In the spring 1989 the Karvina Corporation released a curious game, whose dissemination among American students that fall was swift and furious, though its popularity was ultimately short-lived.

The game was “Killswitch.”

On the surface it was a variant on the mystery or horror survival game, a precursor to the Myst and Silent Hill franchises. The narrative showed the complexity for which Karvina was known, though the graphics were monochrome, vague grey and white shapes against a black background. Slow MIDI versions of Czech folksongs play throughout. Players could choose between two avatars: an invisible demon named Ghast or a visible human woman, Porto. Play as Ghast was considerably more difficult due to his total invisibility, and players were highly liable to restart the game as Porto after the first level, in which it was impossible to gauge jumps or aim. However, Ghast was clearly the more powerful character–he had fire-breath and a coal-steam attack, but as it was above the skill level of most players to keep track of where a fire-breathing, poison-dispensing invisible imp was on their screens once the fire and steam had run out, Porto became more or less the default.

Porto’s singular ability was seemingly random growth–she expanded and contracted in size throughout the game. A Kansas engineering grad claimed to have figured out the pattern involved, but for reasons which will become obvious, his work was lost.

Porto awakens in the dark with wounds in her elbows, confused. Seeking a way out, she ascends through the levels of a coal mine in which it is slowly revealed she was once an employee, investigating its collapse and beset on all sides by demons similar to Ghast, as well as dead foremen, coal-golems, and demonic inspectors from the Sovatik corporation, whose boxy bodies were clothed in red, the only color in the game. The environment, though primitive, becomes genuinely uncanny as play progresses. There are no “bosses” in any real sense–Porto must simply move physically through tunnels to reach subsequent levels while her size varies wildly through inter-level spaces.

The story that emerges through Porto’s discovery of magnetic tapes, files, mutilated factory workers who were once her friends, and deciphering an impressively complex code inscribed on a series of iron axes players must collect (This portion of the game was almost laughably complex, and defeated many players until “Porto881″ posted the cipher to a Columbia BBS. Attempts to contact this player have been unsuccessful, and the username is no longer in use on any known service.) is that the foremen, under pressure to increase coal production, began to falsify reports of malfunctions and worker malfeasance in order to excuse low output, which incited a Sovatik inspection. Officials were dispatched, one for each miner, and an extraordinary story of torture unfolds, with fuzzy and indistinct graphics of red-coated men standing over workers, inserting small knives into their joints whenever production slowed. (Admittedly, this is not a very subtle critique of Soviet-era industrial tactics, and as the town of Karvina itself was devastated by the departure of the coal industry, more than one thesis has interpreted Killswitch as a political screed.)

After solving the axe-code, Porto finds and assembles a tape recorder, on which a male voice tells her that the fires of the earth had risen up in their defense and flowed into the hearts of the decrepit, pre-revolution equipment they used and wakened them to avenge the workers. It is generally assumed that the “fires of the earth” are demons like Ghast, coal-fumes and gassy bodies inhabiting the old machines. The machines themselves are so “big” that the graphics elect to only show two or three gear-teeth or a conveyor belt rather than the entire apparatus. The machines drove the inspectors mad, and they disappeared into caverns with their knives (only to emerge to plague Porto, of course). The workers were often crushed and mangled in the onslaught of machines, who were neither graceful nor discriminating. Porto herself was knocked into a deep chasm by a grief-stricken engine, and her

fluctuating size, if it is real and not imagined, is implied to be the result of poisonous fumes inhaled there.

There's actually an unused house in San Andreas with some kind of faceless guy in a suit. He rushes at CJ trying to kill him and when killed, he doesn't bleed or anything.

What follows is the most cryptic and intuitive part of the game. There is no logical reason to proceed in the “correct” way, and again it was Porto881 who came to the rescue of the fledgling Killswitch community. In the chamber behind the tape recorder is a great furnace where coal was once rendered into coke. There are no clues as to what she is intended to do in this room. Players attempted nearly everything, from immolating herself to continuing to process coal as if the machines had never risen up. Porto881 hit upon the solution, and posted it to the Columbia boards. If Porto ingests the raw coke, she will find her body under control,and can go on to fight her way out of the final levels of the mine, which are impassable in her giant state, clutching the tape containing this extraordinary story. However, as she crawls through the final tunnel to emerge aboveground, the screen goes suddenly

white.

Killswitch, by design, deletes itself upon player completion of the game. It is not recoverable by any means, all trace of it is removed from the user’s computer. The game cannot be copied. For all intents and purposes it exists only for those playing it, and then ceases to be entirely. One cannot replay it, unlocking further secrets or narrative pathways, one cannot allow another to play it, and perhaps most importantly, it is impossible to experience the game all the way to the end as both Porto and Ghast.

Predictably, player outcry was enormous. Several routes to solve the problem were pursued, with no real efficacy. The first and most common was to simply buy more copies of the game, but Karvina Corp. released only 5,000 copies and refused to press further editions. The following is an excerpt from their May 1990 press release:

Killswitch was designed to be a unique playing experience: like reality, it is unrepeatable, unretrievable,and illogical. One might even say ineffable. Death is final; death is complete. The fates of Porto and her beloved Ghast are as unknowable as our own. It is the desire of the Karvina Corporation that this be so, and we ask our customers to respect that desire. Rest assured Karvina will continue to provide the highest quality of games to the West, and that Killswitch is merely one among our many wonders.

This did not have the intended effect. The word “beloved” piqued the interest of committed, even obsessive players, as Ghast is not present in any portion of Porto’s narrative. A rush to find the remaining copies of the game ensued, with the intent of playing as Ghast and discovering the meaning of Karvina’s cryptic word. The most popular theory was that Ghast would at some point become the fumes inhaled by Porto, changing her size and beginning her adventure. Some thought this was wishful thinking, that if only Ghast’s early levels were passable one would somehow be able to play as both simultaneously. However, by this time no further copies appeared to be available in retail outlets. Players who had not yet completed the game attempted Ghast’s levels frequently, but the difficulty of actually playing this enigmatic avatar persisted, and no player has ever claimed to have finished the game as Ghast. One by one, the lure of Porto’s lost, unearthly world drew them back to her, and one by one, they were compelled towards the finality of the vast white screen.

To find any copy usable today is an almost unfathomably rare occurance; a still shrink-wrapped copy was sold at auction in 2005 for $733,000 to Yamamoto Ryuichi of Tokyo. It is entirely possible that Yamamoto’s is the last remaining copy of the game. Knowing this, Yakamoto had intended to open his play to all enthusiasts, filming and uploading his progress. However, to date, the only film which has surfaced is a one minute and forty five second clip of a haggard Yamamoto at his computer, the avatar-choice screen visible over his right shoulder.

Yamamoto is crying.