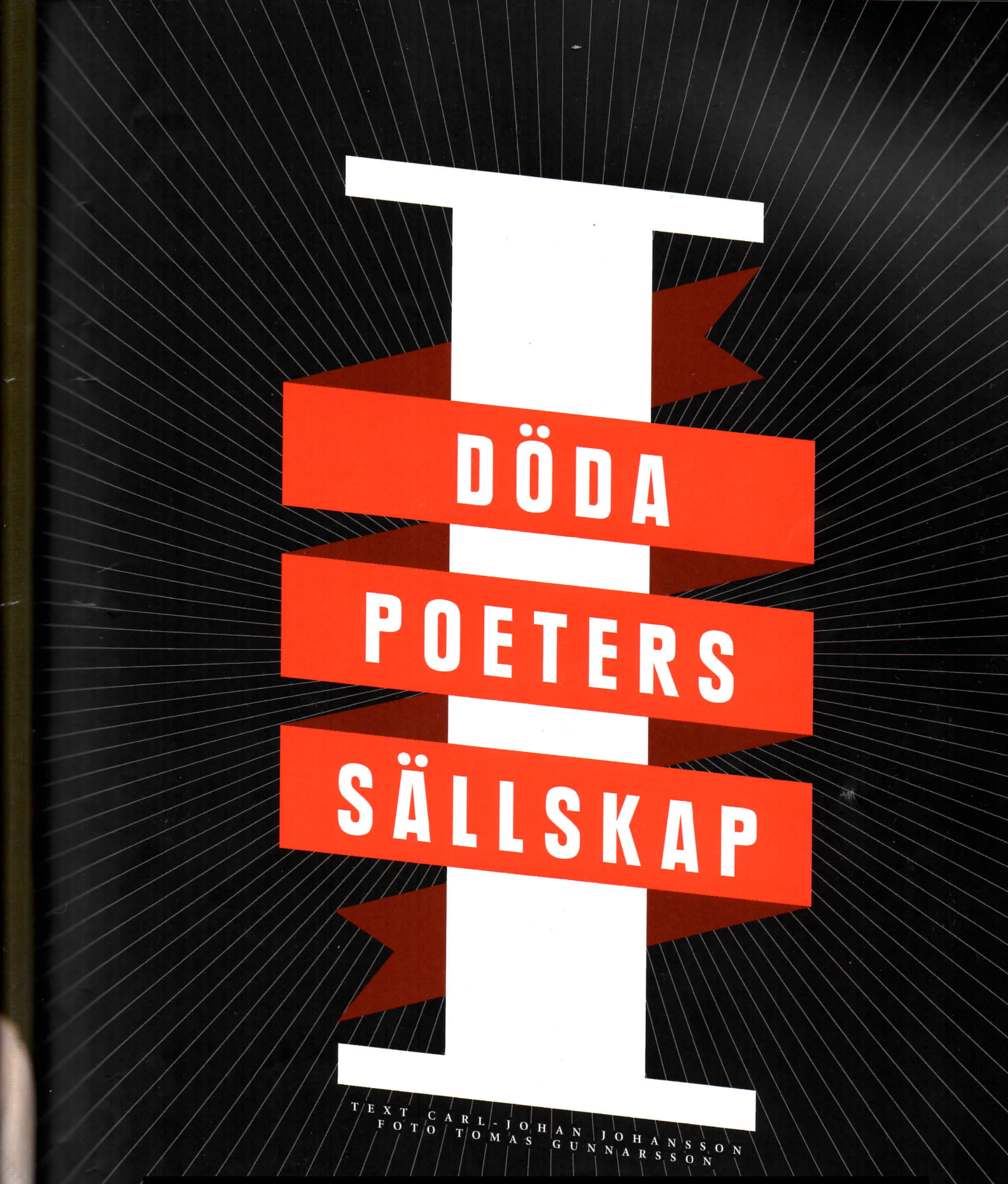


"IN THE SOCIETY OF DEAD POETS"
Text: Carl-Johan Johansson
Photo: Tomas Gunnarsson

Translation by: ScreamingPineapple (annotations in brackets [ ] made by me).

Quick note: This article was written around 2011-2012, around the time of the Kickstarter campaign for Knock-knock. (Before the release of Pathologic Classic HD and the new translation of that game)

The video game studio Ice-Pick Lodge may only be a decade old, but its history reaches back hundreds of years. Its founders could, like generations of Russian geniuses before them, dedicate their efforts to literature or theater – yet instead they choose what they believe will be the great art form of the 21st century.
Instead they choose video games.
Fienden [name of the magazine] travelled to Moscow to figure out why. A week later we came back with this story; of the uncompromising game creator Nikolay Dybowski and the ones who follow him, of long, tumultuous nights filled with vodka and visions – and of Russia, a country slowly smothering them, while at the same time being the only one in which they could breathe.
We'll be honest: this will take hours to read through.
And we'll continue being honest: if you're going to read only one gaming article in your life, read this.

In the beginning, the illusions were dismissed as the effects of altitude sickness, psychological imbalance, or fumes from working inside the mine. Testimonies left by the afflicted were vague. Glimpses of outlandish shapes, of knives and ice picks, of broken glass. Hints of strange scents. No one could say for sure what the visions meant, but everyone agreed they were brilliantly clear, as if they were the visitors' own memories, and that they vanished as suddenly as a candle flame extinguished by a gust of wind. Everything could've been chalked up to temporary insanity if it hadn't been for one detail: everyone who visited the mine experienced the exact same series of hallucinations, in the exact same locations.

All of that stuff was a long time ago now. And what actually happened, what was actually written in those vague reports from the '80s, has since been buried under a thick layer of myth. When three climbers in the beginning of the 21st century reached the research station by the mine's entrance, at an altitude of 3.100 meters, it had been more than a decade since anybody last set their foot there. The station itself was covered with snow and ice, the wind howling through the rooms where researchers and engineers had previously been living and working. Outside the station the enormous, crooked drill pointed like a bony finger into the darkness of the mine.

The researchers' attempts to penetrate the thick crust of ice and cinder, through the remains of the devastating avalanche covering the mine's entrances, had proven fruitless. But the small gaps where the drill had worked its way through remained when the climbers arrived; openings large enough for them to enter with their picks and methodically chip away the remaining ice. It would take time – days, weeks, months. While working, they converted the abandoned research station into a temporary home. They cleared out the debris, managed to heat up the rooms, refilled the inventory with new equipment. They named their new home the "Ice-Pick Lodge".

It is said that they eventually managed to break into the mine, but very little is known as to what they experienced inside. They are supposed to have made attempts to jot down and analyze the hallucinations, the eerie feeling that every step they took made the mine change shape, the sounds around them to transform, indescribable details to emerge from out of the darkness. But they soon discovered that there was a reason those old reports were so brief: the visions conjured by the mine seemed impossible to commit to paper, eager to evaporate from memory as soon as anyone tried to describe them.

No one knows for sure what happened after that – to the mine, to the hallucinations, to the three mountaineers. Which could be because they never existed to begin with.

A NEW ART FORM

Someone once wrote that it's the children the world almost crushed who will eventually grow up to save it. In no other country is that saying more true than in Russia. It's a country with an endlessly dark history – a darkness that has stained and fostered generations of artists. And which is now starting to trickle into our computers and video game consoles.

In the winter of 2002, Nikolay Dybowski managed to convince his friends to put everything else aside to instead do something they knew no one near them would understand. Something that at best would result in a meager income and at worst push them below the poverty line. To motivate them, Nikolay needed a symbol to summarize their position as pioneers. Something to draw inspiration from.

That's when he got the idea of the mine.

The climb would symbolize the significant economical obstacles they would face on the way. The ice was a metaphor for creative compromises and skeptical voices they would be forced to defeat. The hallucinations were an allegory of the artistic visions they would convey to the world. The mountaineers were representations of themselves.

They named themselves Ice-Pick Lodge.

For ten years they have been creating video games unlike anything else. They have a written manifesto that they follow unrelentingly, despite making them jaded and destitute. They summon their strength from the generations of Russian geniuses who have previously travelled down the same road. They see themselves as artists exploring a new type of media, worthy its position beside film, literature, music, painting and architecture.

Their uncompromising attitude has alienated them completely from the rest of

HISTORY RISES FROM PATHOLOGIC'S BROKEN CODE AS WE PLAY

the gaming world. Publishers recoil from hearing their name. Critics are confused by everything they create. Gamers take detours around their dark, melancholic creations.

I had the rare privilege to spend a week with them in a strange apartment in the center of Moscow. They were fantastic days. I heard them explain everything beautiful and important about their own culture, and utter contempt for the broken society that often prevents people from seeing it. I sat next to them as they fell asleep over empty vodka bottles. I saw the passion as they talked about their goals and ambitions, and I saw the empty, defeated stares as their last life line broke one night in October. I heard them describe games they may never get the chance to create, games that are in their thoughts every day, and now also in mine.

I would like to take you to that strange apartment. But in order for you to understand what drove me there, I first have to talk about the most astounding game I've ever played.

What makes Ice-Pick Lodge so unique is the fact that they succeeded. They triumphed where so many others fell short. They truly created the game that once and for all proved that this media could be an art form to be taken seriously.

And they did it on the first goddamn try.

THE AGE OF PLAGUE
Pathologic, 2005

In the autumn of 1770, Moscow was suddenly struck by a devastating wave of bubonic plague. For a year it spread like wildfire and wiped out over a third of the city's population. City limits were expanded to facilitate new graveyards where the dead bodies could be buried, as authorities frantically tried to uphold quarantine laws to keep the infection in check. Property was destroyed, public forums shut off and infected people locked away. Factories and markets were shut down. Food and basic hygiene became scarce and the people rapidly began to starve.

In the beginning of September the following year, the epidemic reached its climax. More than a thousand people died every day and there was no reason to expect that things would turn for the better.

On September 15th, 1771, the increasing desperation ultimately resulted in what has historically come to be known as "the plague riot". An enormous, armed mob marched forth, devastating anything in its path. Destruction and violence followed in their wake, as they advanced towards the walls of the Kremlin to demand the prefect's head on a platter. There, they were confronted by armed militia who opened fire straight into the mass of people, forcing any and all survivors to flee.

Shortly thereafter, the Russian winter arrived. The plague was finally defeated by the cold, but not without the cost of people quickly freezing to death, many having had their houses destroyed or quarantined. Most of them were malnourished and weakened. Over 200.000 people died during an epidemic that almost engulfed the entirety of Moscow.

It's an epidemic you've probably never heard of. It has disappeared into the darkest corners of our history books. Russian history is filled with suffering and misery, overshadowing that of any other nation. 200.000 people isn't much compared to the new criteria of cruelty set by the events of the past century. People forget past sins the moment new ones are committed.

But Ice-Pick Lodge never forgot that epidemic. Instead they made a game out of it.

Pathologic takes place somewhere in the Russian steppe around the break point between the 19th and 20th century, in a small self-sustaining town built upon a meat industry. The town is geographically isolated from the rest of the world, surrounded by tall walls.

Three people arrive there at the same time, each in a different part of town. The first is a doctor obsessed with mortality and aging, the second a shaman with a pragmatic view on morality. The third is a girl claiming to possess supernatural powers. All three of them are called to the town for different reasons.

They barely make it inside the city before the gates are closed, never to reopen.

The town has been struck by a mysterious infection, an illness killing anything in its path and spreading at a devastating rate. The inhabitants call it the "sand plague", and for each passing day in the game it will claim yet more lives. Infected areas are blocked off one by one. Violence and insanity start to emerge out of every corner and people are increasingly getting desperate in their hunt for someone to blame. Is it God's fault? Or the state? Is science somehow the cause? Or is it the result of some black magic?

What follows is a long, torturous simulation of how people act when society and its social constructs crumble to dust around them.

Each day is a harsh struggle for survival – not just against plague, but also hunger and exhaustion. Cows are butchered en masse and burned, while the abattoir – the town's means of livelihood – is sealed in a moment of panic. As the town is cut off and no longer produces any meat, the price of basic necessities skyrocket. At the same time, infected people start falling into an almost animalistic state and attack others openly. The rest start losing both reason and sympathy as starvation erodes their humanity. Already during the second day I witness a mob burning a young woman at the stake, convinced that she's a witch. When it turns out she's not made of clay, and therefore not a witch, the crowd moves on to find someone else to blame. A few days later the army rolls into town, executioners in protective gear who brutally incinerate anyone infected by the plague with flamethrowers.

DEATH IS EVERYWHERE IN PATHOLOGIC. IT'S A SIMULATION THAT'S IMPOSSIBLE TO WIN

And then everything gets even worse.

The goal you aim for at the beginning is to find a cure for the plague, but this objective is gradually put aside as each day passes. Hope is quickly replaced by despair. It becomes clear that this isn't the type of epidemic you can cure, the only thing you can hope for is to survive it – and the chances of doing that aren't particularly great.

On the one hand, there are weapons to protect yourself with in all this madness, but it turns out they aren't worth a damn to a starving man. Only two types of currency are useful anymore: rations and medicine. And anyone who still has any of it are not keen on parting with it. Pathologic is the only game that has made me trade a gun for some canned vegetables. It constantly asks us how far we're willing to compromise with our perceptions of ethics and morals to survive.

At one point I give a razor to an infected and suffering child, in exchange for some jewellery I can trade for vital food in one of the shops. And the game has made me painfully aware of what the child will be using the blade for. I feel disgusted as I stumble upon the little lifeless body in an alleyway later on.

At the dawn of each day, you are given a task that must be accomplished. This is the only demand the story enforces on the player, but to obey is easier said than done. Nothing in this sepia-toned, overgrown world – that has aptly been described as "Oblivion with cancer" – bends to the player's will. Key scenes naturally play out at fixed times, regardless of how far you've come. Important characters fall ill and die or are murdered in cruel conspiracies. Other secrets are entirely lost in the chaos if you don't discover them in time. There is such an enormous amount of things to see and do, and so little time to do it. Everything you put off doing you will regret bitterly, and if you fail a mission the game ends abruptly and you're forced to restart from the beginning. It is a genuinely sadistic arrangement.

The quest givers are different depending on which one of the three characters you play as, but they all belong to one of the families who helped build the town and are now ruling it with an iron fist. Their history is full of betrayal, injustice and bloodshed. The chaos created

by the plague provides fertile ground for greed and mistrust. Characters often lie straight to your face just because they can, and you are just as much aware of the fact as you are helpless to do anything about it. In your fight for survival you are constantly forced to put your life in the hands of people who wouldn't hesitate to thrust a knife in between your shoulder blades if they could gain something from it.

The biggest part of Pathologic however, isn't about running errands for wealthy aristocrats. It's about exploring on your own. And that is where things start getting interesting for real. You discover that there's a meta-narrative running like a grimy red thread through the whole story. The game regularly seems to communicate with us on a plane beyond the plot itself.

One of the first clues is the creatures known as executors. They are placed haphazardly throughout town, like chess pieces on a board: immovable, with long black capes reaching down to the ground and large bird masks meant as protection from the plague. They make the hairs on your neck stand up any time you see them. No one can say where they come from or why they are unaffected by the plague. And they speak directly to you. Not your character – to yourself. The player. Which makes your character confused and upset.

Pathologic often gives you the feeling of being part of a play. The story starts with a quarrel between the three main characters atop a stage in an empty theater, and you can sense that the show is aimed towards us on the other side of the computer screen. They accuse each other of being charlatans, thieves and killers, before they set off in separate directions, but they only make it a few steps before something happens. The stage turns dark and they freeze in their tracks, like marionettes having their strings cut. And there they remain, until we pick who we want to play as.

It is possible to return to the same theater later in the game. If you do it, you get to see someone dressed in black and wearing a white mask performing a pantomime that seems to predict what will happen to the characters of the game – before it has actually happened. Just like the executors he speaks directly to the player, over the heads of the characters.

Pathologic is an enormous game. It is impossible to realize how big the world is until you find yourself in the middle of it. And despite it being a dark and gloomy adventure it is brimming with artistic ambition, painfully beautiful scenery and buildings that leave you speechless. It is full of what Goethe once called "frozen music": architecture expressing emotion as

we gaze upon it. In the case of Pathologic however, this frozen music is more like a long lamentation.

In the district furthest to the east, called "Land" ["Earth" in the re-translation], lies one of the best examples of this – that being the repulsive abattoir. It resembles a giant tumor latching onto the town. No one ever enters or leaves the building anymore. The doors have been locked with the workers still inside. Twisted screams can be heard coming from its depths at night. A blockhouse on a rope runs from a hole in the wall of the building all the way over to the train station: a simple means of transport that has since stopped moving. Rotting meat bags are left hanging from the rope, sticky with the blood and fat trickling through the coarse burlap, filling the air with the stench of death.

Right next to the abattoir lies a rectangular building sunken into the ground. It is here that the meat is processed. It is also here that the mysterious plague is rumoured to have originated. Following a violent revolt, this building has been sealed and now serves as a type of mental hospital. Small narrow slits cut out from the thick concrete is the only link to the outside world for its increasingly desperate prisoners.

On the other side of town, in the district wedged between the river Gorkhon and "Throat" ["Guzzle" in the re-translation], looms what is possible the biggest mystery of all. The Polyhedron, named after its geometrical shape, is an impossible construction overshadowing everything else nearby with its vast size. It sort of looks like a scorpion's stinger wedged onto a huge cocoon, anchored into the ground via a narrow staircase supporting the rest of the building. It hangs there like the sword of Damocles, threatening to fall at any time.

The Polyhedron is also said to be a masterpiece in more ways than just as a piece of architecture, possessing magical properties able to alter both time and space. Time has supposedly stopped inside. Some townsfolk claim it can provide eternal youth. Believers see it as a link to God.

During the course of the story the Polyhedron acts as a temporary home for a gang of murderous children. They lock themselves inside its chambers as the sand plague breaks out, and refuse to open it to any of the adults. Come nightfall they roam the streets wearing dog masks, attacking anyone who made the fatal mistake of wandering around on their own.

Death is everywhere in Pathologic. It is in many ways a struggle for survival, but it's really more about everything that does not survive. It is a simulation that is impossible to win. The town and most of its population are condemned before we even start playing. Partially by the predestined story, but equally in part by the real history it's based upon. The forces that have for centuries tormented and depleted the Russian people all converge into a tale of death, disease, and other themes as old as time itself. It is a work with a classically Russian mark, one seeking resolution for centuries of human cruelty and the scars it has left upon the national spirit.

PATHOLOGIC MAKES YOUR STOMACH TURN

History rises from the broken code of Pathologic as we are playing. Scenes reminding us of the Great Purge and a century of communist abuse of power follow each other. The city limits keep people trapped and limit the spread of information. People fall ill and die. Artists and visionaries are persecuted and executed. The authorities arrive to punish anyone who dares to oppose them. The inquisition, with a fanatic orthodox priest in tow, establishes their headquarters in the town's cathedral. From there they force the villagers into submission and make them regret their sins – sins that have brought upon them all the torments of hell.

One historical incident in particular has inspired the story's most dramatic twist. The Aral Sea, situated on the border between Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan, was once one of the world's great salt water lakes, but fifty years of systematic assault from Soviet industrialism has reduced it to a puddle. Jetties are now on dry land, pointing towards beds of salt stretching out for miles. The remaining water has been poisoned by factory waste to such an extent that most life forms have been eradicated. It's the most depressing place you can imagine; a monument of humanity's destructive and arrogant nature.

Pathologic keeps this motif in the core of its plot. During the course of the game you discover how the people of town have been abusing nature – and how it is now returning the favor. You discover there is an abysmal pit at the base of the abattoir. For centuries, the blood from all the butchered animals have been dumped into it, collecting under the town in huge amounts, like an underground lake poisioning the soil. The ground on which the town is built has gradually been infected and made infertile by centuries of offal, and now that decay is spreading.

It is in other words not the cattle that's ill, it's the town itself.

Pathologic drives this point home in such a well-planned way that it makes your stomach turn. During one of the game's last days, the city map you've been carrying with you is unceremoniously replaced with the image of a butchered bull in cross-section. There it lies, with its organs, entrails, spine, blood vessels, brain and horns fully exposed. And the more you study it the more... familiar the shapes seem.

You soon realize what you're actually looking at. The whole map is shaped like an animal. Behind the carcass in the picture the town can still be glimpsed. The abattoir sticks out like a big cancerous growth from its behind. The tributaries "Throat" and "Vein" [Gullet and Guzzle in the re-translation] represent exactly what their names are: jugular and bloodstream. Even the districts are named after cuts of beef. The whole town is a representation of a dead cadaver where the infection can prosper and spread freely. And in the section forming the animal's head sits the Polyhedron, penetrating the brain. It turns out that the impossible structure can stand upright because its foundation reaches further down into the ground than anyone could've anticipated. It has torn up a deep wound in the tarnished earth, and it is this wound that is now infected, which has resulted in the poisioning of the town's bloodstream.

The people who built the town, we are told, were originally nomadic. They drifted along the steppe without staying too long in the same location. This way, they learned to develop a symbiotic relationship with nature. For all the nourishment they sucked out of the earth, they eventually payed back with their own bodies. But as they decided to settle down everything changed. Railroads were constructed, industries grew, and strangers whose fathers had never died for the ground on which they stood suddenly started to use it for their own benefit.

The balance with nature was forever disrupted. And this is exactly the point the game tries to communicate: the sand plague is not really a disease. It isn't an infection at all. It's just antibodies trying to cleanse away the parasites that have for centuries latched onto the same plot of land.

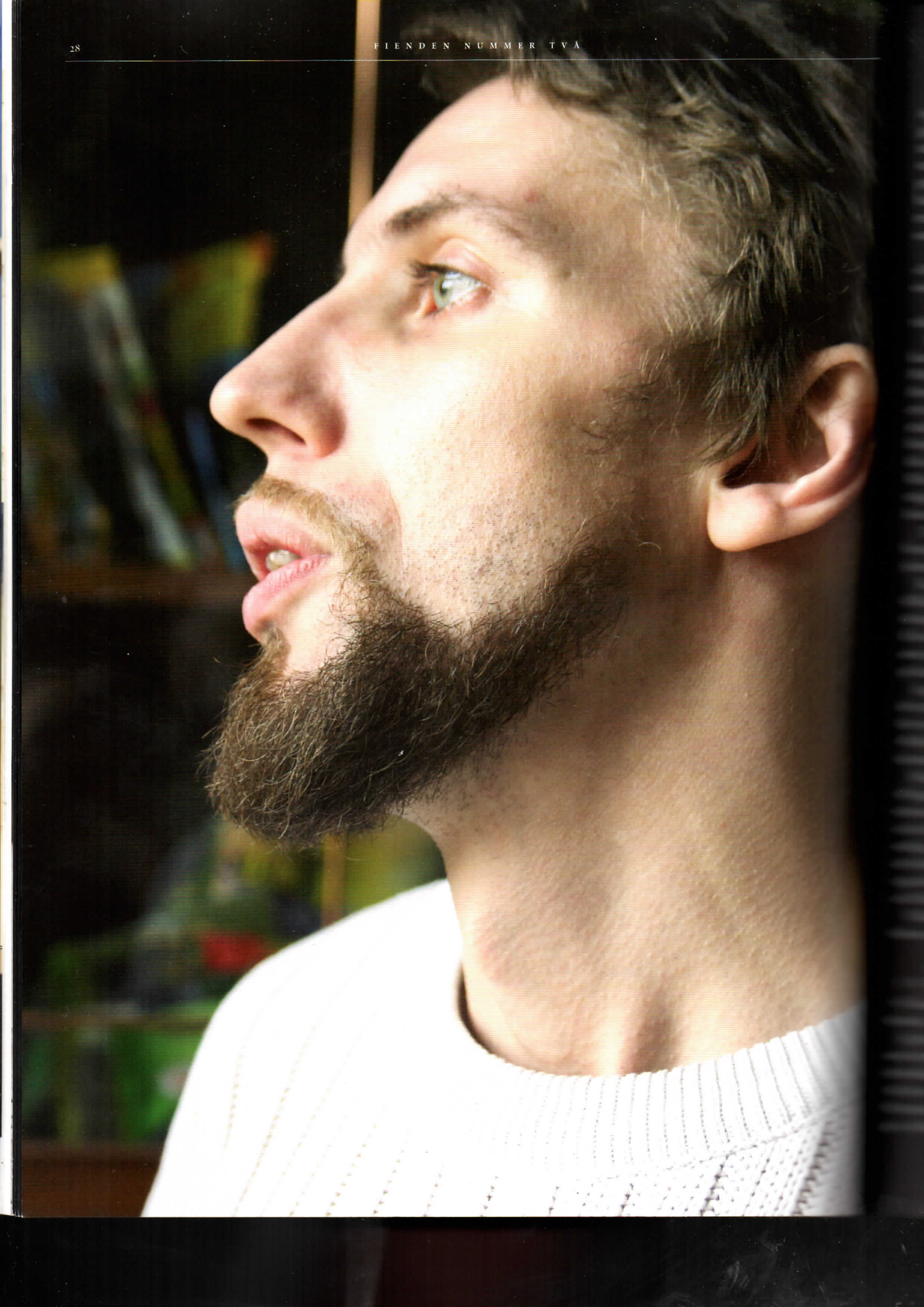
Somewhere around here all the metaphors start to blend together with Pathologic's reality. The game's story is complex and exists on several different planes. We get to experience it directly from the characters' perspectives, as survivors in the middle of an ongoing epidemic. But we also get to see it from an outside perspective, fully aware that we are separated from the characters we control. This is already brought to our attention during the introductory theater play,

and we are regularly reminded throughout the course of the game. Creatures like the executors seem to be able to see us right through the screen, that this epidemic is just a moment of entertainment for us.

How it all ends? In the only way it can end, of course. With a big, confusing meta face-slap.

The twelfth and final day starts off the same way as the previous, listing statistics of the death toll, number of infected and lost people. You are informed that over 8.000 people have died since the game started. 674 in the last 24 hours. Another 397 have been infected during the same time. The town is close to collapse. I'm expecting complete chaos and insanity, but as I step onto the streets I am met with the complete opposite. All the noise is gone. The alleys are empty. No sign of either infected people, children in masks, or soldiers. The panic that has tormented the life out of the people the last few weeks is nowhere to be seen. The atmosphere is calm, quiet, tentative. It could be described as the last breath being held in for as long as possible. I wander around for an hour without seeing another soul. The sky is brighter than it's been for a long time. For the first time since the infection broke out, the town once again feels harmonious and beautiful.

The children ultimately let me into the Polyhedron, and it's just as amazing as I anticipated. The inside is bathed in warm colours, filled with strange decorations and winding staircases. At the bottom there's a symbol etched into a stone plate. The children quietly watch as I step onto the strange sign. And then something happens that would best be described as the bottom falling out of reality. The world around me disintegrates. And I helplessly fall into whatever's outside.



The next time my character opens their eyes I'm standing in an overgrown garden surrounded by a tall fence in the middle of a black void. In the garden sits a lone lamp post. Its light falls upon a model of the town, built in sand. Two children – a boy and a girl – are watching me from the sidelines. They seem just as confused as I am.

-"You came alive!", exclaims the boy. "You've only been doing what you feel like lately! It's impossible! You're ruining the game!"

This is where I'm pulled out of the fiction so violently that I almost lose my breath.

The struggle to cure the epidemic, my character is told, has felt real thanks to the Polyhedron, which the children claim "has the ability to give life to things". They created a sandcastle inside, and the castle turned into a town. They played with dolls, and the dolls came alive. The entirety of Pathologic is a game that grew out of their control. My character angrily retorts that he's no doll, but the children just reply that he was never fun to play with anyway.

Pathologic has previously breached the fourth wall occasionally, but here it's suddenly flattened completely to the ground.

Shortly thereafter my character is transported back to town, upon which I need to decide if the remaining people are to live or die. The same people I am now eternally separated from, by the glass of my computer screen.

I'm not sure what to think. Is it a good ending? Is it a disappointment? I really have no idea. I just know that Pathologic is the only game that could get away with it.

With this realization comes the most important question of all: what kind of people are behind this? What do they want to say with Pathologic, with the countless references to Russian history, with the baffling ending? How do you even start making something so twistedly beautiful, to the breaking point original?

What kind of unique creative process lies behind this masterpiece?

"WE DON'T CARE ABOUT MONEY"

-"We were constantly drinking all the time. It was awful."

I am sitting right across the man who has been staring at me from the other side of a computer screen for the last three years. I am used to seeing his black and white portrait every time the Haruspex, a key character in Pathologic, appears in dialogue.

But now Nikolay Dybowski is instead sitting in a kitchen in Moscow, picking at his pelmeni with a fork. Outside the window the October darkness has fallen. On the table in front of us stand two half-empty bottles of vodka.

To Nikolay – one of the three founders of the Russian game studio Ice-Pick Lodge, and the one responsible for every written line in their games – the view is far from foreign.

-"We drank more absinthe than water for a while," he says. "It was really bad."

Once upon a time Ice-Pick Lodge had an office, even if that's a rather generous euphemism for a one room apartment with some computers and a server humming in one of the corners. People kind of came and went as they pleased. Some stayed there for weeks at a time. There used to be a couch available for overnight guests and the fridge was always filled with alcohol. ("Russians really don't drink as much alcohol as people say," Nikolay explains. "They drink much, much more.")

That was six years ago. Today the office is gone, Ice-Pick Lodge is missing a publisher for their new project and the few people officially employed are working from their apartments and keep in touch through irregular meetings and Skype.

Nikolay is seemingly unphased by the situation.

-"We don't care about money at all," he says as he pours more vodka into our glasses. "We need to eat and be able to pay rent, but we don't make games to buy big flashy houses or luxurious cars. We are completely uninterested in that. We're artists. We create things."

It's not a coincidence that he has this outlook. Nikolay is 34 years old, born and raised in Moscow. The family on his mother's side have roots in the city two generations back, and originate from Georgia. Nikolay's grandparents divorced and his grandmother moved with the family to Moscow where she started teaching political economy at the university. His father is from Yekaterinburg, a small town in the Ural Mountains at the border between west Russia and Siberia ("People in Siberia still refer to Russia as 'over there'," he explains).

It's no exaggeration to say that Nikolay comes from a culturally privileged background. While growing up he was constantly surrounded by literature and art. Both of his parents were theater critics and playwrights who put together plays critical of the regime.

They worked with several of the Soviet Union's most prominent theater directors to save their masterpieces from communist censorship. Nikolay learned at an early age how a dramatist's working process looks – something he would benefit from much later in his life.

He himself studied philology and history at the university in Moscow during the 90s, which you can tell when you talk to him. There isn't a historical time, building, era or literary figure that he doesn't have an opinion or a few anecdotes about.

He's just about to finish another glass of vodka and begin telling us about how Ice-Pick Lodge was formed, when a noise is heard from the hallway. It's Dmitry who's back.

-"Nikolay always forgets I don't drink vodka. I'm Moldovan. I drink wine!"

Dmitry shakes his head as he unties his scarf and returns Nikolay's credit card. There's a liquor store 50 meters away that is open 24/7. He's just been there to shop.

When I e-mailed Nikolay for the first time and asked if me and Tomas could visit him in Moscow he replied:
"Just come. I have an apartment you can live in. It's not particularly comfortable but it's very hospitable." Shortly after we had booked our flight tickets though, problems arose. Nikolay informed us he has just been awarded sole custody of his nine year old son. At the same time his girlfriend, Liu, moved from Saint Petersburg to Moscow indefinitely. Suddenly the apartment was very crowded. We suggested we'd get a hotel instead, but Nikolay didn't want to hear it. "I'll fix it," he said. He messaged us again two days before we were leaving.

-"You can live with Dmitry instead. He is super nice. He also develops games."

And now here we sit, in Dmitry Leaduhin's kitchen, washing down our supper with vodka. It turns out he has an amazing apartment. Nothing in it is as it should be. All the walls are leaning. The door frame to the bathroom is so crooked that you can't close the door. When I try to pour some hot water for tea, the whole tap comes off the sink. In the kitchen, pipes crawl along the walls like bony tree branches. Over the bathtub someone has installed a gas burner with a viewing hole cut out right next to the open flame.

In the stairwell outside hang parts of the building's wiring out of gaps in the wall, like huge crow's nests.

-"In a way it's great that you're living here," Nikolay says as he shovels more sour cream over his pelmeni. "You get to know Dmitry now. He's the one you should really be writing about. He's got a unique way of thinking. I don't understand how he comes up with his idea, but they're so unlike anything else I've seen."

Dmitry gives an embarrassed smile while he sits down to uncork the wine bottle. He has been living in this curious apartment since he moved to Russia two years ago, but grew up at his parents' vineyard home in Moldova. Right now he's trying to create visual effects for commercials and low budget movies ("Really shitty ones", he deflectively replies when I ask him which ones), and teaches computer animation at university level. The rest of his free time he spends, via his company Invada, on creating adorable little indie games. The most famous is called "Luminaria" and is about catching luminescent fish by circling them with the mouse without touching the enemies that surround them. Like everything Dmitry makes it's heavy in the visual effects' department and the odd ideas Nikolay seems so fascinated by.

Together, they essentially make out the entirety of Moscow's alternative gaming scene. There is barely any indie movement here. And no conventional gaming industry either, for that matter. Neither Dmitry nor Noklay know of any other game developers with goals and ambitions similar to their own. The rampant software piracy has almost entirely managed to destroy the market. The rest was taken care of by the economical crisis a few years back. Anyone developing games in Russia today mainly does it in the form of small applications for Facebook and other social media. The stuff you can make money from.

Dmitry couldn't be less interested in the latter years' obsession with "social" games. He barely has anything in common with the rest of the Russian gaming scene. Or with the western equivalent, for that matter. Instead he gains most of his inspiration from the East. He's obsessed with anything related to Japan. He adores Japanese role-playing games, anime and Japanese cuisine. He tells us he could live entirely off sushi if it wasn't for him being completely broke.

Suddenly Dmitry stands up and disappears from the kitchen to retrieve something. When he returns he proudly displays a rare "Neon Genesis Evangelion"-cell phone, which he bought used off an acquaintance in Moscow. It cost him a thousand dollars.

-"And the funny part is that it doesn't even work!", he says before laughing.

The phone is equipped with a 10 megapixel camera, features both manual buttons and a touch screen, and contains a bunch of cute mini-games with a "Neon Genesis Evangelion"-theme. It also has a high resolution 3,5 inch screen that can compete with the best smart phones on the market. The fact that it only works with Japanese telephone companies doesn't matter to Dmitry.

-"I usually only get pissed off when the phone rings anyway," he says as he gestures towards the apartments stationary phone: an old dusty fax machine on a stool (crooked, of course) in the computer room.

It's getting late. Out on the streets of Moscow, the temperature continues its descent. Nikolay Dybowski on the other hand, is just starting to get some steam up.

He opens the last bottle of vodka, empties its contents into our glasses – and begins the incredible story which, ultimately, will answer all the questions that have haunted me since Pathologic's credits rolled down my screen.

STUMBLING STEPS

The events that would shape Nikolay Dybowski started with the fall of the Soviet Union.

He had just started his studies at the university of Moscow and dreamt of doing something creative with his life. He started to socialize with a collective of young idealists who ended up becoming his closest friends. They had plans to become artists, writers, and poets. They would never end up like everyone else.

-"When the iron curtain fell, things immediately changed in Russia," he says. "People dared to dream again. They suddenly realized they could become anything they wanted." It was a liberating feeling. People flooded the universities in search of knowledge. Subjects that didn't necessarily result in practical degrees became popular again. The whole country underwent a brief creative boom before the deterioration started again.

It was at this point in time that he fell in love with Dungeons & Dragons. Since he, like the rest of Russia, had been cut off from the rest of the world his whole life he had never seen anything like it before. It turned out to be the perfect media for young dreamers who, like Nikolay, tried to role play their imagined fantasy worlds in real life.

There was just one problem: in Russia there were no official scenario books for purchase. So he had no choice but to create the stories completely by himself. He used to gather his friends in the kitchen and have them get through the adventures he'd written.

Nikolay quickly grew tired of dice rolls and complicated rule sets though. He didn't want his adventures to be limited by numbers and statistics, so instead his campaings started to look more like a type of chamber play, with advanced scripts and demanding dramatic roles. With a single toss the dice went into the garbage bin. This wasn't Dungeons & Dragons anymore. It was something Nikolay decided to call "Nocturnes" – grand dramas that started at night and played out all the way into sunrise.

None of his friends understood it then, but one night Nikolay presented the adventure that would be the last they'd ever play. It would also be the one to point out the direction the rest of his life would take.

He called it "Rebellion", and it was about a utopian kingdom, ruled by a young regent. Under their command, a society is formed with a high standard of living and remarkable architecture. Universities and a well thought out official apparatus are established to cement the construction of society. The king is an artist but also one of the people, and he is loved endlessly. But one day he finds out that a rebellion has started in a faraway town, near the edge of his kingdom. More people seem to join by each day. At first he feels insulted by the news. He just can't comprehend why anyone would want to oppose him. The people seem to have everything they could wish for. He decides to send some trusted subjects to investigate what's going on. They embark on a journey through the land and experience many of the structures and systems the king has established. It's a rude awakening: suddenly they're forced to reevaluate their view of both him and his society.

Nikolay, who at this time was studying history, became obsessed with "Rebellion" and spent all his time researching failed attempts at creating ideal societies. Without realizing it, he had stumbled upon one of the oldest motifs in Russian history, that of the utopia and its inevitable collapse. He devoured plays and books. He fell in love with Thornton Wilder's "The Ides of March", a semi-fictitious depiction of the fall of Rome, which would affect him deeply.

"Rebellion" was never completed. It became too expansive and outgrew the format of a Nocturne. Nikolay spent months creating databases full of pictures, texts and music to be used as reference material. He wrote fictitious letters for the players to read. Everything was saved on his computer and showed to them on screen in order to illustrate the story. And it was an enormous story, split into 15 game sessions, which put heavy demands on the participants.

Too heavy, it would turn out.

Nikolay loved his friends. They were amazing, creative people. But he also realized they were terrible actors. They just couldn't convey the feelings and expressions this story demanded.

Instead his mind started to wander in new directions. Could he do more with this concept? Could he make people personally involved with the story in a way that didn't demand a talent for drama? He soon started to realize that his reference library looked more and more like something you could use to create... a video game.

In the beginning of the 2000s, Nikolay had finished his education and decided: he would develop a video game. But not a video game in the traditional sense. He was completely disinterested in any of the things games are usually worried about, like achievement based rewards and puzzles. What he wanted was the interactive storytelling. The story of "Rebellion" had at this point developed into something completely different, and this new thing was dependent on choices and simulation. He managed to get an acquaintance of his father to invest 5.000 dollars into the project. It seemed like a dizzyingly great amount. He was sure it would be enough for the game he planned on making. There might even be some money left over.

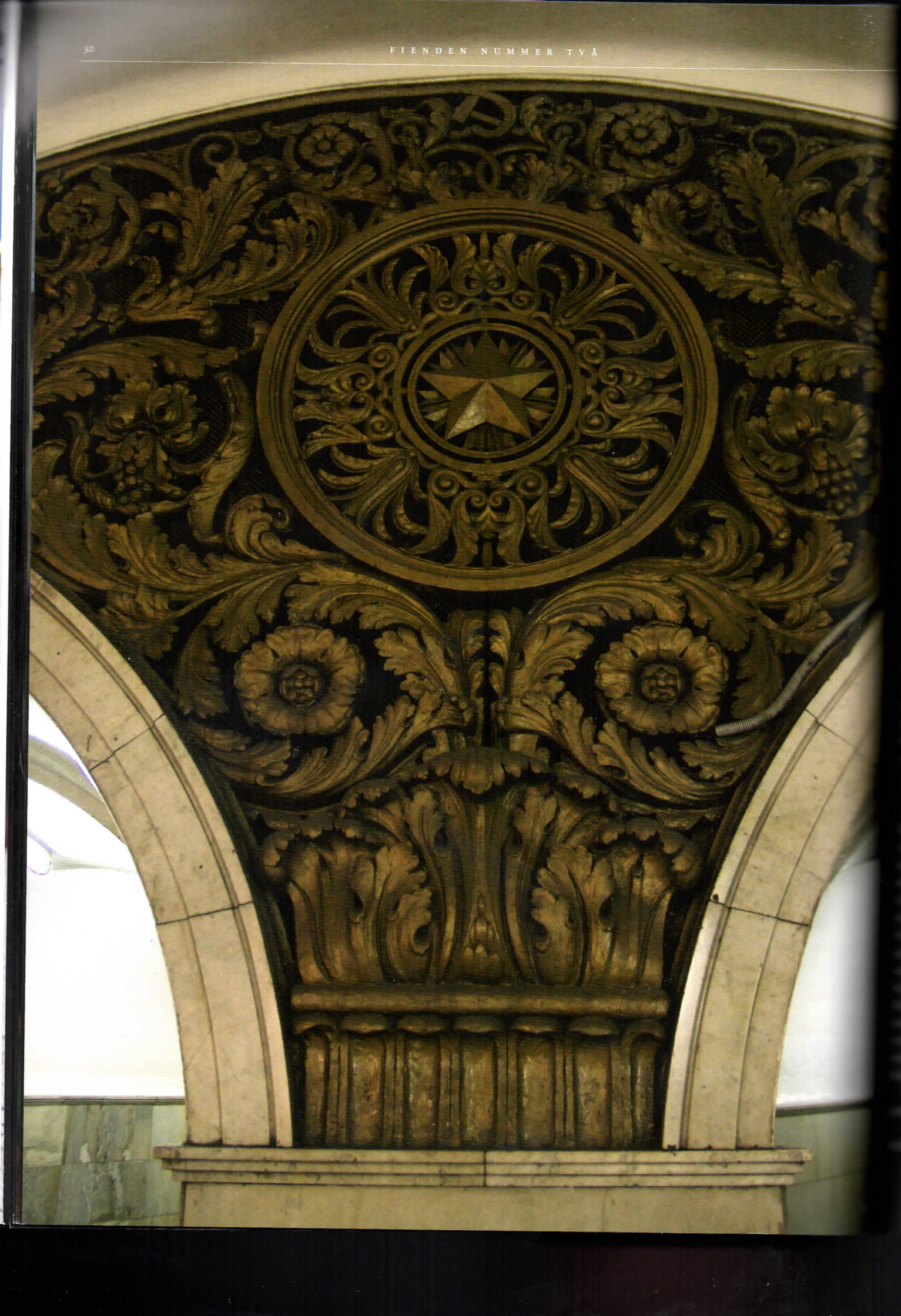
There was just one problem with the whole plan. Nikolay didn't have a damn clue how to make a game.

What he did know, however, is how to use a search engine.

-"I opened up Google and searched for 'how to develop video games'," he says with a shrug.

He read that there's a type of people called publishers, and another type of people called developers. That sounded interesting. He clicked around a little and found out there are people like that in Russia. Something called a design document was often mentioned. You seemed to need that if you wanted to make a game.

-"I quickly found out I needed help from people who understood how this stuff works. So I opened up Google again and wrote 'programmer who wants to develop games'. I found a bunch of contact pages. I called the first name I saw on the list and asked if he wanted to help develop a game. He said yes. 'Will it be a two-dimensional or three-dimensional game, by the way?', he wondered. I said 'What?' and he replied: 'Okay. Fuck off.', and hung up. So I opened Google again and wrote: 'Two-dimensional or three-dimensional games?' and hit Enter. Two-dimensional seemed cheap. So I called the next name on the list. He asked me the same question and I replied: 'It'll be two-dimensional.' He continued:



'Okay. Will it be sprite-based?' I said: 'What?', and he replied: 'Okay. Fuck off.' So I opened up Google again, haha. I kept going for three months. I talked to over 300 people. It was all like a shock to me."

Eventually, luck fell on programmer Ayrat Zakirov. Nikolay describes him as an amazing human being – kind, patient and extremely intelligent. And most importantly: he was the only one who didn't just hang up the phone – he actually believed in the whole idea.

-"I honestly don't know what I would've done without him," Nikolay says.

On his own, Ayrat assembled a small team consisting of a 3D-modeler, an animator and another programmer. Meanwhile Nikolay thought it would be best to create one of those design documents everybody was talking about. He wrote down what the game was about and what he wanted to achieve with it on a piece of paper, and then brought it to a publisher. The design document was only a few pages long. Most of it was presented as a list. Nikolay wasn't very concerned with this piece of the puzzle, and didn't think any potential publishers would be either. A paper with some words on it, you know? Who cares?

-"When I handed it over they just stared at me," he says. "They looked shocked. 'This isn't a design document!'. Then they asked: 'Where is your prototype?'. I said 'What?', and they said 'Okay. Fuck off.' I went home and googled it again, and thought: 'Okay, I guess we'll have to create one of those then.'"

"I WAS A FANATIC"

The project that would eventually be known as Pathologic was born from chaos and confusion, but it didn't matter as long as it was unrelentingly driven by Nikolay's iron will and precise vision. To prevent anyone from misunderstanding his intentions he had, long before even googling how to develop games, written down his thoughts into a manifesto which he forced anyone showing even the slightest interest of working on the project to read. Both publishers and programmers he came in contact with thought he was an idiot. Nikolay respectfully didn't give a single damn about that. To him, it just proved that his process of selection was working.

The manifesto started with two permissibly pretentious sections:

"Art doesn't decay – it changes. Art is like a wandering soul travelling from old bodies to younger ones. It finds new shapes and transforms them according to its own laws. Creativity can arise out of pure pragmatism, new technology or the will to entertain. Every art form changes and gains the ability to embody phenomena not previously expressible. It hasn't been long since film

"I OPENED UP GOOGLE AND SEARCHED FOR 'HOW TO MAKE VIDEO GAMES'"

underwent such a transformation. Now it's the video game's turn. Its new shape must reveal itself at the crossroads where games meet the mystery, the unknown. We call this new form "the deep game".

The deep game has the ability to conjure what Aristotle called catharsis: a purification of emotion by evoking sympathy and fear. The phenomena is characterized by a powerful emotional explosion followed by a psychological shock, caused by the experience of new truths and the ability to see new aspects of reality, previously hidden. The result is a personal moral rebirth. Neither passion nor drug induced states can compare to this sensation. To accomplish something like this is difficult, but we are convinced it's possible. Video games will gain the status of something elevated, something important. People will think of games as something that will forever change their lives."

If people were still there after getting that far, they usually stood up and left after realizing that Nikolay wasn't after making money at all.

-"I remembered there was a tradition of writing manifestoes within literature," he explains. "German romanticists always had a statement at the beginning of their works. The Russian poets from the Silver Age clearly and neatly wrote down their ideology at the start. There was always a manifesto at the head of the great literary trends – so why wouldn't there be one for video games?"

He raises his vodka glass as a toast and downs his drink before continuing:

-"I didn't write this manifesto for the sake of others, but for our own. I wanted to find people who thought he same way I did, who had the same ambitions. We weren't going to be doing traditional game development. Our goal wasn't to entertain. I wanted to make games as a new form of art. In 2002, that was a completely new way of thinking. I didn't have a single thought about Europe or America when I said this. I couldn't imagine my games ever being famous, much less in other parts of the world. I was only thinking of Russia. People who read the manifesto thought we were crazy. Games were cool, but art? No way. Of course they weren't art. I got the advice to write a book or make a movie instead, if I was so hell-bent on making art. Games were just entertainment. When I tried to explain Aristotle's theory of catharsis to them, they just laughed. I'm not sure how things were in Europe, but in Russia 99 percent of everyone who starts working with game development are engineers. Not artists or writers, just programmers. Most of them wouldn't even know who Aristotle was."

He sighs heavily.

-"I wrote the manifesto to clarify my stance. We weren't going to focus on pushing technological limits, but emotional ones. I warned people early on that I am impossible to work with. I didn't give a single damn about how pretty the content was if it didn't serve a point. I actually didn't really want the manifesto published at all. It was entirely for our sake. It also felt unnecessary to publish it since we would only be making one game. I didn't have any expectations of making money off Pathologic. I was completely convinced that we wouldn't have a future after it released. All our resources, all our abilities would be invested in realizing it. It was our holy grail. Nothing else mattered. I was a fanatic. There were only three people who believed in me."

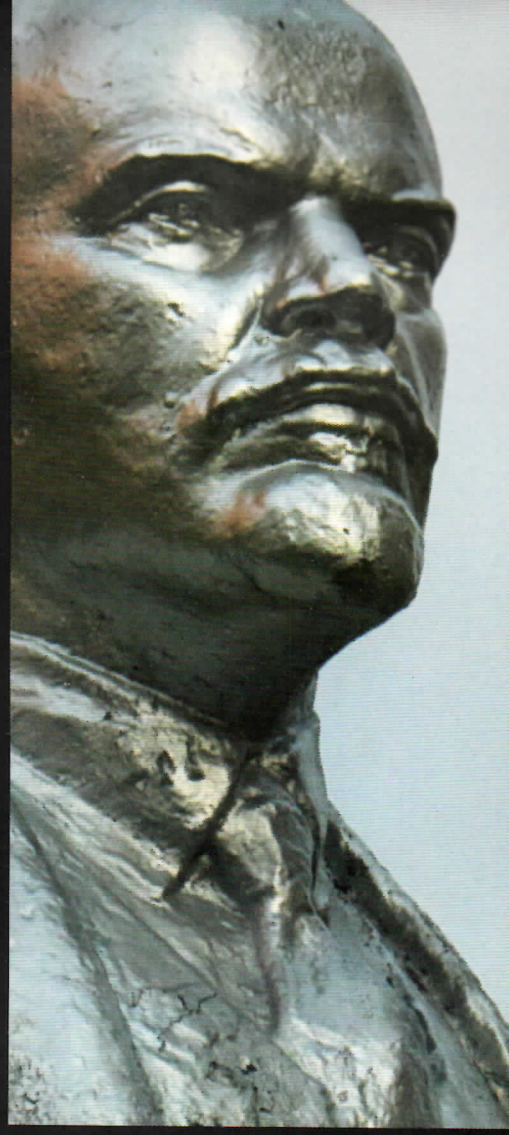
THE BREAKTHROUGH

Pathologic was originally meant to be like a text adventure. Nikolay didn't care at all about graphics and 3D models. He was content if you could display two-dimensional photos that were switched out as you clicked on certain dialogue choices.

What interested him was the decision process, not photorealistic environments, so he asked the programmer Ayrat to make everything as simple and cheap as possible. Ayrat took this as a challenge and did the opposite. When he returned a month or so later with a fully functional 3D-engine, Nikolay couldn't believe his eyes. Instead of still images they had a whole virtual world to shape however they wanted.

After a few months of intense labour they also – at last – had a demo version. Despite only containing a small plaza lined with a couple of houses – really just a square on the ground – it was terribly ugly and buggy. You couldn't do much more than walk in circles. The sun would constantly rise and set in the background. Everything was brown. There was only one building you could enter, and inside it stood a woman blocking the way since they hadn't yet programmed further than the entrance. You could have a very simple conversation with her. And that was it.

Nikolay thought it was the most beautiful



thing he'd ever seen. Full of confidence they took the demo to a new publisher and managed to book a meeting with a producer.

It didn't start out too well. The design document, which Nikolay had expanded with a few more bullet points, was still useless. A design document, he was told, is the most important part of the pitch. The demo was just to prove they could actually realize it.

The meeting got even worse.

-"We're sitting there with our demo when the producer suddenly goes: 'What is this?' I immediately realize he has no clue what kind of game we're trying to make. We've got ten minutes to make an impression on this person. It'll never work. The producer stared at the demo for a moment. Then he left the room and never returned."

But Ice-Pick Lodge didn't give up. They instead took the demo to Buka Entertainment, who were more impressed. Nikolay had been in contact with them long before he even knew what sprites were, and they had encouraged him to return with something concrete. They were sure they'd never see the glimpse of him again. Now he sat there with his own team and had created an entire 3D demo. They understood he was serious and were interested to see what he could accomplish.

After three months of deliberations, Buka agreed to publish the game, and a contract was signed. Ice-Pick received 86.000 dollars but weren't going to be paid a single penny in royalties. Nikolay couldn't care less. He didn't understand how someone would want to spend that much money on game development. They had two entire years to finish the game, too. That sounded like an ocean of time.

Less than a year later the money had run out and work on the game had barely started. Every dollar had gone into the graphics engine – which still looked like crap. Normally they would've been fired by the publisher, but oil prices were still high at the beginning of the 2000s and the Russian industry was booming. People had plenty of money to invest in Russian culture – money they didn't necessarily expect to get back. After some negotiation Buka agreed to raise the budget to 250.000 dollars to help Ice-Pick Lodge finish the game quicker. Or at all.

Another three years and countless missed deadlines later, Pathologic was finally released. Nikolay steeled himself, convinced his masterpiece would be misunderstood by the gaming press and missed by consumers.

It would soon turn out he was wrong. On both accounts.

In its first review, the game was called "an indesputable success for the Russian gaming industry". Not long after, it had been sold in over 50.000 legal copies, which was an amazing number in a country where piracy made up 95-97 percent of the total market. Ice-Pick Lodge won loads of awards from publications and swept the Russian game awards show. Nikolay was interviewed by TV and daily newspapers, where he talked about his manifesto while drinking vodka out of coffee cups.

One who was watching the commotion from afar was Dmitry Leaduhin.

He was living in Moldova, but when he heard Nikolay talk about his manifesto it was as if all the hundred miles to the Russian capital shrunk down into nothing. He had finally found someone with the same outlook on games as himself, who spoke in his own language (in more ways than one – in Moldova, which is an old Soviet state, Russia is unofficially still the main language). So he contacted his newfound soulmates and asked if they'd consider releasing some of his games. Ice-Pick Lodge, who despite all the attention hadn't earned anything from Pathologic, had neither money nor the connections to publish games. Nikolay did however get along well with Dmitry and they started keeping in touch by e-mail. Some year later Nikolay invited him over to Russia to visit Ice-Pick Lodge's recently opened office. Dmitry's family moved to Moscow shortly thereafter, and they've been inseparable ever since.

Dmitry has never become an official part of Ice-Pick Lodge, but he's still considered one of them. It's to him Nikolay turns when he needs someone to talk to, it's in his apartment Ice-Pick Lodge gathers to hang out – and it's also where we are right now.

The apartment becomes mine and Tomas's home while we visit in Moscow. The fact that Dmitry is flat broke at the moment, and that we hadn't spoken to him at all before standing in the stairwell outside his door, is unimportant.

Nikolay has vouched for us, after all.

MORE UTOPIA

-"...What were we talking about?"

Nikolay looks up at me with glossed over eyes. The long arms that were previously flailing over Dmitry's kitchen table are now hanging limply by the sides of the chair. The vodka bottles on the table are since long empty.

A minute or so earlier, I had posed a question that has been gnawing at me throughout our talk. It's about Pathologic and what Ice-Pick Lodge really wanted to accomplish with the meta face slap delivered at the end. I initially fear that I've been keeping it in a little too long, as Nikolay first looks like he's not in a condition to answer it. He sits there quietly and stares at me skeptically before he finally opens his mouth.

-"...Honestly, did you really play it through all the way to the end?"

I understand why he's suspicious. Ice-Pick Lodge has received a lot of flak throughout the years for having games that aren't fun to play. People who are just after a quick rush tend to get tired of the depressive environments, the murderous difficulty level and the dark storytelling of Pathologic. Maybe that's why he looks teary-eyed when I tell him I've played through it a couple of times with all three characters. Nikolay says something in Russian to Dmitry at the other side of the table, who starts laughing.

-"He's saying that if he had a cross, you know, like a protective charm, he'd give it to you," Dmitry says.

Nikolay stares into the glass before him and shakes his head.

"I HAVE A GNAWING FEELING THAT I'LL NEVER MAKE ANYTHING BETTER THAN PATHOLOGIC"

-"Such a shame you had to play through it with that horrible translation..."

What were you trying to convey with the ending? With the children in the Polyhedron destroying the sandcastle model of the town and thereby ending the game, and how the characters turned out to be dolls littering the theater stage. This insight – that you've been playing a game in which you play a game – is pretty crushing.

-"I wanted to move the central conflict and the final decision away from the game's world and to the player, to reality. I wanted to recreate the dialogue between characters as dialogue between player and developer. I wanted to create a new dimension for the player, make them consider the same questions about fate and what makes up their free will. I wanted to show that it's not the character making the final choice that decides the town's fate, it's yourself. There are several different levels to the game. You've got the theater, you have the children with the sandcastle, and you have the executors who all exist on a plane separate from the characters, and allow you, the player, to understand this. The executors was our way to address the player directly. They're a kind of avatar for the developers. The bird masks they are wearing originate in the Medieval times and the Black Death. Rotting bodies lined the streets and filled the air with a horrible stench. People thought the infection was airborne, so they invented a breathing apparatus, this long beak, in which they could breathe. The mask protected both their faces and their identities at the same time. It shielded them from the world, which was a perfect fit for Pathologic."

He empties the last of the vodka into his glass and lights up another cigarette.

-"The ending surprised me too when we got there, but it was a logical conclusion. It was the only way the game could've ended."

As I was playing the game I felt it shared many similarites to how the Soviet Union used to be. They build walls to block out information and contain people. People fall ill, they die, authories come to punish the ones who oppose. The inquisition shows up and forces them into submission. How much of this comes from Russia's political history?

Nikolay lights up.

-"Oh, I don't know how to... It has definitely infused the game. I do love history. A lot of my inspiration comes from it."

He slowly shakes his head.

-"I just can't understand that these nuances are apparent in the terrible translation, but it makes me so happy. In the Russian version there were plenty of connotations and references to books and philosophers. I played around with quotes and voices and different writing styles in a post-modern way. Historical moments were an important inspiration. There is indeed a strong connection to the Russian civil war. I wasn't necessarily thinking of Soviet's history specifically, but Russian history in general. In Russia, the game isn't called Pathologic but "Mor (Utopia)". It's a pun, where "mor" is the Russian word for pestilence, the plague. It's also a reference to Thomas More who coined the term 'utopia'. Finally, it describes the quest for perfection which becomes their downfall.

The most important part for me with the game was to show how these people have been trying to build the perfect city, a miracle of a town, and that they actually did it. Against all odds, they did the impossible and succeeded. They construct the Polyhedron, an impossible building that does impossible things to the human psyche. It's a link to another reality, another plane. To the future. To me, the utopia was a central theme, and it was partially lost in the translation. It is so tied to Russia. Every revolutionary here since the 1800s have been striving to build the perfect country. The communists strived for the same thing before Stalin. It was an idealistic and noble people who wanted to create heaven on Earth. This idea permeates our entire culture. In Dostoevsky's 'The Brothers Karamazov', the brothers are reuinted and immediately discuss how to improve the world. It's the basis of all our fiction. And still, Russia went to hell. The game adheres to this tradition. The epidemic itself that destroys everything is the universe's way to cut down this flower that grew too tall. The English title "Pathologic" was also like a pun for me: path-of-logic. The state of things. Everything we create must die to maintain the cosmic balance."

It's quiet for a while. I feel how the walls in the kitchen are leaning even more than when we arrived. Nikolay is once again deep in thoughts. The night's conversation seems to have opened old wounds.

-"Tell them about the remake," Dmitry asks as he turns towards me. "They're thinking of doing a remake of Pathologic," he adds. "Everything will be the same in the game. The only thing they'll do is to polish the graphics and fix some broken code. I've been trying to convice them to do it forever."

Nikolay nods thoughtfully.

-"I would very much like to do a remake. I have this gnawing feeling that I'll never do anything better than Pathologic. It's my life's game. My life's work. I'm concerned about the bad translation and would like to give people outside Russia a chance to experience it in a worthy way. But it's difficult to..."

The sentence is never finished. I can't really tell if he's thinking of something or about to fall asleep again over the empty plate in front of him. Finally, he stands up shakily and bows out for the night. He says he needs to get up early tomorrow and walk his son to school. Then he lumbers over to the front door and puts his jacket on.

-"We'll continue our talk tomorrow. You get to meet Ayrat then," Nikolay says. And then he disappears out into the cold October night.

Meanwhile, Dmitry has run out of red wine. He looks at the empty bottle.

-"It's only half past ten. We should probably go and get some more."

ALL PUBLISHERS ARE ASSHOLES

We go down to the liquor store around the corner to buy more wine. The shelves are filled with bottles from floor to ceiling. Next to the counter stands an armed guard, who stares sternly at us.

Tomas has found a candy bag that makes him laugh. The picture on it is of a little girl and a bear who stares at her with an R-rated look. He's taking a photograph of it when the guard suddenly taps him on the shoulder and says something in Russian. Tomas initially has no idea what he wants. Eventually the guard points to the camera. He doesn't like that we're taking photographs of the shelves. Tomas shows him that he's deleting the picture. The guard nods and walks back to his post. It won't be the last time the camera causes problems during our trip. People are suspicious as soon as they see it. We eventually realize they think we're photographing their stores to make the owners look bad.

Dmitry shows up with a bag of wine. We tell him we've embarrassed him. He just laughs and explains it's a leftover from the Soviet era.

-"We would also need some charcoal for the water pipe, to be honest. I'm almost out," he adds.

Half an hour later we're back in his apartment with a whole sack of coals that we've collected from the kitchen of an Indian restaurant. We've only been here for half a day and almost all the rubles in my wallet has gone to booze and tobacco. Dmitry warms up the coals on his gas cooker and uncorks a new bottle of wine. He gestures towards the chair were Nikolay was previously sitting.

-"You know, they're trying to convince various publishers to finance that remake, but no one wants to. Many of them have said they're too small to finish a project like that. Can you imagine? They were five people who developed the game from their own apartments, and suddenly they're supposed to be needing 15 employees and an office to polish up the graphics."

I tell him it sounds like the dumbest thing I've heard.

-"All publishers are stupid. There are no smart publishers. All of them – assholes. Do you know what they wanted to name my game? 'Fishes'!" he says with a look of disdain.

-"They didn't get the title. They were just like: 'Ooh, "Luminaria" is a bad name. It's related to light and stuff. People won't get it. We need a better title, something you can relate to. And your game is about fish, you know...'. I went nuts. Fuck off!"

He takes a puff from the hookah. His eyebrows are like a 'V' over his nose.

"Right now I'm working on visual effects in a commercial for Actimel," he says with a sigh. "I'm not really sure what it's about. I mean, it's some fucking fruit monster, and water drops splashing... I do the particles. The water drops. I also teach how to make that kind of animation at the school where I work. Rain, snow, smoke, that kind of stuff. I have a company that does this freelance work from time to time. Right now it's just me and my programmer Vadim who are hired, though. He's back home in Moldova. We keep in touch via Skype. It was he who programmed my latest project, actually..."

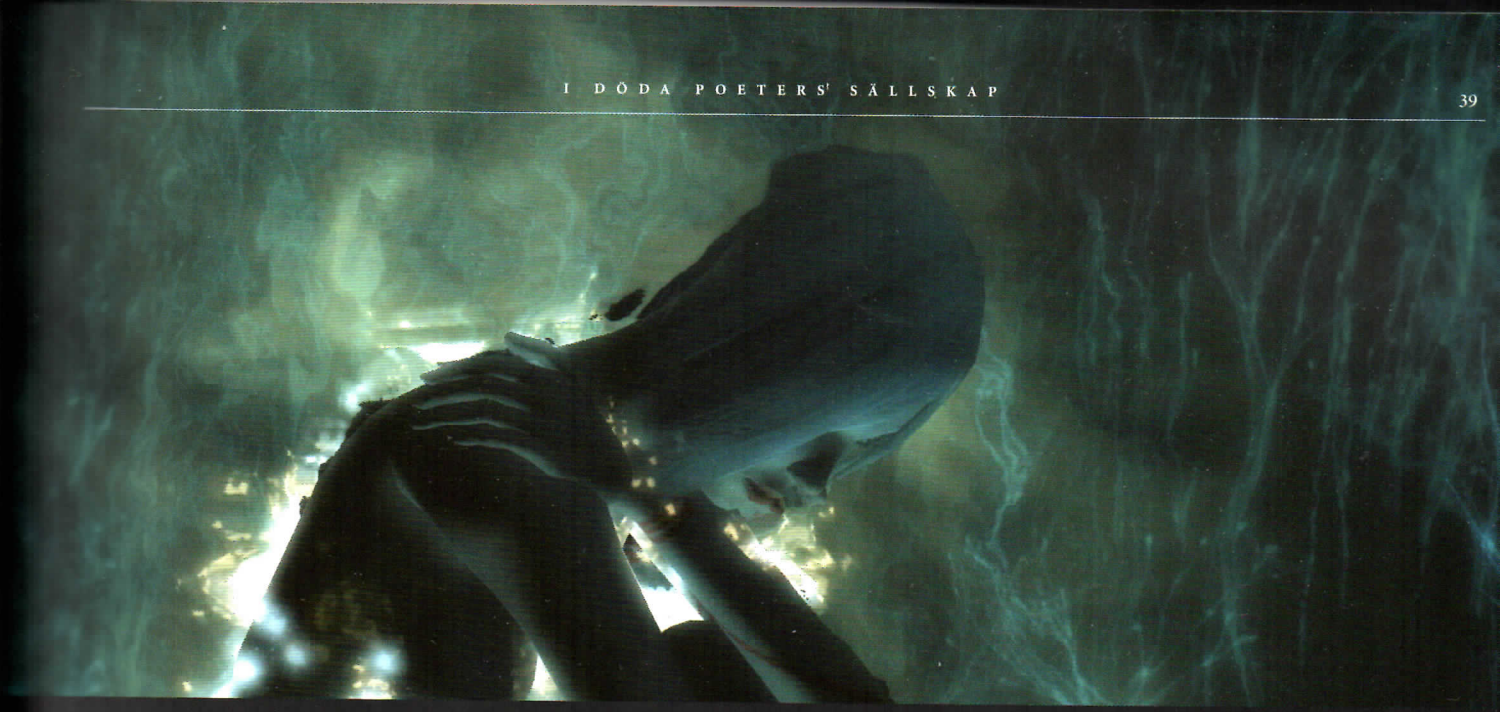
He puts down the hookah and walks away to fetch something. He returns holding a PSP. There's a memory card in it containing a build of Dmitry's other game. He calls it "Pandora".

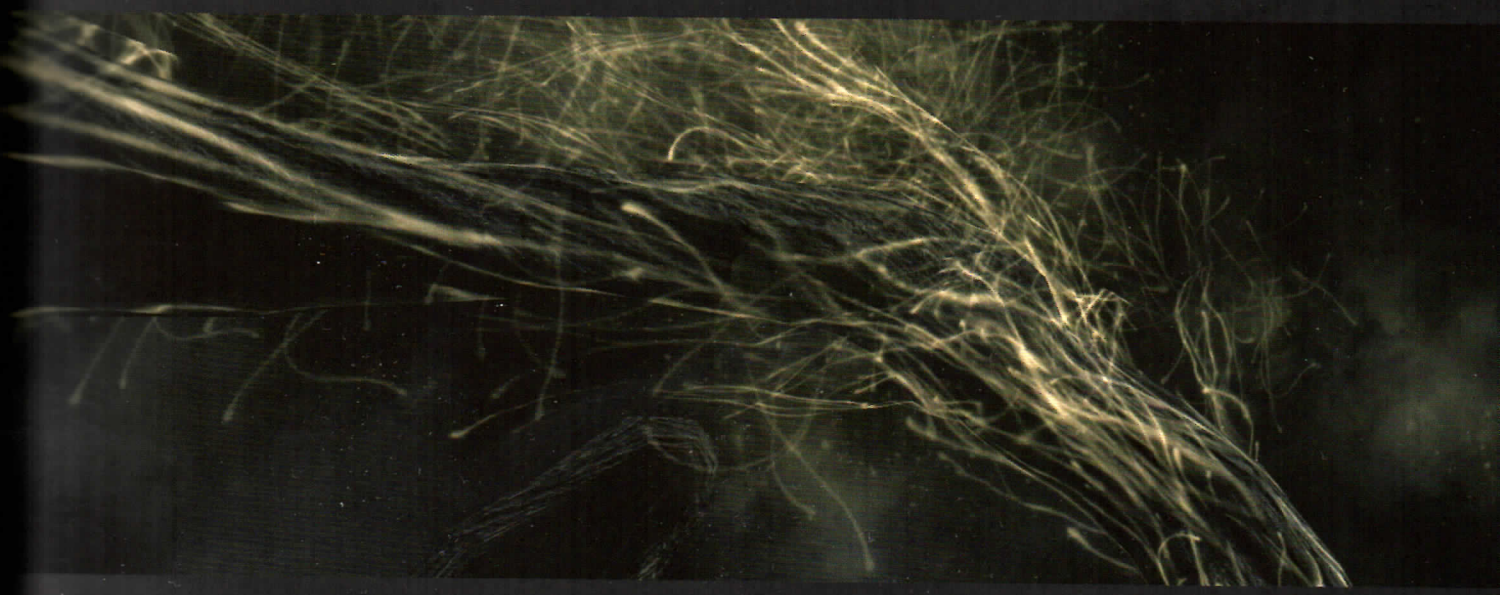
-"It's sold terribly!" he says with a joyful laugh.

Pandora is really a prototype for a larger game. It was released a few months before we got here. The game is downloadable through the Playstation Network (where it is for some twisted reason known as 'Kaleidoscope'). But that's not where Dmitry got his own copy from.

-"You're playing a cracked version right now," he explains. "The only physical copy we had is on our development console at my publisher in London. I received a bunch of free keys so I could download the complete game, but it was so complicated to connect to the online store. It was easier to just download a pirated copy."

Pandora is a brilliant little game that





can be described as interactive synesthesia – aesthetic blends of forms, colours and sounds. Each one of the seven levels is its own world that works according to its own strange laws. One of them consists of moving coloured blocks up and down to hit small falling pixels, that in turn paints lines on the screen. The background looks like a moving geometrical abstraction of the kind you'd see in Wassily Kandinsky's paintings. Dmitry, who has a great interest in art, lights up when I point it out. It turns out Kandinsky specifically is a big inspiration.

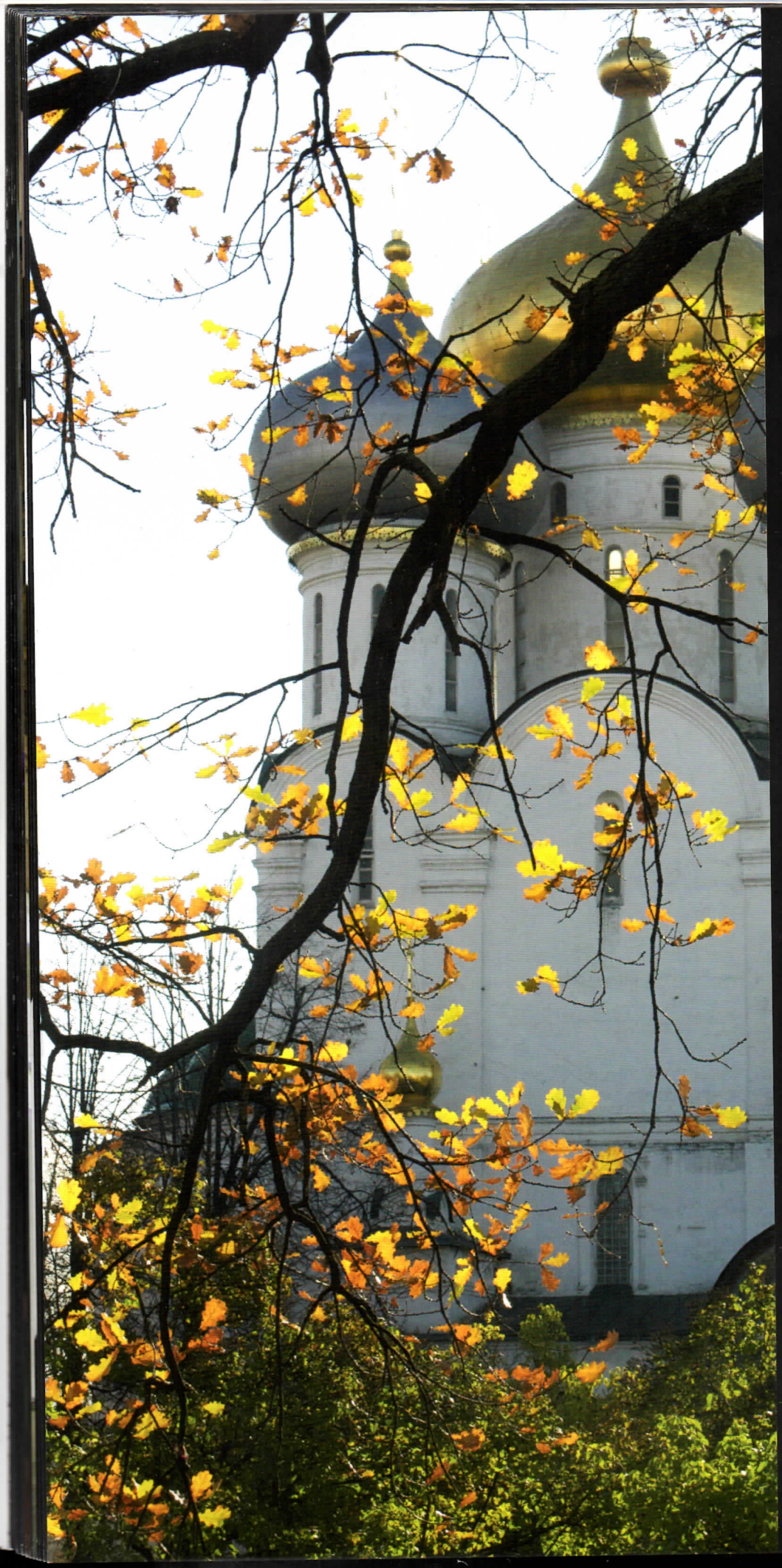
Another level reminds me of a two-dimensional "F-Zero", where the way forward is lined with pink blocks that increase your speed, hollow objects that lower it, and rain made of pixel graffiti that sweeps across the screen. A third consists of filling the screen with neon hearts by destroying red blocks with light attacks. It's hard to describe the game in text, but on a purely aesthetical level it makes sense. It's heavily dependent on instinct and rhythm. You gradually learn how each world works, and use it to your advantage the next time. The game has specifically been designed for you to replay the levels. Many times.

Dmitry has designed the whole game like a song you hear a little more of each time you play it.

-"I used the Chemical Brothers song 'Star Guitar' as main inspiration when I created the graphics," he says. "I sent the song to Vasily and Paul to give them a hint of what I wanted the soundtrack to sound like."

Vasily isn't Kandinsky, but Vasily Kashnikov – internationally known for making the music to The Void,

THE VOID TRIES TO POINT OUT THE MEANINGLESS IN ONLY PLAYING FOR YOUR OWN SAKE



the game Ice-Pick Lodge would eventually make after Pathologic. I express my wonder for both the soundtrack and the game itself. Dmitry thoughtfully nods as I start pouring superlatives over it.

-"Nikolay will probably tell you this himself, but he sees The Void as a personal failure," he says and takes a puff from his water pipe again.

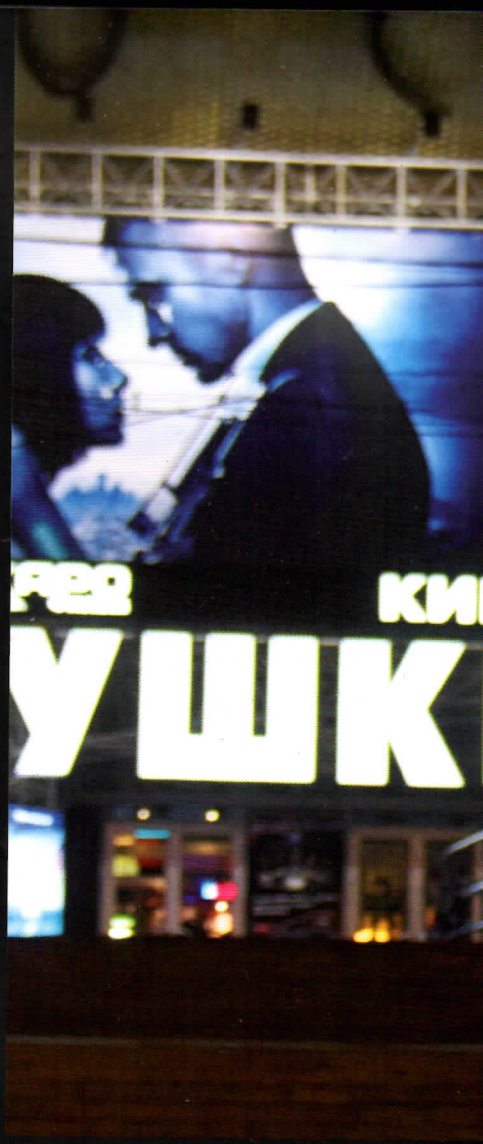
I'm convinced he's joking.

PAINT IT BLACK
The Void, 2008

The camera pans over the rooftops of a town seemingly frozen in time. We hear a woman's voice. She recites a famous poem by Luís de Camões, "Mudam-se os tempos, mudam-se as vontades" ("Times change, wills change"):

"The dream of the future you see dissolves
And with time so does the apprehension
The world under sun is no exception
And all you see around you evolves"

The camera lingers on the charred body of a big tree in a courtyard



between the houses. We get to study it from its roots to the crown, how it reaches with its skeletal branches towards the sky. The voice continues:

"New traits in things familiar can be sensed
But futile is hope without fruition
The grief you knew begets no vision
The happiness you felt becomes regret"

We're moving downward, through a shaft of cement making out four walls. We pass by window after window, facing inwards at the ever deepening hole. The camera is fixed at the gray skies above, twisting around as if lowered through a spiral.

"Winter fades and takes its cold and storm
Spring revives the world with love and warmth
But still the law: all things decay and age
Vanity itself won't dry your tears
And so you fear as your time draws near
The world will turn, but never change"

The game doesn't say it outright, but we have just witnessed a suicide. The opening to the sky above goes smaller and smaller. In the end it disappears completely. Then it is dark.

And The Void slowly opens itself to us.

Imagine a world where the only thing that exists is a melancholy, twisted shadow of something you once considered a landscape. The environments are broken, used. The ground is hard. Trees are black and crooked, reaching for a non-existent sun in a sky stained with ink. No light is to be seen. It's a limbo – a great void.

You're a lost soul, with no memories of a previous life. Everything you once were is gone. And the only thing that remains are your fears and your regret. This world has no room for hope. No salvation. "Here is only hunger, slumber and the eternal wait for the end to come," as the game explains.

But that's not what makes The Void so terribly beautiful.

There is a catch to the premise: your soul needs to be sustained so as to not wither away from the limbo to which it clings – to not transform into something far worse than the shadow it's become. And in this dark, hollow world there is only one thing that counts. Not wealth. Not physical strength. Not food. No high score.

It's colour.

Colour is the most valuable and important thing of all. It's the only thing keeping the world from ceasing to exist, its population from fading away. But it's in short supply. The creatures inhabiting the limbo are obsessed by it. They wander around harvesting the few drops of colour they can find and leave a mangled, starving terrain in their wake.

Colour in The Void possesses fantastic, magical powers. It lights up anything it comes into contact with. It gives you life. It's in your bloodstream, literally. The drops of colour you can harvest from your surroundings are useless in and of themselves. They first have to be processed, filtered through your organs, before you can use them. Your body always needs to have some colour to process in order for you not to die, and its gradually being emptied. It's an

amazing dynamic: the same thing giving you life is also slowly killing you.

Processed colour is what you use to communicate with the creatures around you. Your character is completely mute. You can't speak. But you can paint. The Void contains a system of symbols that lets you interact with your surroundings. These symbols are spread out here and there like echoes of an extinct language, and you need to find and learn them to have a chance to survive. By drawing a certain symbol you can protect yourself. Another is used to attack. A third gives you the ability to give colour to others.

And this is where the sisters come in. They are beautiful, melancholic creatures stuck in the void. They each rule over a domain in the world. They're full of wisdom and are better than anyone at explaining what's going on. But they are also extremely calculating. Just like in Pathologic, everyone has their own agenda. Some of them are trying to coax you into dressing them with colour with promises of love, like sirens in Greek mythology who lure seafarers with their song. Others have less obvious motives. But they all ultimately want the same thing: find a way out of limbo.

By filling the sisters' hearts with colour, you open up new regions of the world to explore. But you can also choose to use it in the most brutal of ways. The sisters are weak and incapable of resisting much. By using a special glyph you can suck out their colour instead. If a sister loses all her colour, she will die.

On the other hand, the sisters are protected by creatures known as brothers. The brothers are huge, scary figures whose nature is built on fear and egotism. They're there to stop your progression. The void takes place between existence and non-existence, and the brothers originate from the colourless nothingness your soul has not yet reached. So strong is their desire for colour that they have managed to cross the boundary and reentered the void – tormented, twisted and blind. They have fused together with machine parts and metal, being penetrated and dissected in horrific ways. Their heavy and monstrous nature is a sharp contrast to the naked and fragile sisters. Each brother has imprinted himself on a sister and protects her from anything he deems a danger to his own existence. They are incomprehensibly powerful on a purely physical level. To even begin to be allowed to talk to the sisters, you first have to convince their brothers that you're one of them.

The world of The Void is minimalistic, stripped of fiction. It lacks history and mythology. Unlike normal games taking place in a small part of a huge fictitious world, everything in The Void is there right from the start. There is nothing outside. But there is also nothing that you can't explore inside the world. And it moves in cycles. At the start of each cycle, new colour appears in the world. But exactly where and what shade is completely random. After the 35th and final cycle, the game ends as the void disintegrates and your soul disappears forever.

The Void has another important element, which is that you can harvest colour. It can be planted into bushes and trees, and you get to see it grow each day, crawling up along roots and veins among the otherwise dead vegetation, and blossom. The process is slow, but it allows you to reap a substantially greater amount

of colour than what you've sown – provided you can prevent enemies from devouring your crops. The trees are also depleted in the process. The next time you use a tree to plant colour, it'll only give you half the amount back as the first time. And then half of that. Finally, you're forced to wait a certain amount of cycles before it can be used again at all.

None of this is explained beforehand. It's up to us to discover it and explore how the world works ourselves. Some information can be gained by giving colour to sisters in order make them tell you things. The problem is that their comments are cryptic and vague, occasionally complete lies. Like Pathologic, this is a game so elaborate in every aspect that nothing can be trusted.

You'll discover the hard way that different colours have different properties. They affect the environment in various ways. Some colours are outright poisonous to certain sisters. Others affect creatures and environments in a specific way. Paint with red and you'll nurture an aggressive world. Paint with gold and it'll be filled with empathy and love. And in the same way, colour affects the player himself. A heart full of red colour makes you stronger, azure makes you faster.

But there's another obstacle: the use of colour is forbidden in The Void. The brothers will attack you if you do it in front of them. Colour itself will begin to whisper to you, telling you you're wasting your soul if you use it to defeat enemies. Some colours also carry a stronger attractive force than others. If you fill a sister's heart with gold, the chances increase of her brother discovering this and tearing her heart out of her body. The brothers want to keep their sisters in the colourless limbo at any cost. They fear change. Hate it.

Which leads us to the game's ending.

After collecting enough colour you are presented with a choice: you can either be reincarnated yourself – or you can ascend one of the sisters by giving her all the colour inside your heart.

"Vanity itself won't dry your tears
And so you fear as your time draws near
The world will turn but never change"

If you understood the poem in the intro of the game, you understand The Void. You understand what's led you to this place and that it's not your fear of death, but of change, that's keeping you here. To get anything out of the ending you need to decide to fail in everything you've egotistically been working for up to this point. Only by voluntarily choosing defeat and giving all your colour is it possible to win.

In this way, The Void is like an extended middle finger to a gaming world that, somewhere along the way, decided that it's the ability to choose, rather than the choices we actually make, that's important. Following this idea, an entire generation of role-playing games have turned into a completely meaningless display of trying to please the public, where characters are defined by the player's – not the creator's – preferences.

The Void instead tries to point out that it's meaningless to play only for your own sake. It's not what benefits the players personally, but what makes us achieve our goals the quickest and most efficiently, that is the point – without forcing us into some deciding, inevitable insight. The final choice is just a last chance to ruin the game for anyone who still doesn't get it.

Despite taking place in a barren, grayish world, The Void features more nuance than most games you'll ever come in contact with during your lifetime. It's the kind of game most developers dream of making once in their life.

And it still wasn't enough for Nikolay Dybowski.

BROKEN PROMISES

I wake up with a headache. It's the day after our vodka marathon, and Dmitry wants us to head down to the bazaar a couple hundred meters from the apartment, and shop. He prefers it to the supermarket because it's easier to get fresh ingredients there. Dmitry, as it turns out, loves to cook. It's a trait he received while growing up. His mother, who's also moved to Moscow, works as a chef at a restaurant.

The market outside the bazaar is filled with little stands overflowing with spice, fruit, vegetables and fresh meat. People point to us and whisper as we walk by. Me and Tomas apparently stand out from the crowd.

-"They're laughing at us," Dmitry says with a smile. "They don't mean anything bad by it," he adds. "They're just not used to seeing foreigners is all. It happens once a month if they're lucky. Tourists usually don't hang around these neighbourhoods."

Tomas is once again stopped by two suited guards when he tries to photograph a bag of flour. They appear out of nowhere and start yanking on the camera. Dmitry is forced to intervene. After a minute or so, they let us go.

"PUBLISHERS ARE STUPID. THERE ARE NO SMART PUBLISHERS. ALL OF THEM – ASSHOLES."

Dmitry is on the hunt for something to cook for dinner. The plan is that Ayrat and Nikolay will come over later in the evening. Perhaps Peter Potapov will show up too, the studio's third founder. The only thing we know about him is his name. He hates publicity and doesn't usually agree to interviews or articles, but Nikolay has said that he might just make an exception for us.

When we return to the apartment, Dmitry shows me a few of the ideas he's been sketching, one of which is called "Nine Minute Game". It looks like a complex version of Jason Rohrer's celebrated indie game "Passage". Each playthrough follows a character from infancy to their death in nine minutes. Along the way you can pick up small gifts with contents that change as you get older. Children wish for toys while adults want more practical objects. The contents of the gifts triggers specific memories and events. The objective seems to be to collect as many gifts as possible in nine minutes. When the nine minutes are up, your character dies and the screen is covered with a text saying: "Congratulations, you just wasted nine minutes of your life. They'll never come back."

Dmitry has summarized everything neatly into a design document full of illustrations that he's spent a significant amount of time on. I think the difference is like night and day compared to the one for Pathologic which Nikolay told me about yesterday. That doesn't mean it'll be easier to pitch, though.

-"We're looking for someone willing to invest some money into the idea, so that we can

realize it, but it's difficult since it's not very marketable," he says.

We spend the afternoon in Dmitry's apartment. Tomas is looking through his pictures while I entertain myself by playing "Pandora". Dmitry is working on his animations for Actimel. Every twenty seconds you can hear a bubbling sound in the background. He has dragged the water pipe into the computer room.

Nikolay doesn't get in touch, so we save the food we bought and decide to pick up some pizzas instead. Soon after, Vasily Kashnikov calls and asks if he can visit. He wants to meet the Swedes who have travelled all the way to Moscow to write about Ice-Pick Lodge. And he also wants to try out "Pandora". He still hasn't seen what the game looks like. When he wrote the soundtrack, Dmitry still hadn't given him a clear idea of what the graphics for each level were meant to look like – only what themes and feelings would permeate the various musical pieces.

Vasily is completely self-taught as a musician. He creates electronic music and sometimes performs live under the name Mushroomer. The name refers to his background in biology. The multifaceted soundscape he designed for The Void is one of the game's most beautiful aspects, crucial in enabling the game to convey its palette of complex emotions. The tentative, muted tones mirror a dying game world, tormented by hunger and a vast emptiness. At the same time there are hopeful elements, a promise of creating something new. Kashnikov tells us he sees the game as a metaphor for art, a battle between the dying old and the new which is on the way of changing everything. He merged soft, lingering electric piano loops and hard wooden flutes with digital effects in a way reminiscent of IDM-pioneers such as Aphex Twin. It's an amazing achievement, created entirely with free digital tools.

Vasily's collaboration with Ice-Pick Lodge started, like so many other things in their history, by complete coincidence. Long before meeting Nikolay he had worked on a fantasy role-playing game that never saw the light of day. Through this project he found KRI, which is like a Russian equivalent of Game Developers Conference, where he eventually crossed paths with Ice-Pick Lodge. As the afternoon drifts away, Vasily talks about how involved Nikolay was with the soundtrack to The Void, despite not creating any of the music himself. He knew exactly what he was after. Several of the tracks had to be remixed later to suit him better.

Nikolay eventually arrives at the apartment with his girlfriend, Liu. Neither Ayrat nor Peter has joined them. It's dark outside at this point. You can immediately tell by Nikolay's body language that something's wrong. He looks vacant and his jaw is clenched. He stands up and stares out through the kitchen window for a moment while the tea water is boiling. Finally, he sits down at the table and drags his hand across his face.

-"I'm sorry, but I need to collect my thoughts for a bit before I can continue where we left off last night," he says. I ask him what's wrong.

"AT ANY MOMENT THE CREATIVITY COULD RUN OUT AND DISAPPEAR FOREVER."

He explains that Ice-Pick Lodge just had a meeting a few hours earlier. Their publisher has decided not to publish the game that Nikolay and his friends have spent six months planning. They have no way to finance development by themselves. This was Ice-Pick Lodge's last lifeline. They are now economically destitute.

It was at the gaming show Games Convention in Germany a few years ago that Ice-Pick Lodge met Wolfgang Walk; a 50-year-old industry veteran with over 20 years' experience of game publishing. He's produced "Settlers", "Incubation", and a bunch of other titles during his career. It was Walk who helped them find an international publisher for The Void. He told them he's a big fan of their games.

Shortly after releasing "Cargo", Ice-Pick's latest game at the moment of writing, Walk introduced them to a German publisher called Bob Waltz. He represented the gaming company Gameforge and claimed to want to invest in Ice-Pick Lodge. They met him in Cologne and discussed their ambitions. Waltz said he wanted to expand Ice-Pick into a medium-sized company. He encouraged them to sign a contract for an MMO based on "Cargo". If they hired around 50 people and made the game, he tempted, they'd get the money to be able to realize the remake of Pathologic – and even better: they'd be able to afford development of "Frost". The game Nikolay wants to make more than anything.

Nikolay was hesitant, but Waltz insisted. If they wanted to generate money to realize their other projects, they'd have to invest big in the production of the MMO-game. Waltz mentioned six million dollars as an estimate.

Ice-Pick's largest budget at that point had been 400.000 dollars.

-"To us, he might as well have been from another planet with those kinds of numbers," Nikolay says as he pokes at the filter in the teapot on the table. "I said: I don't believe in any of this until I get to see the money, but Wolfgang was happy. He thought the contract was more or less a done deal and that we'd celebrate that the MMO-game had a publishing agreement. Today we got to see just how wrong he was."

He sighs heavily and puts away the teapot again.

-"The world doesn't end because of this. We will naturally keep fighting," he says with an empty stare.

Do you have any money at all to resume production right now?

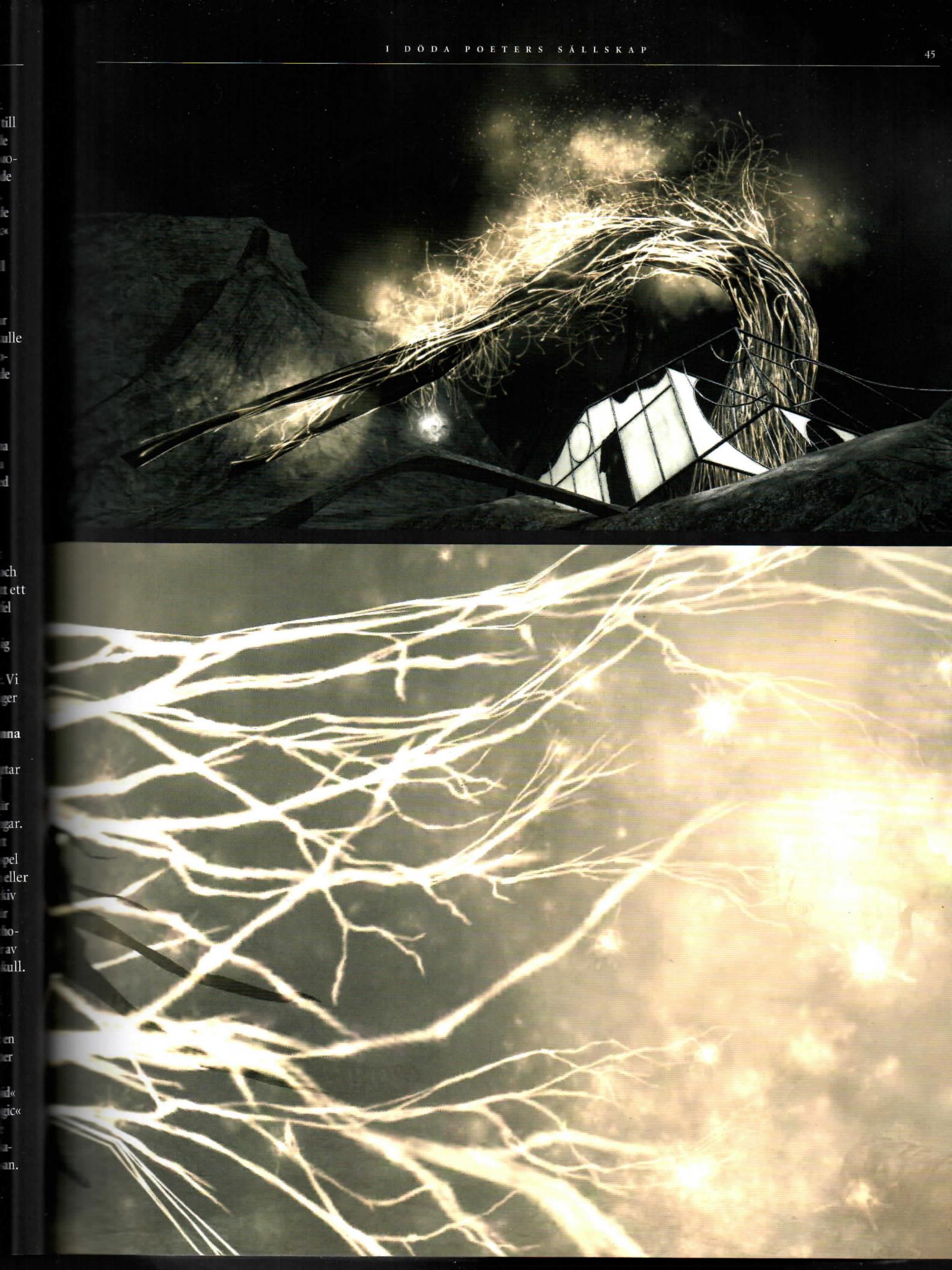
Nikolay shakes his head and laughs bitterly.

-"Not a cent. We discussed this earlier tonight: how we're gonna get any money. We've decided to create a new game for Steam or something like that. A small game that could be done in five or six months. We're gonna go through our archives and check out some old ideas on Monday, when you've left again. When we developed Pathologic and The Void, we had lots of them. I wrote them down just in case."

THE CREATIVE FORCE

It turns out that Ice-Pick Lodge has a history of shaky relationships with publishers.

When they started work on The Void, it was with wind in their sails. Pathologic had been celebrated and Nikolay had held a series of notable presentations about his creations at the Russian game developers' expo.



(He still receives offers to publish these as books.) All the local publishers knew his name. The situation was the exact opposite of what it had been four years earlier. And yet, Ice-Pick Lodge had a lot of trouble finding anyone wanting to release the game.

-"They told us to do something more traditional that they could sell," Nikolay explains with a sigh.

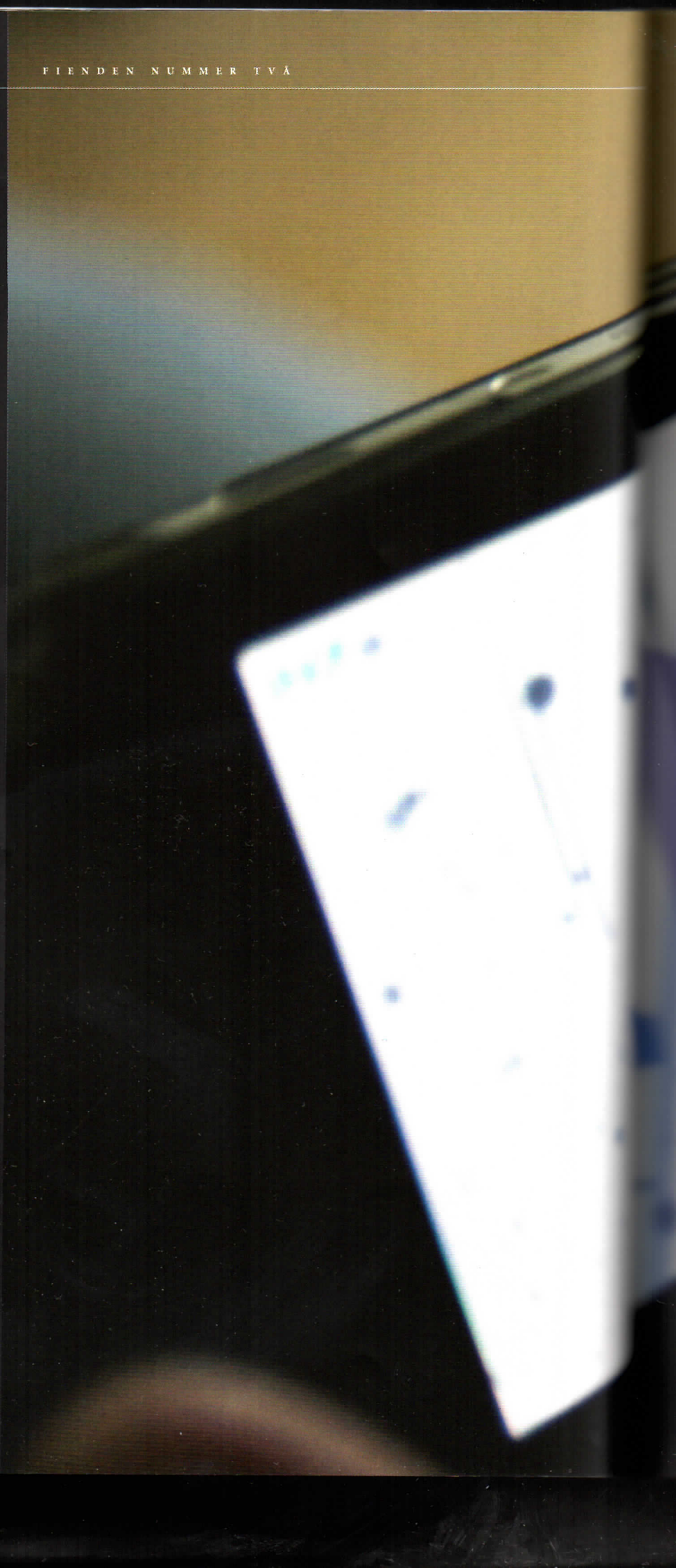
Then something happened. The Russian publisher ND Games signed a contract with Nintendo, and suddenly had the license to release games for Wii and Nintendo DS. They took a quick glance at the pitch for The Void and realized that the game mechanics consisted of drawing symbols on the screen. The concept seemed perfect. And to make the gamble even more waterproof, Nikolay took the time to negotiate a PC version too.

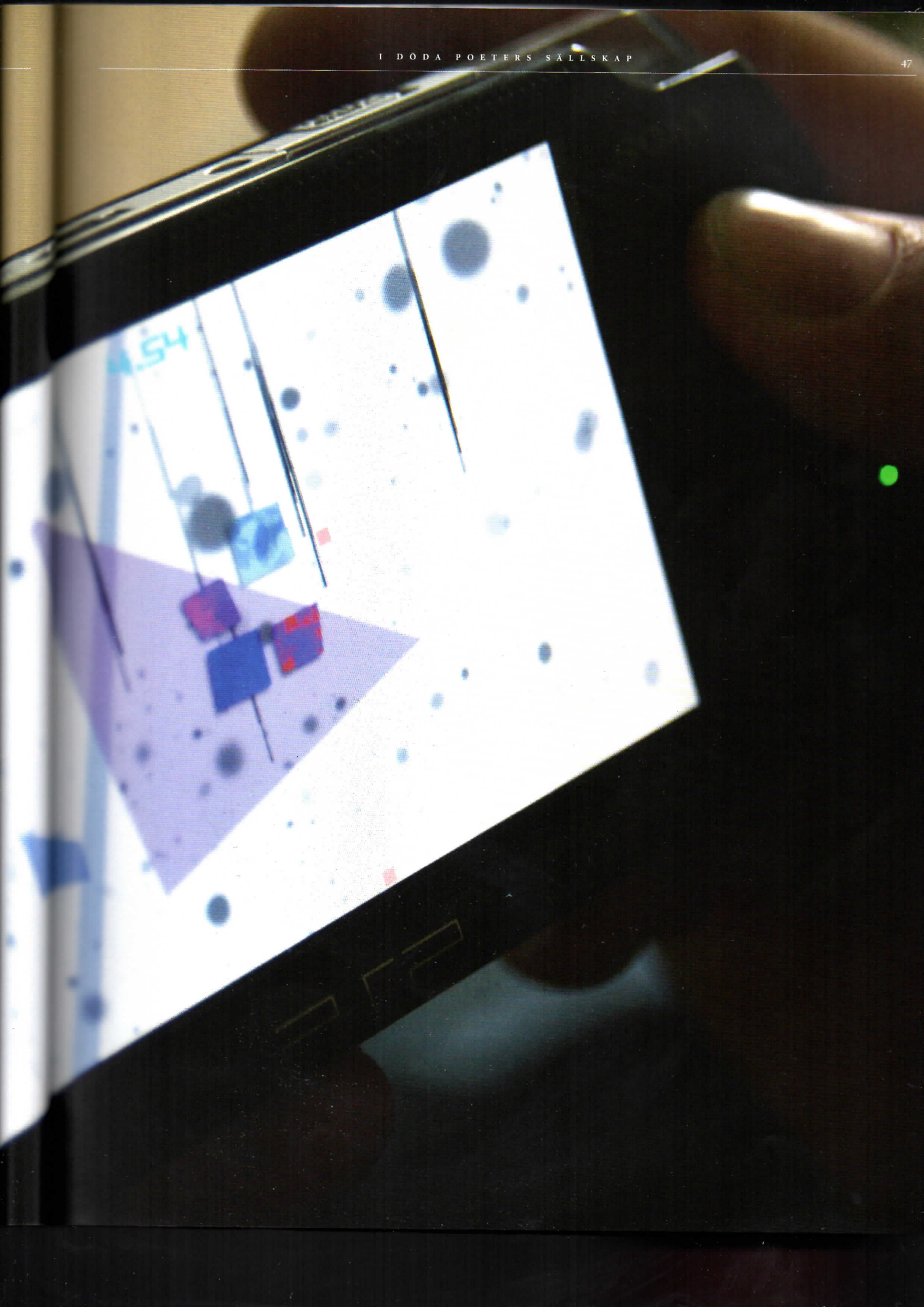
-"The person responsible for connecting new developers to the company was a young guy called Dmitry Burkovsky. He was ambitious but very inexperienced. That was our salvation. Had he been more experienced, he would never have agreed to release The Void. When Dmitry's boss looked through the projects a few months later and saw us there, he was shocked. 'What the fuck is this?! Do you realize what you've done?! You've ruined us!'. He risked getting fired for a while. We were really lucky to have met him," Nikolay says in a pleased tone.

It would however turn out that they had much bigger problems than that. Just as Ice-Pick Lodge seemed to have scored a one-way ticket to the upper crust of the gaming world, the financial crisis hit, and they were suddenly dirt poor again. ND Games could no longer guarantee that The Void would ever be released. They had also realized that it featured naked female bodies and a subtle nod towards suicide at the start, which automatically disqualified the Wii-version. Since no one could pay for Ice-Pick's salaries anymore they couldn't afford rent, and were eventually forced to close their offices. They finished the last of The Void for PC by working at home in their own apartments.

To Ice-Pick Lodge this was naturally worrisome, but they were on the other hand already used to suffering in order to complete their games. They could deal with not having any salaries, that the console versions were cancelled and that they no longer had an office space.

What was harder for Nikolay to accept was that the game, after the laborious development, still wasn't what he'd hoped.





Dmitry told us before that you're dissatisfied with The Void. In what way do you feel like you failed?

Nikolay tugs on his beard.

-"I tried to find an answer to questions I myself couldn't answer. The process of game development is a type of research to me. I never have the answers when I begin work. The insights come as the game takes shape. With Pathologic, I managed to find a satisfactory answer. But with The Void... the game was about creativity, about the source of the human ability to create. About why we as people are driven to do it."

-"One of our most famous Russian poets was Alexander Blok. He grabbed a pen and the creativity just started flowing. He couldn't stop it. The words just appeared out of thin air. He was a genius. But suddenly the words stopped coming. He couldn't get a single line down on paper. He didn't manage to write a single sentence in seven or eight years. No one understood why. He was the greatest Russian poet of his time. Everybody idolized him. He was the flag-bearer for Russian poetry. Russia's most powerful voice had suddenly gone mute."

He pauses to uncork a leftover wine bottle from yesterday.

-"I sympathized with Blok. I've always felt that creativity is extremely unstable. At any moment it could run out and disappear forever. For a long time it made me sick with worry. In those days, all of my friends from university – the ones who were meant to become writers, poets and artists – came to me and told me that their flame had died. They no longer felt compelled to create anything. They wanted to get real jobs, start a family and make money. All these brilliant people I've known suddenly stopped shining. It made me terrified. I felt like this creative death could happen to me too any day now, and I was powerless to prevent it. The Void was a game about this, about what the will to create something comes from."

Nikolay takes out two wine glasses and fills them up. He finds some cold pizza in one of the boxes left on the table and takes a bite.

-"The colour in The Void became a symbol of this creative force. Sometimes hostile, sometimes hard to control. I created this world as a metaphor. The Void is in actuality a person's inner being. The game represents a time of introspection where you must try to find a complete state for yourself, something you can see through to the end in order to be reborn in an elevated state. It's a game about the anatomy of the human soul. That's why The Void was designed as a biological game. When we counted all the texts in Pathologic, we found out there were 1.500 pages of it. It was longer than a copy of 'War and Peace'. I started getting tired of all this text. I wanted to design a game that didn't use a single word to express anything. One where the gamer instinctively knew what to do."

He makes a pained expression.

-"But when we develop games, it's not just my ideas we're working with. We create something together, not just for my sake. When we discussed The Void, the others pointed out that text was our strong suit and I let myself be convinced. When I started working on the characters, with the brothers and sisters, I felt that they should say something after all. I didn't know exactly what, so I filled them with words. They were meant to reflect the deeper philosophical points of the story but instead it turned into lots of bullshit. They say so many things that are completely unnecessary. They didn't need these words to communicate. That was the first mistake. The second was that I bit off more than I could chew. The Void is a metaphorical game about the transformation of the soul. Of its evolution. It was a very difficult subject to depict. An old man, an experienced man who had lived his life would've depicted it better. I was thirty. I didn't know enough about life and death or the things that unite and separate us as humans. I lacked this experience. I should've made another game."

But...

-"It's like architecture. You don't start by building a cathedral. You build houses first. Then bigger buildings. But I just skipped all that."

I'm not sure I agree. Take Rimbaud for example – he was 17 when he wrote his greatest works. His texts move people despite him not having much life experience.

-"But he was an exceptionally rare case."

But maybe The Void isn't so much about what it means to you, but what it means to the ones who play it?

-"... Maybe. But either way, I imagined The Void differently beforehand. The idea appeared in a single second. It was like a bolt from the blue. I remember listening to... I have this process when I write scripts, where I always play one of my favourite songs and set it to loop. It is played hundreds of times in the background. It helps me work. I have no idea why. This time it was Rolling Stones's 'Paint it Black' that was played. And while I was listening to these words repeating time and time again it suddenly came to me. The colour that kills him and allows him to live at the same time."

-"I believe the original idea, the first moment of insight, is its purest state. Later it starts to change and transform and new things are added, but I wanted to make the game in its purest form. I believe God speaks to us. We are not the creators of these ideas. We are just their messengers. We're instruments, middlemen. When you craft something truly valuable, it's not yours. Your mission is to try and introduce this idea to our world in its purest form. Your problems, your visions, your questions that you want answered – they are irrelevant to others. If you want to create something meaningful to many people it can't be about your own problems. This is a very Medieval view, I'm aware of that. But I'm a Medieval man."

Are you religious?

-"No, not really. My mother was religious and brought us to the Orthodox church while we grew up, but I can't set my foot there now. I can't sympathize with the religion itself. I'm really a gnostic. Not an agnostic, a gnostic. I believe in God in the same way Locke or Pascal did. I can't imagine a universe like this existing without him. It seems logically impossible. I don't pray. I don't feel religious, but I believe there's a creative force behind everything.

With that in mind, how do you view the ending of The Void?

-"Each sister was an idea. The manifestation of an entire world, so to speak. If The Void is a person's inner being, the brothers represent his fears, his inner demons preventing him from developing, from dying. They don't want him to transform and be reborn. They warn him against moving on.

These forces are a kind of defense mechanism, a survival instinct. To change as a person is always hard because it means a part of what you are right now will die. And there's no guarantee the new person will be realized. The brothers try to hold you back. The sisters are the temptations. They are promises of your future self. They lure you with glimpses of the opportunities ahead of you. I felt like I failed in depicting this clearly enough," Nikolay says as he gloomily shakes his head.

He ponders for a moment before adding:

-"I mentioned that The Void was a reaction to my friends who had lost their inspiration, their creative edge, their will to create anything. In one way the game was an instrument meant to help people find an answer to questions like that. But the situation also reflects how the entirety of Russia changed during this time. Putin moved into the Kremlin and life changed radically here. The whole society began to stagnate. Hope died, thoughts of freedom were erased. The Void was personal for many Russians. If I had been more experienced I would've realized I should've left more things unsaid. Have you seen the Australian movie 'Picnic at Hanging Rock'? Peter Weir never gives you a definitive answer to what's going on."

The film is about a class of school girls and their teacher who disappear without a trace during a picnic at an Australian rock formation called Hanging Rock, on Valentine's Day of 1900. The mystery turns into an obsession for the people in their hometown of Woodened, and comes to a head when one of the girls suddenly returns without any memory of what has transpired.

-"I read an interview with him after seeing it, where he said that he very intentionally left things open-ended. If he had given us a definitive answer, it would've completely killed the atmosphere. The viewer has to reflect on the movie afterwards. Try to find their own meaning. That's the most valuable thing anyone can gain from the movie. I should've done the same thing. I felt compelled to finish in a definitive way and it crippled the entire game. I can't see The Void as a masterpiece. It was however an important part of the learning process for me."

Is that why "Cargo" is so different compared to your first two games? Were you trying to take a step back?

-"To me, every new genre is a challenge. When we released Pathologic, everyone encouraged us to make a sequel. They thought we had found our style, that we'd make a second game taking place in the same universe. It was of course tempting for a couple different reasons. When you start to develop a game, you don't know what it'll look like, or what it should look like. Only when it's done and no longer reliant on you anymore do you have a clear image. It was very alluring to make something like Pathologic but with fewer of the mistakes from the first game, but I was also scared of us becoming slaves to its form. Our manifesto ended up guiding us onto the right path. It entailed a great responsibility. I had written that we wanted to develop games as a new art form, and I realized that if we really meant it we'd be forced to explore and evolve. We need to explore the gaming media in all its different forms. We couldn't afford to make a second Pathologic. We needed to do something else. The Void

was very different from Pathologic. Cargo, in turn, became very different from both of its predecessors."

Nikolay isn't kidding.

MENTALLY INSANE HUMOUR IS THE BEST KIND OF HUMOUR
Cargo: The Quest for Gravity, 2011

Ice-Pick Lodge has placed us in the midst of surreal plague epidemics, made us puppets in the hands of omnipotent children, and let us harvest colour in the empire of death. But nothing they have ever subjected us to will ever get close to being as strange as what awaits us in "Cargo: The Quest for Gravity".

At times it comes across as some kind of satire of the criticisms they sometimes get of their games being too heavy, too removed from the effortless entertainment that games today are expected to be. Therefore, Cargo is about small, fat, naked men called "buddies" who are obsessed with having fun. They are defectively simple in their pursuit of entertainment. They love skating, playing instruments and dancing. They will march completely unphased straight into propellers and jet engines, destroying themselves unless you guard them. Which on the other hand doesn't matter too much since you can just create more from a hole in the ground.

They make up Humanity 2.0.

As soon as you start the game, a series of mechanical Aztec masks appear who claim to be manifestations of the same god (they refer to themselves collectively as "Manipu"). They say they created the buddies and realized that these were the highest form of life, as "having fun" is obviously the most elevated form of experience. So in order to have their creation take its rightful place as ruler of the world, Manipu simply decided to destroy mankind. The plan meant stopping the Earth's axis from rotating and thus eliminating gravity, because that would make all the humans simply float away. But when the plan was realized it was clear that Manipu had forgot to consider something: it wasn't just humans who turned weightless and floated off into space – so did everything else.

And this is in other words the explanation to why the world of Cargo is a place where everything – all matter, time itself, seasons – is in a state of weightless limbo. All the famous buildings of the world are floating around aimlessly in the stratosphere, and the only thing that can restore gravity is a rare substance which, of course, goes by the name of "fun". You harvest this substance by assembling vehicles and organizing

activities for your buddies, and the only underlying point to all this seems to be that the world lacks fun and it's up to the player to create more of it.

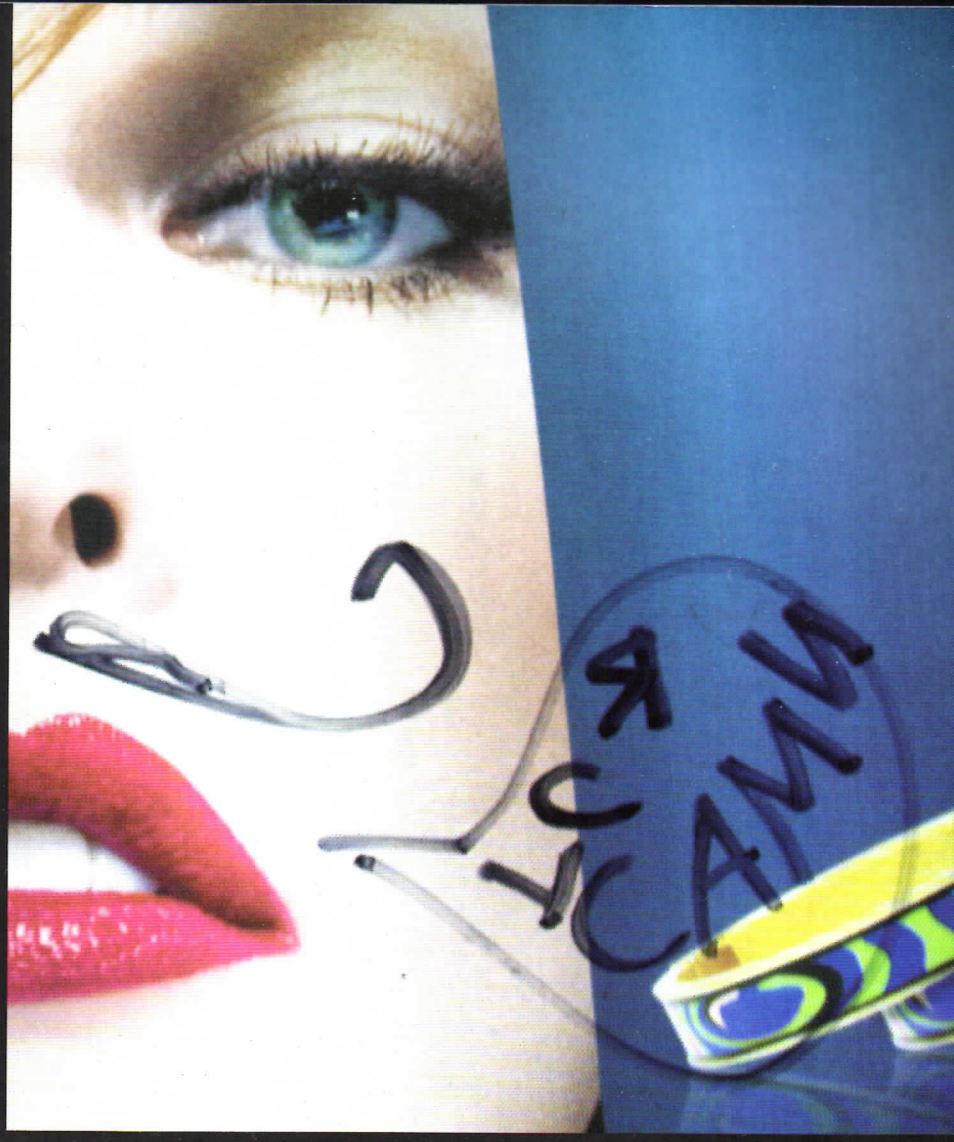
Cargo is consequently the only place where you can simultaneously find Big Ben, the Arc de Triomphe, and the Sistine Chapel standing next to each other on a floating island, while tiny naked dwarfs merrily strut around playing bass tuba on the patch of ground in front of them.

-"Cargo was originally not my idea, but Ayrat's," Nikolay says. "He wanted to make a game for kids. I just stared at him. 'Are you fucking retarded? Don't you get how much more difficult it is to write children's literature than it is writing books for adults? It's the biggest challenge of them all.' But Ayrat didn't give up. And then he said: 'I want to make a fun game.' Oh my god. I just sighed. 'Are you aware that it's much more difficult to make people laugh, than it is to make them scared or sad?', I asked him. But he was determined. So I made an attempt. I can't say I succeeded. I thought about the story for over a year... are you familiar with Peter Weiss'

play 'Marat/Sade'? It's the perfect example of humour since it takes place in an insane asylum."

He takes another bite of his cold pizza slice.

-"It takes place in an asylum during Napoleon's period of glory, and the patients are trying to stage a play about the murder of Jean-Paul Marat. The play is directed by Marquis de Sade, who is also one of the main characters of the drama. I wanted to create something reminiscent of that play. Something funny but also serious on some level. A sarcastic game. It's about the end of the world, the apocalypse. The gods have given your buddies the opportunity to wander free and it's up to you to anchor them to these islands again, create meaning for them. Despite lacking the ability to communicate with them. They are on a completely different plane... um, how do I explain this... okay, like this: mankind is constantly changing. Medieval people were different from the ones who lived in the 18th century. It's about paradigm shifts.



Our ways of thinking and living develop as people realize their perception of reality don't correlate with reality anymore. And we'll soon be presented with such a shift. The internet, social networks and new ways of communication are signs of its arrival. In ten years I probably won't be able to understand my son. I fear it. He's growing up in a time that's so different right now."

Nikolay is silent and thinks for a while.

-"I took this idea and elaborated on it further," he finally says.

Then he starts talking about the game he's been thinking of every day for the last few years. The game so enormous in scope that no one dares publish it. The game he has been put on this Earth to create. He calls it "Frost".

A NEW WORLD ORDER
Frost, 20??

One day, Earth's atmosphere suddenly changes. The planet is plunged into shadow, all life begins to die. There is only one place where anyone can survive: a few kilometers below ground, which is the center of a mysterious village of Russian miners. Down here, protected by Earth's thin crust, it's still warm, and there's plenty of air.

In the depths of the rock, the miners form a new society. What transpires there during the following generations makes out the foundation of "Frost" – Nikolay Dybowski's as of yet unreleased life's work.

Each chapter of the game takes place during the course of a few weeks, and a long time passes between each of them. The story returns to the same people five, ten, twenty years later. We get to know their children and grandchildren. And we see how their world slowly changes.

Their new life in the enigmatic cave begins in harmony. They are good and hardworking people who maintain rules and laws. But as they start to realize that they're probably the last remaining humans on Earth, something happens. A new economy arises, based on the limited assets that exist in the ground, and people start to get greedy. The shortsighted perspective wins over the long-term. Development stagnates. Then it starts going backwards. Their model of society collapses back into a feudal rule. A civil war breaks out and splits the people into two camps, after which everything spirals into a long, bloody vendetta. Every debt must be repaid in blood, every slight must be avenged. Honour and pride forbids them to stop fighting.

The leaders of both camps ultimately realize that they need to make peace to be able to preserve the last shreds of mankind, so they arrange a marriage between the clans. The bridal couple is the game's main protagonists. They're called Abel and Vera. They hate each other from the get-go. Their brothers and sisters have died in battle, put to death by the other's family or friends. The story of Abel and Vera is thus symbolic of their entire generation.

As a player we witness the conflict from several different viewpoints. We experience it from inside Abel's and Vera's own heads, from their servants' and subordinates' perspectives, from their parents'.

The goal: stop the civil war.

-"The game ends when these characters are old people, with children and grandchildren," Nikolay tells us. "I want to show how mankind evolves during this period of time, during the 50 or 60 years the game covers. The old people who lived on the surface cease to exist. They are replaced with generations who have never known anything other than caves and wars. Their culture changes. They turn superstitious, create new religions. They develop fanaticism. They feel like God was unhappy with mankind as it was at the beginning of the game and believe they need to change. Their ethics and morals change. Some relapse into an animalistic state."

-"It's a game about love," he continues. "It's about how Abel and Vera try to cling onto their humanity while they see people transform around them."

Nikolay falls silent again. He has been gesticulating just as intensely with his arms during our talk as he did yesterday, but it seems like his thoughts return to the problems with the publishers again as soon as he stops speaking. The smile disappears and his stare turns muddy. He lights up a cigarette and looks towards the window. It's the middle of the night. Vasily Kashnikov has returned home a long time ago. Tomas is snoring in the other room. From the computer room you can still hear the bubbles from Dmitry's water pipe.

FRIENDS AND ENEMIES

It's the next day and we step onto the platform with our pockets full of paper slips.

Me and Tomas are on our way home to Nikolay to continue yesterday's conversation. In order for us to navigate between metro lines and station names written in Cyrillic letters, Dmitry has written down directions on little slips of paper. He himself has stayed up all night preparing his university lectures. We're going to meet for lunch in town a little bit later, after visiting Nikolay.

It turns out that the entire subway in Moscow is one big underground art gallery. Every station is adorned with unique architecture, statues and murals. Most of them contain motifs referring back to an inventive and productive Soviet. The platform at Sportivnaya is lined with marble pillars, supporting a vaulted ceiling of white stones laid out in a rhombic pattern. And then we reach the surface – and are met with rows upon rows of gray, anonymous residential quarters.

I call Nikolay, who has been dropping his son off at school, to see if he's on his way. A few minutes later he comes trudging around the corner down the street.

-"I hate this neighbourhood," he says with a scoff directed at the blocky buildings surrounding us.

Nikolay rarely misses a chance to spill some hate over the industrialization process that has – bit by bit during the last 50 years – transformed one of the world's most beautiful cities into a gray mass.

-"Just like all normal Russians I am ashamed by Stalin, but I like the architecture from that period of time. People still saw architecture as an art form back then. When Khrushchev took over he launched an initiative that meant everything had to be built in a functional and economical way instead. Moscow was to become the heart of the Soviet Union's industry, and that's where the money went. The beautiful artistic buildings disappeared and were replaced with a more practical design. I really hate it."

I ask if his apartment is nearby. He hesitates for a bit.

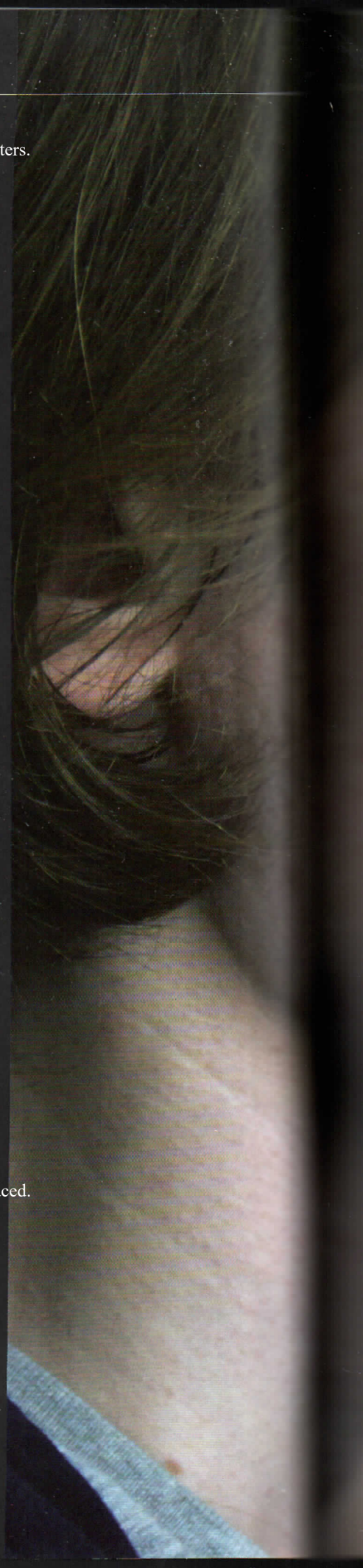
-"It's in the other end of Moscow, actually," he finally says. "In fact, this is my parents' apartment. I live here for the time being."

Nikolay's father imports special instruments for laboratories and sell them to specific clients in the chemistry sector. Ever since Nikolay's mother passed away a year ago, he lives alone in a house about a mile outside of Moscow. Since nobody currently lives in the old family home anymore, Nikolay has temporarily moved in. He rents out his own apartment to earn some cash. The last few years have been terribly difficult financially for him. More difficult that what he's previously wanted to let on.

Right next to Nikolay's temporary home there's a construction site bathing in mud after a rainy night. Piles of concrete and cranes crowd the uneven ground where the foundations of an older structure can still be traced.

-"There used to be an old historical building here before, with a sculpted facade of red marble," he says with a sigh. "When I was little there was a big bakery on the bottom floor. Every morning, the whole neighbourhood smelled like freshly baked bread. Now the house has been demolished to make room for more concrete blocks."

The apartment where Nikolay now resides is on the sixth floor of a beige-coloured



building which, like everything else in Moscow, is surrounded by high fences. When we go in it turns out that Liu is still sleeping, so we sit down in the kitchen. Nikolay is in a better mood than the evening before. He tells us that Ice-Pick Lodge is in contact with two more publishers. One of them is the German company Bluebyte. The other is the Swedish Paradox. He asks what their reputation is in Sweden. He makes a passing remark that Swedish fairytale writers are well liked in Russia. Especially Astrid Lindgren.

-"'Karlsson-on-the-Roof' is the foundation of all Russian children's literature," he explains while filling the kettle. "Russian kids can't comprehend that it's written by a Swede. They think Karlsson is a Russian national hero."

Is it because it's written in a typically Russian way?

-"Yeah, maybe. But most of all, the way Karlsson behaves is very Russian," he says with a laugh.

I ask if Nikolay himself has gained inspiration from Russian storytelling tradition. Everyone I've shown Pathologic to throughout the years have remarked that it feels very Russian in both style and tone – before they are even aware that it's developed by Ice-Pick Lodge.

-"... Maybe. You know, Russia was an agricultural country all the way until the late 1800s, where 80 percent of the population was living in rural areas. After the civil war in the beginning of the 20th century, most smaller villages were destroyed, and then Stalin came to power with his plan of industrializing the country to produce weapons. If you travel five miles outside of Moscow you'll run into a bunch of villages that are abandoned and half ruined. They are mainly populated by old women. When I studied philology we'd go to villages like this and try to collect old folk tales that have survived via oral tradition among these old women. We did what you're doing right now, we went there and put a microphone on the table and let them tell the story. Then we tried to piece it all together when we got back home."

He glances at the pigeons sitting on the window frame outside. They watch us curiously with the same expression as the people at the bazaar yesterday.

-"The birds used to build nests in all the chimneys protruding from the building across the street," Nikolay says. "When Soviet's economy crashed into oblivion the bakery was abandoned but the birds stayed. Now that the building has been demolished they've moved their nests to the neighbouring houses instead. There are thousands like them here."

The kettle switches off in the background. Nikolay stands up and starts rummaging through the cupboards for some mugs.

-"Ayrat had an idea of making games out of Russian fairytales," he continues after returning to the table. "He made a draft of a game engine that combined the stories. There was a famous Russian scientist, a structuralist by the name of Vladimir Propp, who wrote an amazing book called 'The Historical Roots of Magical Fairytales' here in Russia. Magical fairytales is the most classic kind of tale. The ones where a hero is presented with a certain mission and must travel to another reality, like the realm of death, and save a damsel in distress or become king. Propp remarked that the structure of these fairytales, not just Russian ones but from all over the world, is very similar. He proved that all these fragments, that can rarely be explained by normal logic,

originated in ancient rites of passage. When a young man was to become a hunter or warrior in the old tribes, he had to survive a painful forest ritual that first imitated his death and then his rebirth. He died as a boy and was reborn a new man. When he emerged from the woods again, he was met by his tribe acknowledging his new status. And the fairytales recreate this situation. Propp described how they are all related to each other according to these rituals."

He takes a sip from his tea and continues:

-"Ayrat, who is also very structuralistically inclined, read this book and decided to create a system that combines different parts of these stories with each other. Each fragment had the potential to develop into one of three or four new situations depending on what happened. In this way you'd be able to forge your own tale while playing. Each playthrough would be unique. The fairytale hero is always faced with a series of choices: where to go, what to do, what to say, if he should accept help from outsiders or refuse it... all these choices decide how the story is shaped. Ayrat was very excited about this idea. I'm more skeptical. Ayrat thinks about the structure, the skeleton of the story itself. I say it's not the stories themselves, but the situations they describe and the unique imagery that each and every one of them produces, that's interesting. This meat gives the skeleton identity. We'll only be able to create a limited amount of content, so we're in other words tasking the player with assembling sequences. But the allure of the fairytales is how the metaphors and imagery change in different cultures, even if the structure remains the same. We would be creating the opposite: environments similar to each other but with different ways to traverse them. That's why I'm skeptical towards the whole idea. But Ayrat likes it and he won't calm down until he's realized the project."

Tomas asks if he can take some close-ups in the kitchen. Nikolay nods but with a displeased murmur.

-"I don't like publicity, really," he explains. "I have very few good pictures of myself. I don't feel comfortable in front of the camera."

He does his best to look unaffected as Tomas holds the lens a few decimeters from his nose. I ask him whether the fact that photographs of Nikolay and others make out avatar portraits in the dialogues of Pathologic, has anything to do with the game originally being meant to consist of edited photos. He nods concessively.

-"The art director for Pathologic who took them was a very skilled photographer."

Does he still work for Ice-Pick Lodge?

-"Um... we had a fight towards the end of the game's development," Nikolay says and hesitates for a moment.

-"He was a very ambitious person. He is very proud and sees himself as an artist. At the same time he's very concerned with his image and strives to become famous. He's a bit strange but very nice. He's an old friend of mine from school, actually. Already back in school we were friends and enemies at the same time. We stood out from the rest of our class. We were

rivals but couldn't resist hanging out and challenging each other. He had a very different philosophy. Later on he studied graphical design at the university. When we started working on Pathologic, he suddenly fell in love with photography. He bought a really expensive camera and walked around just like Tomas and took pictures of everything. All the floors and walls were covered in photographs. When he decided to join our team, I offered him the role of art director. He knew everything about graphics. But more importantly – he had a sense of style no one else of us possessed. Neither us nor the illustrators I had found. They couldn't craft their own language of imagery. Ilya on the other hand, could. Our initial idea was to base the entire game, all the graphics and textures, on black-and-white photographs he had taken."

He stops to say something in Russian to Liu, who has just woken up and is tiptoeing around in the background. We take our teacups and move into the living room instead.

-"When we worked on Pathologic his name was Ilya Kalinin," Nikolay continues. "But then he moved to Tel Aviv and figured, hell, you can't have that name in Israel. So he changed his name to Eli Goren instead. He lives in London right now, though. I honestly don't know what his official name is anymore."

"I GET SO SICK OF THIS COUNTRY SOMETIMES"

Why did you stop talking to each other?

-"We fought a lot at the end of developing Pathologic. Ilya criticized me often. He called me a dictator and claimed that I was too much of an authoritarian, that I always force my own ideas on everyone instead of letting the other creative people of the team contribute. It was a terribly difficult time. When Pathologic was done he had a suggestion for what we could do next. But I thought the idea was primitive, and..."

Nikolay starts fiddling with his cup against the table and seems to be searching for the right words.

-"... When someone does something with the sole purpose of becoming famous, it's written in large letters across his forehead, and over his entire creation. If an author writes a book to become famous it'll always be missing the most important content. I don't think a man who only cares for himself is capable of creating something other people need. I might be unfair now, but that's how I feel. So I told him: 'No, Ilya, I won't make your game. I don't see any idea, any underlying thought, except you wanting to show how brilliant and remarkable you are. This is a game about you, for you.' He was furious. He felt insulted and offended, and he stormed out. I can't say I fired him, but he didn't show up again. We worked apart from each other for a few years after that. He got in touch again as we were finishing up The Void and told me he was tired of his job. He complimented our games which he felt were unique and asked if he could work with us again. He later admitted that The Void would've looked very different if he had been with us from the start of development, and deep inside I knew it would've been a better game if he was there."

Do you still keep in touch?

-"Yeah, he writes to me sometimes to discuss ideas. We have the same relationship we've always had. Friends and enemies. He went wild when I told him about 'Frost'. He said it's the game he's always dreamt of making and asked me to let him work on it. I just said: 'Of course, Ilya.'"

Nikolay pauses and grins widely.

-"His head is full of cockroaches, as we say in Russia, but he's an amazingly talented artist. I'd rather work with a difficult but brilliant person than someone who is compliant and talentless. I'm pretty sure the entire process will repeat itself. We'll fight and he'll tell me to go to hell and disappear again. But before that happens he'll for a short time create something purely amazing which makes 'Frost' a better game... uh, hopefully at least. By the way, he's married to Meethos who was one of our main illustrators for Pathologic. She really wanted to stay, but when Ilya moved she had to quit too. I lost both of them that day."

POLITICAL PROPAGANDA

A few hours later we're on the subway heading into the heart of Moscow. We get off near the Kremlin to meet Ayrat. Tomas wants some photos of him and Nikolay together in locations characteristic of the city. Nikolay is walking with his body turned towards me as he speaks. He's in a good mood until a hand suddenly shoves his chest.

He looks up and sees a guard in a fur cap, blocking our way. It turns out Red Square is sealed off. Nikolay starts talking to the guard and gesticulates frustatedly with his arms. It doesn't help very much. The only thing that happens is that two more guards walk up and stand next to the first one, to ensure that Nikolay won't try to slip past. As he finally walks away, he's bitter.

-"Fucking Russia. I get so tired of this country sometimes. Everyone's like: 'Do this. Do that.' 'But why?' 'Who knows? Just do it.' "

Nikolay isn't alone in his criticism of the country's law enforcement. There are tens of thousands of militia guards in Moscow. They have more or less the same authority as the police, despite lacking any proper training. It's a cheap way for the state to utilize people who want a little taste of power. They openly advertise for more people on posters taped up in the metro. When Tomas tries to photograph a couple of them without permission one night, Dmitry puts a cautionary hand on the camera and shakes his head.

I ask if the square has been sealed off due to a political visit.

-"No, just Russian reality," Nikolay sighs.

Today in particular, there seems to be more guards in the neighbourhood than usual though. We turn towards the Alexander Gardens and pass through a series of hastily placed metal detectors. There are policemen and guards everywhere. Some of them insist on yanking out all of the stuff in my bag and then putting them back in one big tangled ball.

-"There's probably some kind of concert," Ayrat says when we meet up with him. "There's a parliamentary election next week so they're taking the time to put people in a good mood."

Ayrat is 33 years old and raised in Tatarstan in southern Russia. He moved to Moscow at 18 and studied theoretical physics with a focus on quantum mechanics at the university. Outside his work at Ice-Pick Lodge he also works on developing some kind of system for Daimler Chrysler. He is a completely self-taught programmer, and the only person Nikolay really listens to besides Dmitry. I also recognize his face from earlier. Just like Nikolay's, it's been staring at me every time I've started up Pathologic: his photo is the avatar of one of the three main characters in the game.

I ask who he'll be voting for in the election.

-"Anyone except United Russia (Dmitry Medvedev's party, <editors note>). Their rule has been a complete disaster for the country. It doesn't really matter much who I vote for, because nothing will change, but I still want to do it. If you don't vote in this country your vote automatically goes to the governing party. It feels morally wrong to give it to them."

The Kremlin has become a kind of metonym for the old Soviet rule. It's as much a political seat as it is a tribute to the old leaders who slowly but surely drove the country into the ground. Right next to the Alexander Gardens is the most famous of them all, resting in a glass coffin inside Lenin's Mausoleum. Nikolay nods towards it as we pass by.

-"We're the only nation in the world who has a mummified president on public display in the middle of our capital," he says while shaking his head.

The spires of Saint Basil's Cathedral protrude in the background. He isn't very fond of it either.

-"It looks like a damn ice cream cone. I hate that it's become a symbol of Moscow. Ivan the Terrible had it built in the 1500s after invading Tatarstan and then plucked out the eyes of the architect so he wouldn't be able to build anything like it again. Any time someone claimed to be able to do something better, he had them executed. There is so much amazing architecture in this city and yet it's that joke of a building that's become the most famous."

We pass by the Alexander Gardens and yet more guards. Nikolay picks up the pace. He doesn't like the Kremlin very much. To him it mostly seems like a symbol of corrupt politicians and narrow-minded bigots. He was already grumbling loudly when we insisted on coming all this way to take pictures, despite him already showing us the Novodevichy Convent ("A superior building", which was also just a station or so away from his home), featuring simple white walls that make for a stark contrast compared to the red boastful construction of the Kremlin. Its cemetery is full of important artists and writers like Anton Chekhov, Mikhail Bulgakov, Nikolai Gogol and Sergei Eisenstein.

It's the side of Moscow that Nikolay is eager to show us. It's where everything beautiful and important of this town is located, according to him. It's what so many people miss due to all the flashy tourist attractions, and solemn reminders of old crimes against humanity.

He holds a long lecture when we walk past the Pashkov House about how it is the most beautifully designed building in all of Moscow. The white stone palace, featuring a rotunda on its roof, stands on a Vagankovo hill overlooking the gates of the Kremlin some hundred meters away, across a big patch of grass where there were once a couple of run-down apartment houses. Leonid Brezhnev made sure they were demolished and shipped away before Nixon's visit to the Kremlin in the '70s. Instead of a shameful residential area, Nixon was met by the splendor of the Pashkov House as he looked out through the gates.

The Pashkov House was designed in the 19th century by Vasily Bazhenov, one of the leading figures of the Russian Enlightenment. The area looked a bit different back then. Today there is a dirty, four-lane highway snaking out over the Bolshoy Kamenny Bridge to the left of the building, splitting Moscow into two parts.

The Cathedral of Christ the Saviour sticks up in the distance on the other side, its spectacular view covered by exhaust and asphalt, the composition cut apart by high-voltage power lines. It's like seeing two worlds – the golden artistic era and the modern, industrial city – in open conflict with one another.

And it's very clear who's about to prevail.

THE RUSSIANS' CONSTANT TOSKA

We're suddenly standing in front of Taras Bulba. Not the warmongering main character from Nikolai Gogol's 19th century novel – but a small Ukrainian restaurant named thereafter, situated in a cross-street a few hundred meters away from the Pashkov House. Nikolay stops and suggest we have dinner here. Since it's me and Tomas's first time in Russia, he wants to treat us to borscht.

We sit down at a table and each order a portion. Nikolay calls Dmitry to tell him where we are.

He makes sure to order a bottle of red wine along with the vodka this time.

Nikolay tells us about his family's Polish roots while we wait for the food. His grandfather's father, Benedykt Dybowski, was a biology professor from Warsaw who was sentenced to death for his compliance in the January Uprising of 1863 against the Russian tsardom. The tsar eventually changed the punishment into exile instead. Benedykt settled in the small Siberian town of Kultuk and started mapping out Lake Baikal, where he discovered hundreds of new life forms (if you enter 'Dybowski' into English Wikipedia, it's Nikolay's relative you're automatically redirected to). It was also there he met a young woman from China. Her family were aristocrats who had fled from the Chinese civil war. Dybowski was over 60, she was barely 20. They married and started a family.

-"My little brother looks Chinese," Nikolay says. "I'm the only one in my family who really looks Russian."

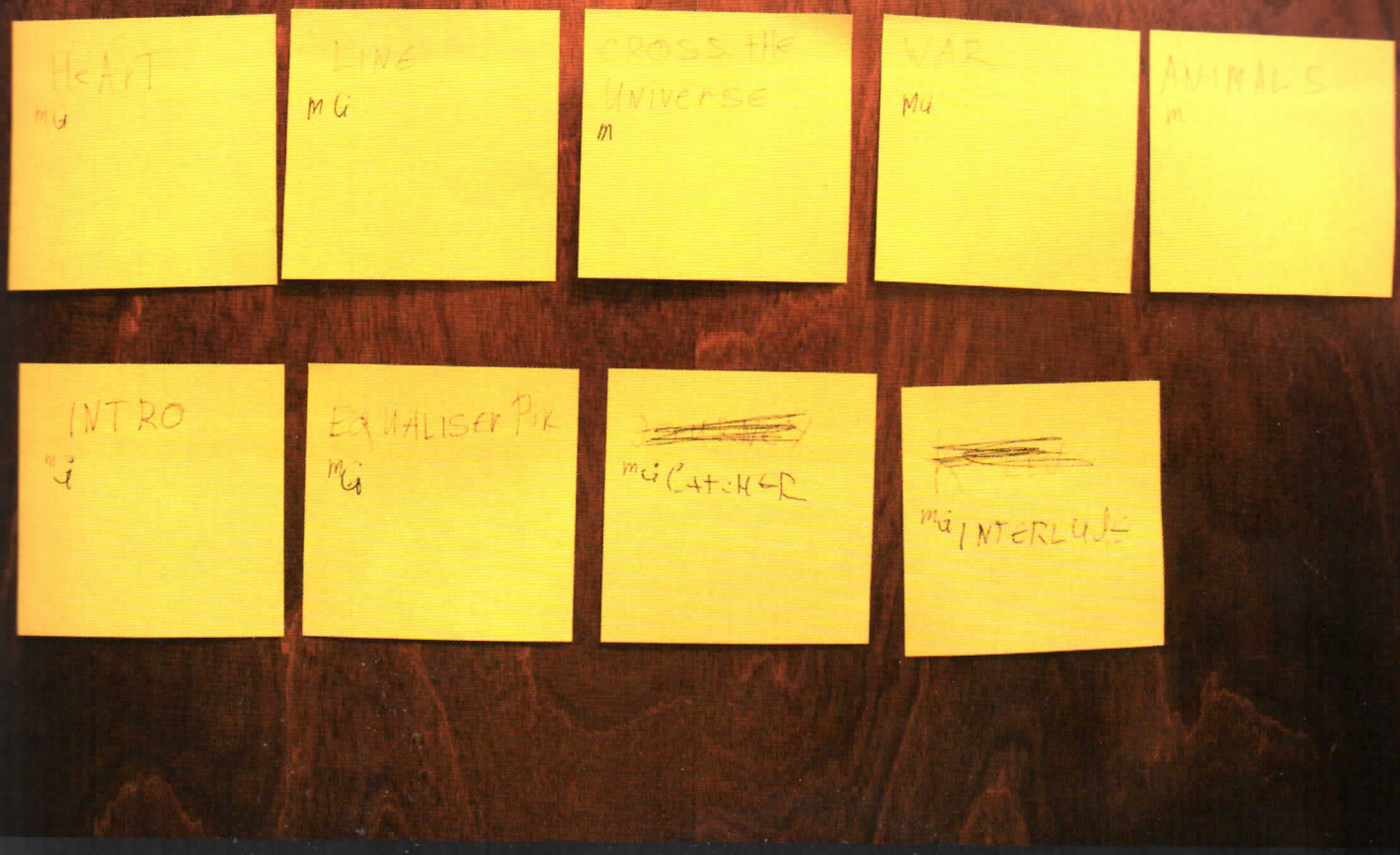
He mentions that he often played video games while growing up.

-"My favourite game is 'Thief: The Dark Project'. It was actually while playing it that I understood that I wanted to develop video games. I fell in love with the world. Not the game mechanics, but the world and its lore. I like 'Fallout' and 'Fallout 2' as well. They're brilliant games. In Russia they have legendary status. They are a symbol of great games. I think it has to do with the Fallout-universe being so similar to the Russian reality," he says with a smirk.

What was it like growing up in Soviet?

-"Tough. During the '80s, especially the second half, people were quite poor. Even here in Moscow, despite the city receiving more necessities than other parts of the Soviet Union. I especially remember 1989 and how difficult it was for us to buy flour, sugar, even bread. There were long lines along the streets and all the stores had been swept clean. All the shelves in the grocery stores were empty. The only thing you could find was salt and stuff like that. No bread, no meat, no milk, no vegetables. People barely survived. Soviet's economy was in shambles and nobody did anything to improve the situation."

-"It was an interesting time. The Soviet Union fell in 1989, but the iron curtain



had begun to dissolve long before that. Books that were previously banned were republished and discovered again by people. You could suddenly find literature from outside the country. It was like night and day compared to before. People had long written texts and books critical of Soviet, and self-published them within smaller, closed circles. Many were arrested and executed. And then suddenly all these books appeared in the '80s. And all this hunger... it wasn't starvation, but severe hunger... it partially disappeared. Books made us forget it. They were like a wind of freedom."

-"I grew up and learned to hate the Soviet Union. My family suffered terribly due to the communists. Many of my relatives were arrested and either executed or died in prison. They died for nothing. Both during the times of Stalin and of Khrushchev. My family was always in direct opposition to both Soviet power and the Soviet Union itself."

Food arrives at the table. To compliment the warm borscht we're served with cold vodka from a decanter with little ice crystals on the side. Me and Tomas glance at each other. We've already had two bottles of wine, a couple of beers and a bottle of Russian Standard throughout the day. It's only half past three. Nikolay looks up and asks how we're handling all the alcohol. He makes an attempt to explain how deeply associated the Russian mentality is with liquor and melancholy.

-"In Russia we have a unique word called 'toska'. You can't really translate it, but I'll try to explain its meaning. It is an expression that is intimately connected to Russia, summarizing our mentality. It's as palpable as nationalism. It's a typically Russian way to get through life. Toska is an expression for a type of spiritual suffering, where you feel pain for everything wrong with the world around you. It's unspoken, instinctive, an understanding on a different plane. You can't explain to your friends or your partner what the root for this pain is, where it originates. We just describe it as toska. It's a romantic state, in a way. It makes your emotions stronger, your nerves more sensitive. And when you feel like this, when you're in toska, you're in a state which enables you to understand everything surrounding you. You feel the sorrow of your close ones. You understand them on a level far beyond words. And this feeling, this pain, it's directed somewhere above... not at the people, because it's not the kind of pain you can cure and then compensate for with a couple of good deeds. It's more like: 'Why was I born? Why do we exist?' It's not about what you should do to make things better, not about curing the affliction, but being aware of your own existence. I think Heidegger or Gadamer would understand exactly what toska means. Pure existence. And so Russians don't drink to become happy, or to forget their problems. They drink to achieve toska."

He pours more vodka and adds with a smile:

-"Personally, I mostly drink because it makes the food taste better."

Tomas thinks toska sounds pretty similar to melancholy, but is quickly told that's not the case. Nikolay explains it's a different, more complex state. He shoves more sour cream into his borscht and asks if we've seen 'Melancholia', speaking of which. Nikolay adores Lars von

Trier – who he originally believes is Swedish.

-"I really like 'Dogville', especially. I'm in love with the artistic method. He uses minimalistic tricks to convey an entire reality. It's like a type of theater art. 'Dogville' is in many ways a theater play. It could be set up on stage. In Russia there was a very beautiful play staged by Yuri Lyubimov. He was said to be the next heir to the throne after Bertolt Brecht within the world of theater. This play was an adaptation of Fyodor Dostoevsky's 'The Meek One'. Lyubimov accomplished amazing things, minimalistic wonders, on stage. He could suspend a board from a string and let it make up the only decoration. Part of the board hung over the stage, while the rest was outside. And this board eventually transformed into a river, a wall, the side of a house, a train travelling along a railway track. It could be anything. Lyubimov crated an entirely new minimalistic imagery. I truly admire it."

You said your parents would stage theater plays that were critical of the Soviet Union when you were little. Were they ever arrested?

-"My father waited to be arrested one time after a big official meeting. He had just held a speech in support of Václav Havel who would become president of Czechoslovakia. He said the entire audience went silent as he began speaking and gave him a frightened look. Havel was an opponent of Soviet and wanted to clear the communists out of Czechoslovakia. To my father it was a type of rebellion against the Soviet Union to be supporting him. He lost his job because of it. He was never arrested but he was constantly waiting for it to happen."

-"My grandfather was arrested. He was accused of being a German spy. He was an educated man who spoke eight languages, one of which was German. That naturally looked suspicious. He spent 12 years in a labour camp in Norilsk up on the Siberian gold fields. He was close to dying but one of the guards saved him. This guard had planned to move here to Moscow and study at the university, and my grandfather helped him with his studies. He got to come in and warm himself up an hour a day in the guardhouse, where he was given a mug of warm tea. He said that's what saved him. It was below 50 degrees centigrade outside. People were constantly freezing to death. Few survived more than a year or so."

Nikolay proceeds to talk about the history of Russia – of the country's connection to Scandinavia, of how the first Russian regents were vikings, of how the Slavic tribes of Russia had connections to Norway, Sweden and Denmark. And how they, after two decades of Mongolian invasion initiated by Genghis Khan, lost their national identity. It took them 500 years to get it back.

-"Up until the 18th century, Russia was a nation full of slaves. The people got used to being controlled. The tsar was the only free man in the entire country, and even he was a slave before God. It's a cruel fact. It wasn't until Peter the Great in the 18th century that people started to regain their own will. He created the first generation of Russians who dared stand up for themselves. Thanks to him, the golden generation of artists who would define Russian culture of the 1800s, could restore the dignity of the Russian people. They understood the very soul of the people. Shortly thereafter, after the October Revolution, the Russians were once again turned slaves under Soviet. And now we're once again on the way to regaining our dignity," he says with a bitter laugh.

He stops to down his vodka and continues:

-"We are a tragic nation. There's plenty of causes for our constant toska."

HATE AS A DRIVING FORCE

Dmitry looks torn as he arrives at the restaurant. He's been up almost the entire night and then taught his class the whole day. He sits down at our table and orders a portion of borscht. While he awaits his food he starts talking about an acquaintance in the U.S. who has worked on animations for the 'Tintin'-movie and 'Prometheus'. Dmitry is full of wonder, and makes a passing mention of his own plans of moving to Los Angeles.

Nikolay just stares at him.

-"I'm shocked. This is the first time you've mentioned this to me!", he says, distraught.

Nikolay looks hurt, and I understand why. Dmitry is his closest friend. Dmitry himself sees Nikolay as a brother, and this is probably the reason he hasn't said anything earlier. It's a conversation that can only end one way.

-"I've wanted to move to America since I was 18," Dmitry troubledly replies.

"Not because I like that country much more than this one, but the opportunities are just so much bigger. I told you the other night about my dream of working on real movies some time."

He is interrupted by the arrival of the food. Nikolay sits in silence and stares blankly ahead as Dmitry greedily chows down. Tomas asks if he isn't also interested in moving, for the sake of game development. Nikolay laughs quietly and shakes his head.

-"Every day I find new things that disgust me about Russia," he slowly says. "There's so much with this country that I hate. And I see no solution to these problems, have no reason to believe it'll get better. I think this awful decay will continue and that each year will get worse and worse in Russia while I become even more bitter. And still I can't bring myself to leave. I want to be a Russian game developer and I want to work in Russia. It's my identity. I can't see myself leaving the country to work in Los Angeles instead. I have nothing against Los Angeles, it's a very beautiful city. But I want to be a Russian developer."

He stares at the table and continues:

-"After the October Revolution, many of our writers and poets fled the country. It probably saved their lives. Most of their brothers and colleagues who stayed were executed or abducted. But while they saved themselves, they never wrote a single line while abroad again. It's a paradox. They were creative and productive artists in Russia, but after moving to Germany or France they never wrote a single line of text again that was remarkable. There are only two exceptions: Nabokov and Brodsky. And of the two of them it was only Brodsky who wrote better in the U.S. than he did here. He's the exception that proves the rule. And Brodsky was a genius. The writers and poets of the Russian Silver Age who stayed here and died, like Mandelstam, perished. But they produced lots of wonderful texts before they died."

The waitress appears with more vodka. Nikolay takes the decanter and refills our glasses.

-"I will never be able to move," he notes.

Do you think it would kill your creativity?

-"I don't think – I know it is so. It's not because of the living conditions but because of the language. It's what nourishes me. It's the fuel of my work. It's... I can't describe it well in English, but it means everything. I would never manage."

-"Some of my friends moved. They had grandiose plans of what they wanted to do with their lives, but now they regret it deeply and want to return. They constantly complain. But they never return because they have families and roots in other places now. Things are more socially stable, a little more comfortable. But they suffer on the inside. They're not happy."

Dmitry, who has been sitting quietly and watching Nikolay, interjects:

-"Russians die slowly abroad. They can't handle the separation."

Aren't you worried the same thing will happen to you?

-"No, I'm not Russian. I'm Moldovan. I have no roots in Russia. It'll be nice to leave the country, quite honestly. I'm sick of it. I've always viewed my time in Moscow as a transition period. I never planned to live here originally. Many of my friends are here, but I don't care much for Russia otherwise."

It's quiet around the table again. No one says anything for a long while. Nikolay stares blankly ahead of him and Dmitry looks at him thoughtfully.

Suddenly, he brightens up.

-"I have a story about Nikolay you must include in your magazine!", he says with a laugh. "This was at the beginning of the year. I had just gotten an advance payment from a job I was doing and had plenty of money in my wallet. My relationship was about to end, and I didn't feel like going home, so I called Nikolay instead and asked if I could stop by for a bit. When I got there we decided to go somewhere to eat. We ended up at a Georgian restaurant and started drinking pretty heavily. I became sentimental and started telling him that I love him like a brother and stuff like that. We were there for a pretty long time. When we left again it was already dark, but I still didn't want to go home. I had the brilliant idea that I would ask Nikolay to go the cinema instead. I had seen 'The Fighter' a week before, and loved it. So we spent an hour looking for a movie theater in Moscow that was open at night and showed the movie. Afterwards we went home to Nikolay, smoking water pipe and drinking until we fell asleep. The next day we woke up terribly hungover. I wasn't really planning on drinking more, but Nikolay found a bottle of tequila and I have a weakness for tequila. Suddenly the bottle was empty and we were even more drunk than when we went to bed. I started thinking of my relationship again and became depressed. Nikolay tried to find a way of cheering me up. He suggested he'd teach me how to box, since I liked 'The Fighter' so much. He has been an amateur boxer for many years. He said: 'Stand like this and I'll teach you.' Then he said: 'Okay, hit me.' In the movie, Christian Bale shouts 'Head-body! Head-body! Head-body!' like some kind of chant while Mark Wahlberg is fighting, and I was drunk so I started doing the same and shifting between head and body. The problem was that Nikolay wasn't prepared for me to suddenly pepper him with punches all over the body, and he hit me back by reflex. He hit me right in the face with full force. Bang! I was on the floor, completely knocked down. I couldn't see anything. There was blood coming out my eye in several places. Nikolay was beside himself with despair, but I just laughed. And then we sat there drunk off our asses, crying and laughing at the same time because we were so happy. The funny thing is it took me three months to heal afterwards. I had to wear an eyepatch all the time, hahaha."

I look over to Nikolay. He laughs with the rest of us, but it's obvious that our conversation has stirred up somber thoughts.

"NO ONE CREATES ANYTHING BY THEMSELVES"

I'm talking to Ayrat in Dmitry's kitchen when our host sticks his head into the room and interrupts us.

-"Nikolay called fifteen minutes ago. He just woke up. He'll be at the station in a little while."

I look at the clock. It's eight thirty. In the evening.

A day has passed since we sat and ate borscht together, and this is the first sign of life from Nikolay since. Ayrat, who was talking about Nikolay's notorious inability to keep time right before we got interrupted, shakes his head.

-"You see, I told you so. He's often like that. But it's the only way he'll get things done so it's best to let him be. You get used to it."

It turns out there are more ways in which working with Nikolay is complicated.

-"It's... not always easy. I think he'd be brilliant as a game producer for a large team. The problem is that we have a small budget and an enormous amount of ideas. We can't realize them all. We'll have to replan, replace and restructure things. Nikolay doesn't like that. When we developed Pathologic there were a lot of things he had to have in it. He refused to budge an inch. They required huge amounts of time and we went over budget with hundreds of thousands of dollars. We fought quite a bit. He's not particularly organized. One day he'd show up a bit late. The next, we didn't see him at all."

-"I remember coming to visit them for the first time," Dmitry chimes in. "I was still living in Moldova back then. They were doing the English localization of The Void. Nikolay was hungover from the night before and sat there snoring in front of a computer. When I came up to show him one of my games he woke up with a jolt and dizzily shouted: 'Don't talk to me! I'm working!', and then he started going through a bunch of text on screen at a blazing speed. I figured it was best to leave him be, so I took the time to go shop. When I returned he was sleeping again but he had finished all the work. He had downed a small bottle of vodka while doing it too. He has an eerie ability to work efficiently to make up for only doing it during short moments."

-"The first time I met him was about ten years ago," Ayrat says as he takes a swig from his Staropramen. "He was looking for people with experience in game development. I had been creating small games at home since I was 13 years old and got my first computer, but I didn't have any experience at all of this stuff. I had made a little two-dimensional casual game together with Peter for a German company and uploaded some work samples along with my résumé on a website. Nikolay managed to find it on Google and contacted me. He had decided to make Pathologic, and said he had written a design document that he wanted to show me. It wasn't a design document at all, really, but more like a story with some markings here and there. It looked strange, but we agreed to make the game. We had no money but he found someone who could invest a small sum. We spent three or six

months on developing a prototype. It truly looked horrible. It was so fucking ugly. It was our first experience with this kind of game. Buka mostly seemed surprised though, when we showed it to them. Nikolay had been there half a year earlier and talked to them. They never thought he'd make something that actually worked."

-"Tell them about the game you and Peter made!" Dmitry says with a smile.

-"It, uh, it was about pies falling on people sitting in a café," Ayrat says shamefully while Dmitry laughs in the background. "We made it for a German client who wanted it as some kind of presentation. People could add photos of themselves and use as faces for the characters."

Did you feel right away that Pathologic was something different, that you wanted to make?

-"It was very difficult to understand the game from Nikolay's 'design document'. It was more Nikolay himself who made me interested. He's a very unusual person. You realize it immediately. I didn't know what Pathologic would look like at all when I agreed. It was purely about creating something together with Nikolay. I felt he was worth listening to."

How do you feel about the game today?

-"I think Pathologic is a good game, but it has very poor implementation. I hope we'll get the opportunity to do that remake some time. We would never change any of the story, but graphics, AI, and things like that, aren't good. I'm very proud of the game otherwise. I usually don't play video games. It feels like a waste of my time. I don't want to spend 40 hours on killing other characters or collecting virtual money. There's rarely anything there that feels meaningful to me. I mean, I can watch blockbuster movies sometimes for entertainment, but I'd never spend 40 hours on a movie like that. Pathologic is different. It has something inside that other games lack."

-"For years after releasing Pathologic, I tried to explain to Nikolay that the game was bad," he adds. "It took a lot of distance to realize how good it actually turned out. People celebrated it in the circles where it became known. To me it was hard to play because I had created everything in it. I didn't see the characters conversing. I only saw the broken lines of code. I didn't understand it at all then, but in hindsight I've realized we created something very unusual."

Why do you think so many people instinctively associate this game with Russia?

-"One of the things Nikolay was very clear about was that he wanted to create a means of expression that felt typically Russian. He wanted it to be associated to Russia the same way you associate certain games to Japan. But I'm not sure exactly why it feels so Russian. Maybe it has to do with his education. Or his life experience. He's been studying and reading so incredibly much Russian history and Russian literature. Many of those motifs and techniques have probably influenced his game creation."

Nikolay explained before that he finds new things that annoy him about Russia all the time, but he still doesn't want to move. Do you feel the same?

Ayrat ponders for a moment and pushes the beer bottle in front of him on the table.

-"... I think so. I can't say my roots here are as strong as Nikolay's, but it's still my country. I just don't see any change in sight. Things won't get better. Putin will be the next president and probably continue until he dies. The fact that everything is so dependent on oil makes me devastated. When everything in this country is dependent on oil money, you don't produce anything yourself. You buy it from Europe and America with money from the oil industry. And that in turn stunts creativity. People stop creating things. Russia is hundreds of years behind Europe and America when it comes to human rights. People here don't protest, don't stand up for their rights. They need to understand that they should fight. It's a slave state in many ways. Ten years from now nothing will have happened. Putin and Medvedev will still be there. People will still be miserable and the country will remain broken."

It's quiet for a moment while I write my notes. Ayrat is curiously looking at the notebook and asks what kind of article we're writing. I ask him what Nikolay has said.

-"I don't know anything. Nikolay didn't say you'd be coming until three days ago. He said: 'I'm going to the airport to meet two Swedes now', and then he left."

I tell him about the idea behind Fienden [the magazine]. Ayrat nods approvingly when I explain we're completely independent and only write about games we find are important. After that he opens up a little more. He asks if people read the magazine.

We talk about how the view of games with literary and artistic ambitions has changed in the last few years. Ayrat thinks we're close to a paradigm shift.

Do you think things would've gone better if Pathologic had been released today?

-"I think we'd find a bigger audience for it today. People start to grow up and demand more intellectual experiences. Maybe the explosion of indie games is a sign that people are increasingly wanting something deeper."

As we put on our coats to meet Nikolay, Ayrat talks about how Pathologic suddenly appeared on the online service Onlive without them having any knowledge of it. Nikolay was told about it through the grapevine a few months later. The Russian publishers had sold the game to a couple of Western companies and, since Ice-Pick Lodge by contract wasn't entitled to a single cent in royalties, simply hadn't bothered telling them.

-"We'll try to buy back the rights to the game as soon as we can afford it," he says. "I don't think it'll be particularly expensive. But it would give us the opportunity to do that remake."

Nikolay looks tired when we meet him and Liu at the subway station. He grumbles discontentedly when Tomas asks if we can go somewhere to take some night photos of him, Ayrat and Dmitry. He thinks the pictures from yesterday are enough. Eventually he agrees to take a walk to the subway for an additional photo session.

I'm having small talk with Nikolay on the way. We talk about what he thinks will happen to Ice-Pick Lodge in the future if neither Bluebyte nor Paradox wants to publish their next project. He's unsure.

-"You know, we did try to create games with alternative design for social network sites a while to get money," he says. "But it didn't work. If you don't like what you're working with it's not going to be good in the end. That was our weak point. The only platform we can work with without having lots of limitations is PC, and the computer market is dead now. Not just in Russia, but essentially the whole world."

He remarks that it's not the first time it looks dark, and probably not the last either.

-"It was a miracle that we found a publisher for Pathologic, and it was an even greater miracle that someone wanted to publish The Void. Same thing with Cargo. They showed up out of nowhere and offered to

publish it. Things will hopefully work out in the end."

We walk for a bit before he adds with a smile:

-"Maybe your article will help us a bit on the way. Who knows?"

WHAT KILLS AND GIVES LIFE

A few months after my visit to Russia, a reminder emerges that change can crawl out of the most unexpected of places.

I sit glued in front of my TV and watch the demonstrations in Moscow. Vladimir Putin and United Russia are accused of electoral rigging, and many people are just as upset as you'd expect. But something's different this time. Instead of just accepting the situation, the people decides to show their displeasure. 120.000 people participate in the demonstration held on Christmas Eve. A few months later, some of the members of the feminist punk band Pussy Riot are arrested in the Cathedral of Christ the Saviour, as they protest against the Orthodox Church's political connections to the Putin regime. Three of them are put on trial and sentenced to two years in prison. The trial results in dismay both in and outside the country.

I think about what Ayrat said about the country's corrupt politicians and how the people need to learn to stand up to them. Maybe this is a tiny, tiny sign that things are starting to happen.

Another sign comes later in the year, and is just as unexpected. Dmitry, who I've been having frequent contact with ever since we got home, has already told us that Nikolay is considering a crowdfunding project to get money for a new game. He is on the other hand unsure if Ice-Pick Lodge has enough fans to reach the goal. In August of 2012, they decide to find out.

"Knock-knock" is announced via Kickstarter with a minimum goal of 30.000 dollars. When I log onto the site I am met with a familiar sight. With his straggly red hair, striped scarf and checkered Harvard slippers, the main character couldn't be based on anyone other than Dmitry Leaduhin.

-"I said the same thing!", Dmitry exclaims as I point out the similarity. "Ayrat also thought it was me. But Nikolay waved it away and claimed it was all just pure coincidence."

The game is inspired by Russian folklore about ancient forest creatures. A man lives alone in a cabin in the middle of the woods. Each night, evil creatures knock on the window shutters and challenge him to some kind of murderous hide-and-seek. The rules are simple: stay alive until sunrise, do it with your mental health intact, and you win. Which is easier said than done when something in the house does its best to sabotage you. Something's walking around opening windows for the uninvited guests, rattling saucepans and sneaking around with creaking steps in the attic.

At the beginning of September, when the Kickstarter campaign is finished, they have collected over 40.000 dollars and a few additional thousand via Paypal (where you can still donate to the project). Knock-knock will become reality. And even if it's a much smaller and simpler project than anything they've done thus far, it's a sign that there are still people who love and need Ice-Pick Lodge. People who never stopped caring.

Maybe it's not that strange. Ice-Pick Lodge is unique in the gaming world in so far as they are a reflection of Russia; of the country's cultural and social background, its divided political present, and its uncertain future. Nikolay was old enough to experience the difficult years before the Soviet Union crumbled, and he grew up during a short time of intense cultural emancipation. It's no coincidence that he's absorbed immeasurable amounts of Russian literature and is obsessed with finding a new form of expression in a virtual age. Or that he idolizes dead poets who perished during the great cleanse and despises buildings representing old executioners. This is his city and his history – this is where he constantly witnesses how the artistic and magnificent is threatened by being drowned by the mundane and anonymous. When he says he'd never be able to leave Moscow, it's not just his roots in the homeland he's speaking about – it's also the hate. The same displeasure and suppressed emotions giving fuel to artists and writers for centuries lies within the core of everything he creates. Osip Mandelstam once wrote that 'only in Russia is the poetry so respected that it gets people killed. Is there any other country where poetry is such a common motive for murder?' That quote also points out exactly what the difference is between Nikolay Dybowski and every other game creator. He sees games as a new art form – but in Russia, art isn't synonymous with undemanding entertainment. Over here it's a matter of life and death.

During the week I've spent with Nikolay he kept coming back to how the golden generation reestablished the Russian culture in the 19th century. Perhaps his games are an attempt at doing the same thing in a computer age that's on the way of forgetting the heights Russian art once reached. An attempt at – just like the cultural revolution – restoring the people's dignity again, and doing it within the art form that's probably the most representative of our time compared to others. He's often said in interviews that computer games have the potential of being an art form, something to become the language of the age we live in, in the same way movies partially did during the 20th century.

Whether it'll be Ice-Pick Lodge leading us into this new era remains to be seen, but one thing is for sure: I've never seen any other games like the ones they make. They are like generational novels of a generation yet unsure of its place in history. Like national epics of a nation still looking for a way out of centuries of darkness.

"We're going to make games for our country and about our country," say the last lines of the manifesto that Nikolay Dybowski once wrote. Ice-Pick Lodge has lived up to those words for a decade. They will do it for a decade more. One day we might finally get to experience "Frost", no matter how distant it might feel here and now.

The reason for this is simple: Nikolay will never leave Russia, just as little as Russia will leave him. The chaos that has served as inspiration and fuel for everything Ice-Pick Lodge has ever done, will continue to drive them. The irony of this story is that their games could never have been made under more humane conditions in a better functioning society. To Ice-Pick Lodge, Russia is like colour in The Void. It gives them power and kills them slowly at the same time. What makes it so hard for them to exist is simultaneously the very reason that they even do.

It's from this very paradox that Russian art has always emerged. It's in this way the country has for all time fostered their artists.

And it's in this way it is now fostering one more.