

Indie Postmortem: Chronic Logic's *Gish*

By Alex Austin

Introduction

Gish is a 2D side-scrolling game, highlighting physics-based gameplay, and made specifically for the PC. The initial concept, when we started development on *Gish*, was to make an old NES-style game with modern physics and graphics, and make it fun. The main character is a ball of tar named Gish, who is trying to rescue his girlfriend. Most people, at this point, ask, "Why is Gish a ball of tar?" He just is.

The game was created by independent game developer Chronic Logic, based in Santa Cruz, California. The company has been around since 2001, starting with our first game, *Pontifex*, a PC title where the player tests and designs bridges. Since then, we officially incorporated as a company in 2003, and we've managed to make a living making games, at some points barely getting by. However, we've found solutions, such as some smaller European publishing deals for *Pontifex* and *Pontifex 2*, in order to get by.

Luckily, we have been able to stay independent, which allowed us to make a game like *Gish* without requiring outside funding. An early version of the game was a finalist in the Independent Games Festival for 2003, but the title itself was finally launched in May 2004.

The Origins Of *Gish*

Gish started out as an idea thought up by artist and designer Edmund McMillan, as we were trying to figure out a simple game that could use the same physics as our previously released puzzle game *Triptych*, which relied heavily on the *Tetris*-style blocks in it obeying the laws of physics. I remember that, when I first heard the concept of *Gish*, I thought it was pretty dumb. After some convincing, we started working on some prototypes, and the design evolved a lot as we were able to test out our concepts over a period of time. *Gish* originally was going to have an arm that he could swing on, be able to shoot goo, and a variety of other ideas. Fortunately, we tried many different ideas out early, and realized some didn't work, but we also thought of a lot of new ideas along the way.



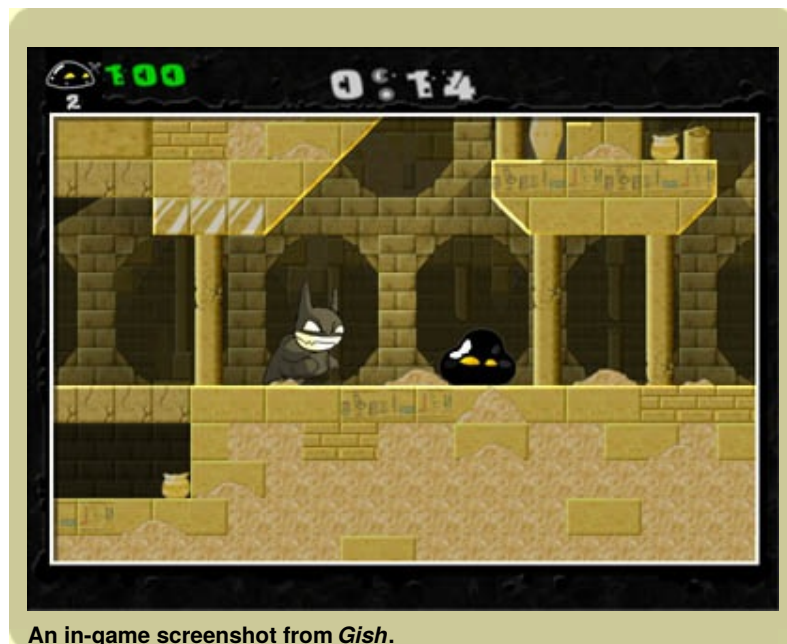
The cast of *Gish*.

The first half of development on the programming side was mostly physics-related. I had to resolve some issues involving in-game objects colliding incorrectly with other objects, and making the title character, *Gish*, move smoothly. Since our main character was just a collection of particles and springs, it took a lot of balancing to make it work.

The second half of development was finishing everything else, including a level editor and the more advanced animations. We changed quite a few things during this time, and we changed the level format at least twice, and had to redo all the levels. But although this sounds a little chaotic, we think this flexibility helped the final game, since we were able to add features all the way through the development in a more

organic way to much game development.

During the development of *Gish*, we played a lot of classic games, from *Super Mario Bros.* for the NES to Atari 2600 games like *Pitfall*. The great thing about older games was they seem to have one basic design philosophy - make it fun. We tried to use that same philosophy with *Gish*. For example, we could've decided the versus mode wasn't worth the time, since no one plays two-player games on the same PC any more. But we felt that it was one of the best parts of the game, and maybe people would actually take the time to play two-player style, if there was a game that was fun enough. Either way, we had enough fun playing the versus mode ourselves to make it worth the time.



An in-game screenshot from *Gish*.

What Went Right

Physics-based gameplay. The original design for *Gish* was a sprite-based character that could interact with physics based blocks. Due to my laziness, I didn't want to program the hundreds of animations that would be needed for the main character, so I began to think about a physics-based character. After a few weeks of Edmund bugging me to make a prototype, I took a day to make a side-scrolling engine and added some physics. After a few hours of experimenting with a ball shaped object, we realized that the physics-based character was definitely the way to go. While using physics for gameplay also adds a lot of issues to the design, in the end, it made *Gish* more original and more fun.

Original character design. Edmund's original focus when making *Gish* was to make sure the visuals were something to be remembered, and I think when it came to the character design he really delivered. From a team of feces-filled sacks known as the Honey Bucket Boys, to the very memorable Viserien Sisters (who just happen to birth baby demons out of their chest cavities), the bosses in *Gish* and overall creature design really stand out, in a sick and twisted kind of way that might just be a bit too odd for 'traditional' mainstream gaming - this postmortem showcases some of the concept art Edmund created while in development on the title.

Versus mode. A few weeks into development, as I was working on the object physics, I tried having two *Gishes* on a platform colliding with each other. After playing a few rounds of trying to push the other *Gish* off the platform, we realized that this would be a great mode to have in the game. Even though the graphics at the time were only green lines, and the movement was only left or right, it was a lot of fun. It was a good example of a simple prototype evolving into a big part of the game, and a further example of how an organic development style can help foster innovation for indie titles.

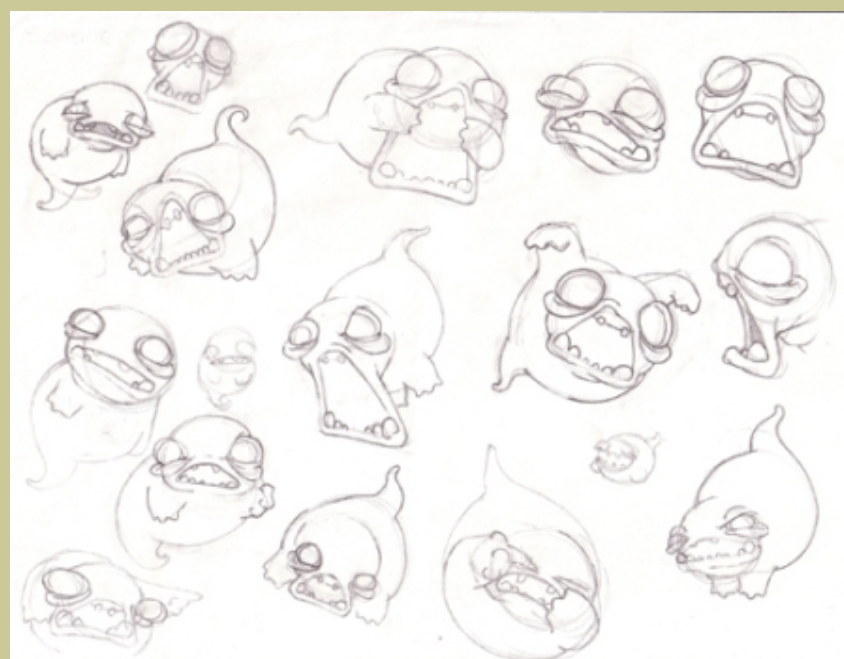
Small team. I believe that making a game should be more like a band making an album, rather than a movie studio making a movie. For *Gish*, we had 3 people working on the game, which helped us to capture the feel, the "I don't know what", that I think is lacking in games now. We were able to try out new ideas without worrying about marketability or getting the idea approved by someone else. I would rather have a team of 3 or 4 talented people instead of 100 drones, even for the most complicated game idea, although I understand that sometimes the volume of work requires more personnel.

Good fan base. Over the last few years, we've managed to gain a number of fans that support our games and Chronic Logic as a company, even though we've released a diverse range of titles in terms of genre. This helped us to get the word out about *Gish* as soon as possible after the release, leading to some good 'buzz' online. Also, independent game sites like GameTunnel and DIY Games, who are some of the few entities covering the often overlooked area of independent gaming, have helped more people find games like ours.

What Went Wrong

Only two types of enemy! The original cast list for *Gish* was over 36 characters. This list was cut down to just 16, two weeks before release, due to the pressing and fixed deadline. At the time, the current frame count for the character animations was well over 900, and with only a

few weeks left of development time, there was no way Edmund alone would have been able to pull that off. So regrettably, a lot of memorable baddies were cut. Having physics-based bad guys also led us into a few more problems in the last weeks of development. We only had two base physical structures for enemies (not counting boss entities) - the Nibbler and the Bobble Head. The Nibbler was a physics-based box that could be crushed with enough force. The Bobble Head was basically a box with a round head on it - with enough force the head could be snapped off, killing the enemy. With very little time remaining, all we could do to solve this problem was to give each chapter's bad guys a different skin, and slightly different movement, making them appear like different creatures, though in reality, they were staying the same.



A few concept sketches for the design of Paunchy Chops, one of the bosses in *Gish*.

Interface. Most of the interface for *Gish* was done in the last couple of days, and it's pretty obvious that we didn't spend much time on it. Some people have told us that they recognize our games by the interface, since we've used the same one for all of our games. Part of the problem was that we changed a lot of things towards the end of development, and we didn't have the time to bring the interface up to speed. Also, I hate doing interface work. But at least the interface was still functional and working.

Sound. This problem relates to sound, or rather, lack thereof. Sound effects were basically the last thing on our list of importance, and I think that's pretty obvious to any one who's played the game. Though some might say the original (and amazing) sound track was a saving grace, the lack of obvious sound effects is still apparent. *Gish* was the first Chronic Logic game where sound was really a factor, so I could blame its downfall on lack of experience in the sound department. But in all reality, I'm sure we could have made time for extra sound effects, if we actually had any extra development time left to do so.

Crunch time. Even though we didn't have a boss asking us to work 12 hours a day, we still ended up working way too much in the last few months. The main motivation for this was that we needed money, and to make money we needed a game to sell. I'm not sure what we could have done differently - sometimes you get stuck in situations that you can't avoid.

Leeches. The more common term for someone downloading software for free is a software pirate, but I think that gives actual pirates a bad name. At least the original pirates had to have some courage and skill. It is frustrating to see more people leech off your game than actually buy it, with people even writing to us for tech support when their stolen keycode doesn't work with the newest patch. There are plenty of justifications that people state for this, but the fact is that these leeches are a big part of why games aren't very good anymore. Companies who arguably aimed at the hardcore market ended up going out of business (like Looking Glass Software), because too many hardcore gamers are "too smart" to actually pay for something. So we end up with games aimed at the Wal-Mart crowd, with pretty graphics and movie licenses. Hopefully, there's some way this can change in the future.

Conclusion

Since its release, *Gish* has been released for Windows, Linux, and Mac OS X, and has received quite a few good reviews from mainstream media such as GameSpot, PC Gamer UK, and Macworld. Sales have been good, at least for an independent game, considering we don't really have a marketing budget. It shows that people will support unique games, even if the production values aren't as high as a 10 million dollar budget game.

However, so far, we haven't signed any distribution deals for *Gish* to get the game into stores. I'm not sure if we will, since dealing with publishers is usually such a pain in the ass. *Gish* would work well on a console, though, so we might try to find a deal for that.

There were definitely things that we wanted to try during the development of the game, but didn't get a chance to do, such as make the level structure less linear and add more interactivity. Unfortunately, we had to make the choice to go with already tested methods, such as dying meaning restarting the level.

But overall, I'm happy with the way *Gish* turned out. Its one of those games that people either love or hate, which is pretty much what we were going for, since as an independent game creator, you can't settle for something that's just mediocre.

Game Data



Publisher: Chronic Logic

Developer: Chronic Logic

Number of full-time developers: 3

Number of part-time developers: 0

Number of contractors: 2

Length of development: 8 months

Release Date: May 4, 2004

Target Platform: PC, Mac OS X, Linux

Development Hardware: 3 PCs with Windows 98, 2000 and XP

Development Software: Visual C compiler, DOS editor, Photoshop, Flash

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