HCL.hr (in Croatian)
<https://www.hcl.hr/vijest/iz-splita-stize-ljubavna-avantura-s-ivicom-narodnjack-om-glazbom-the-wheel-of-fortune-179649/>

PlayNoMore (in Spanish)
<http://playnomore.com.ar/?section=posts&action=read&post-id=12849>

Netokracija.com — Interview with author (in Croatian)
<https://www.netokracija.com/wheel-of-fortune-takujin-186964>

Game reviews

FFA.hr (in Croatian)
<https://ffa.hr/recenzije/recenzija-the-wheel-of-fortune/69582/>

IGN Adria (in Serbian)
<https://adria.ign.com/the-wheel-of-fortune/35053/review/the-wheel-of-fortune>

LewdGamer
<https://steamcommunity.com/id/cheesepile/recommended/1810230/>

Visual Novel Reviews
<https://vamirz.wixsite.com/visualnovelreviews/post/the-wheel-of-fortune>

KittyVisualNovels
<https://steamcommunity.com/id/KittyVisualNovels/recommended/1810230/>

Opening theme music video

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=zrIUkqReWWw>

The Wheel of Fortune free download link

Note: NSFW content can be switched off during startup or at any time in the preferences menu
https://takujin.itch.io/wheel-of-fortune/download/FPCfUhJDRG5RmmAQ9eVPhBhe_1_H9weXheOnw0EZ

Other links

First indie project (with age check but safe for work)
<https://takujin.itch.io/sleeping-politicians-demo>

Video projects
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=LkU3Ab23Z4Y>

Thank you for your time!