# Screening Calls with *GAMETHING*'s David Wolinsky and Pippin Barr

By Ben Sailer • May 5th, 2023

Matt Johnson!

The video game industry moves fast, and by necessity, so does the media that covers the medium. While the business is blessed with no shortage of talent to break stories and offer insight across all manner of channels and formats, following the discourse surrounding games can feel like getting sucked into the whirring engine of the hot take industrial complex. Paired with the rapid-fire nature of social media, where so much discussion around games takes place, the pressure to offer the sharpest opinion possible (often before one has had a chance to formulate a complete thought) can sometimes smother thoughtful conversations about the art form before they even begin.

While this should be taken as an observation rather than a criticism, the natural tendency toward wanting to cover what's new does tend to overshadow broader possibilities for what games media can explore. This is, in part, what makes the long-running podcast *GAMETHING* so interesting. Now in its fourth season, co-hosts developer/academic Pippin Barr and writer David Wolinsky aim to "decelerate" games

discourse by taking a decidedly unusual approach to the show's format: each episode is stitched together as a series of answering machine messages between the pair.

We caught up with Barr and Wolinsky to discuss how the show's unique format underpins its contemplative nature, why the most interesting games aren't always the "best" games based on critical consensus, the dynamic that emerges when a developer and a critic cross the aisle to co-host a show, and much more.

**_GAMETHING_ is a bit different from a lot of games podcasts that I'm familiar with. Could you explain the concept behind _GAMETHING_ and give me the elevator pitch for what makes your show interesting?**

**David Wolinsky (DW)**: I don't know where it originated from. I guess it's basically in a very macro high-level way, Pippin and I with our different points of entry, lived history, experience, careers around video games, I don't know, reexamining games?  The elevator pitch is like "what are video games," and also "why" are they, and with Pippin's history and career background it's like, "how" are they. We are just very interested in decelerating the whole pace of how video games are discussed and what we find interesting about them and coming at them in a different way.

I don't know that it's like we dreamt up, "How contrarian can we be?" But we're very curious about what's being left on the table as far as how potential in video games is thought of or discussed. But I also think because there's two of us, there's the way I come at _GAMETHING_, and then there's the way he comes at _GAMETHING_, and then in that Venn diagram of what makes [the podcast], us as individuals is what _GAMETHING_ becomes. Which sounds very weird. I mean, are all podcasts like a form of alchemy? I don't know. I think it's just the way we're coming at it

because of who we are and that's what makes us different from all other game podcasts. They don't have us. [laughs]

**Pippin Barr (PB)**: So true. Let me jump in with a couple of other thoughts, one of which is exactly related to this moment as I begin speaking. Which is that I think, for a lot of people, maybe literally for everybody, it's hard to have an intelligent, well-thought-through opinion about something or response to something Instantly after you hear it. Such as David's comment just then or this question. And maybe this is just somebody speaking who finds live conversations – I'm making myself sound a little strange – but who finds it a little bit more challenging than I would like to say intelligent things live. And I think this is especially painful for me as an academic because I have a lot of colleagues who are very, very good at, at least sounding smart in the moment. They know what to deploy and when to deploy it.

But one of the things that I think is special about *GAMETHING* is exactly that because we formatted it as a series of answering machine messages there's actually a lot of time between when David says something and when I say something back and when he says something back to that. And that time in between, it could be days, could be hours, is spent playing the game that we're talking about and making notes and thinking about what we really, really think about what has been said and what we're seeing in the game and then pulling all of that together into a phone message. It s kind of like having the superpower of freezing time somebody says something smart, you freeze time, you go think about it, you research it, you get up to speed and then you un-pause and you say something hopefully smart back to them.

That's the format that does that, right? You can't do that in a straight up conversational podcast format.

**(DW)**: I think you're too hard on yourself. I think you say plenty of smart things and are fine talking live. I think it's just deceleration is a big part of it and I think when I look at it... it's not being critical of the way other conversations about games happen. It's just I think, "Man, how many opinions do people really have in a day?" I think that's the joy of what we're doing, it's like a crock pot for ideas about games that otherwise you would just totally zoom past if you have to be like, "Here's my here's my final judgment."

It's also true with most criticism of games, it captures an amber at that particular moment when the deadline was, usually around the time the game came out. That's the other big thing that I think distinguishes us a bit. We will talk as deep about a game that came out in 1973, that came out in 2023. But we're most likely going to skew older than more recent. I don't know how unique that makes us, but I think we feel very comfortable casting a wide net.

**You touched on the format of the show a bit there and some of the benefits that you have with the format that you use for the show where you're passing voice messages back and forth sort of like an answering machine.**

**(DW)**: Phone tag. [laughs]

**Could you share a little bit about how you arrived at that format? What was your conversation like, or what was your thought**

**process like going all the way back to when you were first conceiving of the show?**

**(PB)**: I'll jump in initially on this. I think like anything, like any idea, it no doubt has multiple starting points, I think one of the weird starting points is that we met for the first time very romantically on Skype when David interviewed me for his interview series *Don't Die* back in 2016 on my birthday. I think that, in a weird way, Skype ended up being this iconic thing that was the way that we communicated, other than via email.

I don't know if I'm building it into a myth at this point, but one of the reasons that the format is the way that it is now is to do with laziness. We did seasons one and two, and they were these experimental sound collage responses to games. I cringe a little when I listen to them, to be honest, at least when I listen to my bits. But one of the things about it, was that there was labor, like significant labor, I think largely on David because I just didn't really tend to do it, to pull these things together and to produce audio segments. And these were short. A lot of these episodes are like five minutes, eight minutes long.

And when we started talking about having an actual conversation about games instead of playing my ukulele about them or going on sound walks about them, the thought of all of the editing that might be necessary if we did it in a traditional fashion scared me and we've had this kind of ongoing ethos of, "Don't make extra work for ourselves."

We have other jobs. We're trying to do a whole lot of stuff, we don't we basically don't make any money out of this, though we have a Patreon to try and make some money out of it. But in the spirit of not making work, aka laziness, maybe depends on how you want to look at it, one or both of us started thinking about it

in terms of this asynchronous format where you would just have multiple messages that can sit independently of each other.

Because I have a background in computer science, it seemed to me like it would be comparatively easy to write a program that then just assembles the episode out of individual audio chunks of somebody talking. Writing that code turned out to be harder, say 10 times harder, than I expected it would but that's software engineering. But it does mean that now we record all of these messages to each other, I get the audio files and I type something into my computer, and it builds the episode, builds the season without any intervention from us at all. I think that that's a big part of why it feels possible to keep going and why we have the pace that we have is there's no editing involved and it probably changes what we say to it. I don't know what you think about that, David.

**(DW)**: How could the format not inform what we say and how we say it? My memory is it 100% came from Pippin. I guess it was maybe born out of sympathy from what he perceived as being quite a bit of work and making the sound collages for our first two seasons many years back. I think I was initially a little resistant because I've been doing interviews for so long it's like, "Come on man, why can't we just set aside time to get together and talk?" Then, he pitched me on, "Well, what if we just do it as answering machine messages?" And I was like, "Alright, whatever, sure why not," because that's the path of least resistance. Let's just go with it and see.

I think what I've really come around to, however many of these we've done... for a long time as an interviewer, I've been very curious but I don't think I've ever talked about this, Pippin, but I've always been curious if it's possible to do an interview with someone where you just explore one question and you

take it through to its natural conclusion. Or you just try to answer every single part of it, and I guess in a way, I realize that's sort of what we're doing.

It's definitely true in these bursts of check-ins we do with each other, which is pretty much daily at this point, we've come up with a way of both thoroughly exploring each game up until an arbitrary time limit we've set, just because we don't want to go on forever, but it's also a format where ideas really have nowhere to hide. So, by removing crosstalk from a podcast, we're unable to hold out a thought and hope someone else fills in our blanks. I don't know if that makes us more thoughtful. I think it just makes us thoughtful in a different way.

Pippin, would you say we never really stop an episode because the time is up, not because we're finished talking about it, but does it ever feel like we're coming to some understanding about each individual game? I'm thinking back and all the ones we've done so far, are we proving something, or is it just about scratching and sniffing?

**(PB)**: Well, I find that a disgusting metaphor. [laughs]

**(DW)**: It's like a banana sticker. It's something pleasant. Your favorite fruit, whatever it is.

**(PB)**: Yeah, my son has a book that has a roast chicken one that I always object to because I'm a vegetarian.

**(DW)**: I'm sorry.

**(PB)**: It's triggering. So, do we come to an understanding? I mean, yeah, if you think about what we know about these games before we start versus what we're able to say about them at the end, stuff is happening. I don't think we ever managed to tie it in a bow.

I think David's a little more allergic to that than I am, but I am also allergic to it. It might kill him, but it might just make me very ill. But by the end, I think we've been pulling out themes, or really hyper specific moments that we think are important or emblematic or new, even if it's from an old game.

Part of the format, and I'm very painfully aware of how much we're talking about a podcast format and not anything that we actually uncover in the podcast, I know this is on David's mind no doubt as well, but one of the things about the format is that we are picking a theme across a season. So, the season three (the first season of this format) was simulators. Then we did horror, now we're doing coding/computational thinking.

And because we're doing that we're also building up a larger, not argument, but a larger desire to get insight into how video games writ large are addressing those kinds of ideas. So, we're also collecting things that are meta level that aren't specifically about solving a game or having the best hot take on the game or best cold take, or whatever.

**Could you fill me in on what led you to choose horror games for season four, and what were you thinking you might learn about horror games? Or what insights you were expecting to extract from horror games that made you feel that would be an interesting genre to tackle?**

(PB): I'll grab this one because it was my pick. Just to stay on format for a little longer, in the comfort of the format we alternate picks on the theme of the season. So David picked simulators and then I picked horror for season four. I think the slightly dumb-ish answer is that I watch a lot of horror movies with my wife. I wouldn't say that we're mega fans, but if we're reaching for a film to watch somewhat thoughtlessly, we will inevitably watch some kind of terrible C-movie on Prime Video that you find somewhere in the

depths of the barrel, because we've just watched so much of it that we are curious about the format and how different filmmakers are going to do the same stuff that they always do.

And so, to some extent, I think season four being about horror is just – how much do I hate saying that word with my weird accent – it's an extension of that love of horror. But also then, the obvious question is video games are different from films. It's not the same thing. How are video games going to try and have similar effects to or different effects to films in this genre? And just not having actually played that many horror games in my life, I remember being absolutely terrified of *Forbidden Siren* when I was in my like late teens or something. It just freaked me out a lot. I guess I've always remained really curious about that feeling of being too stressed out to play a game because I stopped playing and it scared me too much, and how that's possible, and what's going on from a design perspective.

Again, I don't make horror games, but I just think it's such an interesting project and such a pure project of manipulation. It's very much on the surface in horror that you're trying to manipulate the player into being scared or feeling dread or these different kinds of horror feelings and that you have to do that not just with surface visuals or narratives but with agency and interactivity and the sort of possibility space of a game world.

So, as a designer especially, I was really interested in trying to understand how different games approached that task and whether different games that call themselves horror games even try to try to be scary at that kind of agency level. Which, as it turns out, I don't think all of them are trying to do that, and that's fine, but that was a discovery of the season for sure.

**(DW)**: Yeah, we really learned we were each made of stiffer stuff than we imagined and very little scared us in the end. Just listening to you know Pippin's response there, I think that's some of the sort of secret magic sauce and *GAMETHING* is, you know, I'm a recovering critic of games. I think there's so much about the lifestyle of criticism and the reality of weighing in and rendering judgment on games that so skews the way you play, but it's also true that as long as I was a critic, I've never developed the vocabulary that Pippin possesses as far as how games are designed, why the decisions are what they are in all games.

Specific to horror, I think there's a lot that comes out of the experience gap and the knowledge gap. I don't really think I've come across a lot of podcasts or things where it's people talking across the aisle of games, and so for my own very selfish reasons and I'm hoping you know other people listening, get something out of it. I just think it's kind of cool to be able to sort of poke at games with someone who knows far better what's under the hood and how the gears turn. Why is this game like this or what is it that makes horror games scary or or not scary? I'm far less horror-aware than Pippin is. I'm definitely more horror aware now after we've just spent this year so far, most of it, playing horror games, talking about horror games, and I watched a couple of horror movies.

I think that's a big thing that still interests me is perhaps from the writing background is both understanding and a curiosity about how is it the way we talk about games today, why did it crystallize in the way that it has? But, also, from a design perspective, why have the tropes crystallized in the way they have? That's the cool thing about being able to go week to week hopping around from older games to more recent games to even considering games that may not even bill themselves explicitly as horror, but there's

still things that can be looked at through that lens and have some nutrition, or it's just that sort of random grab bag thing of like, "I don't know what may come out of talking about this, in this way."

I'm definitely going to be more likely to play more horror stuff now and I'm definitely more curious about horror stuff now. I think Pippin and I have also discussed at some point down the road, "We should do a season of just multiplayer horror games," because that's a whole other twist on the experience that merits discussion.

**(PB)**: I just wanted to jump in with one other thing because I'm prone to forget stuff. I was just going to say I want to talk about specific games, and maybe I do, but one of the things I think that's really important about the thematic approach is it gives us a lens, or a disembodied eye, to look at these games – not so much as games, which sounds silly, but as soon as you start thinking about something as a game in the traditional sense, you're going to get into, "Is it a good game? Is it fun? Am I engaged? What's the point system?" We do talk about those sorts of things a bit, but always in terms of how they're serving the core concept that we're actually interested in, which is in horror, what about this game is scary and what about its gameness is trying to scare us, or does scare us because plenty of things do.

And likewise, how did the ways in which this is maybe a bad game in the traditional sense, what's helping it to be scary? If I may finally mention a game, something like *Anatomy*, which I think we were both very enamored of, you could say it's just walking around a house and stuff happens and you hear

sounds, so it's a walking simulator in the in the classic sense but it plays with the possibilities of that genre so effectively that I would still think it's probably the scariest thing that we played that season. It understood so well how to leverage ambiguity, which is so central to things being scary. And again, this is interesting, because it's especially in a games context that ambiguity can be so scary, because games are very often about communicating to you that you do know what's going on and you know how to act and you know how to act correctly.

And *Anatomy* doesn't have any of that, in part because you don't really have anything to do except walk around in this horrible house. I often end up thinking about this John Carpenter quote about how the whole point of horror is getting the person watching your film to know that they're going to get a scare and to think they know when it's going to happen and then to not do it then, but to do it at this perfect moment where they weren't ready for it. That's maximum impact and I think a game like *Anatomy* holds you in tension this whole time by doing exactly that kind of thing, and also by not wearing out its welcome. There's lots of tensions I think in designing horror games, in all games, that you might want to be emotionally effective that come from them just being too long, and becoming repetitive, and becoming commonplace in terms of the kinds of things that you're doing to fill to fill the time.

You can talk about things like value for money and stuff like that. But I think another game – sorry, I'll wind this up in a second – but another game we played called *Lila*, it's another indie game, but it's much more of a more traditional game where you're trying to solve these puzzles and it has this weird mechanic where you control the face. Again, if we were just looking at this and we're like, "This is a game. What do we think of this game?" We would come to very different conclusions. We're going to be

like, "Oh well, the face control mechanism is really janky, it's quite hard to make the expression you want, or the faces look silly." That's what makes me laugh! This game makes me laugh. It doesn't make me scared. Whereas I think what we're trying to do with these themes, like horror, is come in and say these people are trying to do something. How are they trying to do it? We're not even particularly trying to evaluate how successful it is or we're only remarking on moments where we think it is surprising and interesting.

So, that face control mechanic, the faces do look really silly, but it also leverages that mechanic to do some genuinely scary stuff when it suddenly seizes control of the face from you and makes you make a face that is totally inappropriate. That's playing with game conventions, right, that you would lose control over something that you had control over is a classic fear in video games. I've gone on for too long, but as you can see, I think the theme does a huge amount of work to allow us to look at games side-long or not just in terms of what the Metacritic score is going to tell us about this game.

**What are your conversations like when you're narrowing down... like, "these are the games that we're going to talk about because we think that these games have something interesting to say or we have something interesting to say about them"?**

(DW): We have a document with ideas for... I don't know how many seasons. All of it's very iterative and we're just constantly chewing our food as far as what are lenses for ideas we can consider, what are games that can fit under that idea, and it should be said like we're not looking to be exhaustive or comprehensive as far as, "These are the games everyone thinks of when they think of blah blah blah." We did *Resident*

*Evil 4* for horror, but that's the only one like that, I think where it's like, "Oh, yeah, this is the one you've got to talk about If you're talking about horror."

We do, literally, alternate every time: I'll pick a game, then he picks a game, and back and forth and on and on we go. I can say from my end, what's shifted since [our season on] simulators to horror now into our fifth season, is I winnow down our big list that we work on together. Do you remember how many it was in simulators? It had to have been like 80 to 90 games that we both sort of brainstormed up and I think it's similarly as many for horror. I have come to be way more present in that, the same way that each message leads to another, I've gone from a winnowed-down list from that big, big list, and being like, "Okay, cool, we're doing horror. These are the ones I really want to do."

It's good to be aware of that, but I go from, "Well, what does *Anatomy* suggest or what does that make me curious about next?" Because we did simulators and we didn't play *Sim City*. We've talked about that and we really are more curious about the nature of simulators, not what are the big games. We're more curious about the nature of horror, not what are the big blockbuster titles. In a way, that's another thing *GAMETHING* is doing in a way, nudging against or rowing in the opposite direction of the natural desire and tendency and impulse people have around games of just generating lists and closing the topic around games.

We do it every single year, "These are the top 20 games of 2022," and then you put it on the shelf and then we never think about 2022 again. We want to take off that type of constraint and put different constraints on us. Pippin, but then you're picking half the time, what's your philosophy or approach to it? I feel like we're pretty much on the same page, but I don't know if you're of the same mindset as I am.

**(PB)**: I think I picked two games for horror that I would say, probably, are ones you might expect to see on a list, especially from a podcast focused on historical interest as well. I also picked *Alone in the Dark*, first game of the season.

**(DW)**: It was our second time talking about *Alone in the Dark*.

**(PB)**: Yeah, then *Resident Evil 4*. I think those are both arguably massive classics and a huge part of the lineage of survival horror, but I didn't pick them because of that so much. I also picked *Amnesia*.

**(DW)**: Yeah, I thought that was the other one.

**(PB)**: I was definitely much more towards some of the the classics probably because as a game designer – he said in scare quotes – I am interested in design. I don't think that we're interested in which are the good games, but I am interested in the games that have stood the test of time and that people think are still interesting now, even if they're from quite some time ago. None of those games are new games. They're so un-new that *Alone in the Dark* is being remade and *Resident Evil 4* is being remade and so on. I'm sure *Anatomy* will be as well, *Amnesia* will be as well.

They're often a good place to look at, in some sense, what the general consciousness of game design thinks that that horror is, and I want to look at that not because I think that it's correct, but I want to know, "What does the hive mind think is scary, or is suitably horrific, in terms of gameplay and game design?" So, I picked those games because of that, and I would say even *Anatomy* I picked because it was just recommended to me by some people that I have a lot of respect for their opinion. Maybe our picks are, in some ways, reflective of our different perspectives. I'm probably trying to get at game design a little more

closely and I think I can sometimes do that through games that are acknowledged as having been successful in some way.

It's weird though, because there's no strategy to do that. I picked *Resident Evil 4* because the podcast *Dev Game Club* did a whole series on it and I'd never played it and it sounded important. It's an important game, so I thought it would be good to have the excuse to play it. I think that's another reason that we pick games is just being like, "It'll be cool to play this game, it sounds weird," but I think really David is the great contrarian, always trying to pick a game that we will finally not be able to say anything interesting about. [laughs] Which has so far not been proven true and it's been pretty enjoyable. I'm probably guilty of being a little conventional, if anything.

**(DW)**: I think there's an interesting tension between us as far as experience that just comes from my background being an editor and curating coverage consideration for games? It's not like I sit down and say, "Hey, what's the opposite thing we can do here?" But I think, just like as Pippin was saying, it goes to show, we even say it out loud, "We're picking the best games," and it's like, well, what does that even mean? "Best" by who, to who? Who decides what makes a game good and why? Maybe we should do a season on good games, what do you think?

**(PB)**: Yeah, we do literally have that in the document somewhere.

**(DW)**: We have talked about looking at Metacritic. "What were the best games of 2018? Let's do those."

**(PB)**: I would say as well, one thing that's very clear from our discussion is that we... it's this format thing. It's the conceit that we're leaving each other phone messages means that we can't really talk to an audience. Both for that reason and because we don't care about doing this, we're never recommending

these games to anybody or saying, "Oh, this was a great game, everybody should run out and buy *Lila* or everyone should download *Anatomy*."

People may want to do that because those games sound interesting when we talk about them and we mostly try not to spoil games as part of our conversation, both for each other and for the actual listeners, but we're never we're never evaluating these games. We're trying to talk about them, not reach some kind of number.

*You can find* GAMETHING *at [gamething.life](gamething.life), [Apple Podcasts](Apple Podcasts), [Google Podcasts](Google Podcasts), and [Stitcher](Stitcher). Season four (Horror) is available now; season five is currently in progress.*

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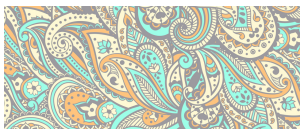Follow     Share

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