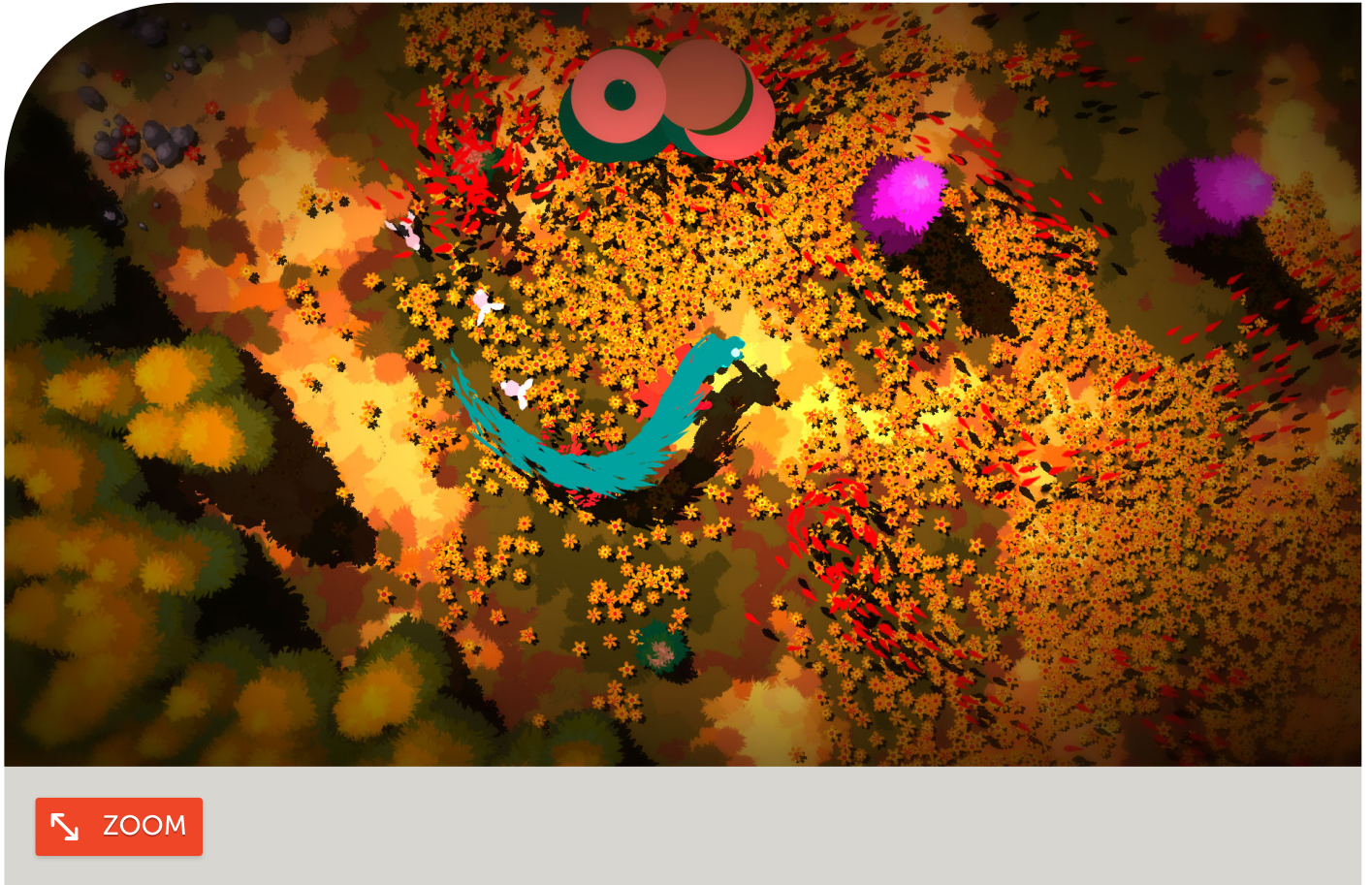# Future Unfolding review

Dreamlike and inscrutable, this painterly puzzle game holds moments of wonder in its depths.

I wiggle my way between sickly pink cherry trees, only to startle what looks like an elk, or maybe an antelope? Whatever it is, its horns are majestically wide. Running alongside, I dive and swing myself up on his neck, the creature's mate dashing away in the dusk light. Suddenly, the creature calms, then sprints toward a hedgerow at the edge of a cliff. At the last second before it plummets down, one of the hedges starts bubbling... like tar melting...

After a flash I'm suddenly in a valley, strewn with boulders, and it's the dead of night. My shadowy ride tosses me aside as the rumble of a lion echoes throughout the dead trees. I touch the trunk, and it unravels a line like a sweater. I stop, take a breath, still holding the strand from the tree, no

idea where I am or what the hell just happened. My character sits automatically—patiently—looking as serene as I am bewildered. So started my game of *Future Unfolding*.


ZOOM

Before I go any further, I do need to talk about some practical details in *Future Unfolding*, or rather, why I'm going to mostly avoid talking about the practical details. The game is mysteriously vague, only slowly opening up through long exposure to its surrealist illogic. There is no tutorial, and there is no fixed, linear story. Even the manner in which the simple control scheme interacts with the world to create striking scenes is best left to be discovered, not explained. My only banal suggestion is that you play it with with a controller, since it was often frustrating to try to do any sort of graceful movement with the arrow keys.

## The game is mysteriously vague, only slowly opening up through long exposure.

This propensity toward poetic obfuscation, for lyric insinuation that never quite answers the question its own existence asks, permeates the game. Even the map screen is esoteric, showing a hypnotic collection of expressively brushy chunks drifting to and fro like a flotilla of lazily anchored ships at sea, only loosely tied together by thin lines implying a malleable relationship.

Once you reach the end of the world, you are transported to a plateau, green in a way only known to Hollywood special effects. A herd of rabbits blossoms in this lurid field until they fill the screen. Suddenly everything goes fuzzy and you awake, sitting in a dark cave echoing with a glassy sheen. This in-between space seems to serve as a hub, linking you to a host of other "worlds", which is the game's term for its procedurally created levels. Wandering these halls, you realize you have only begun to scratch the surface of this bizarre, hallucinogenic, collection of realms, even as you realize you are the lone human.

ZOOM
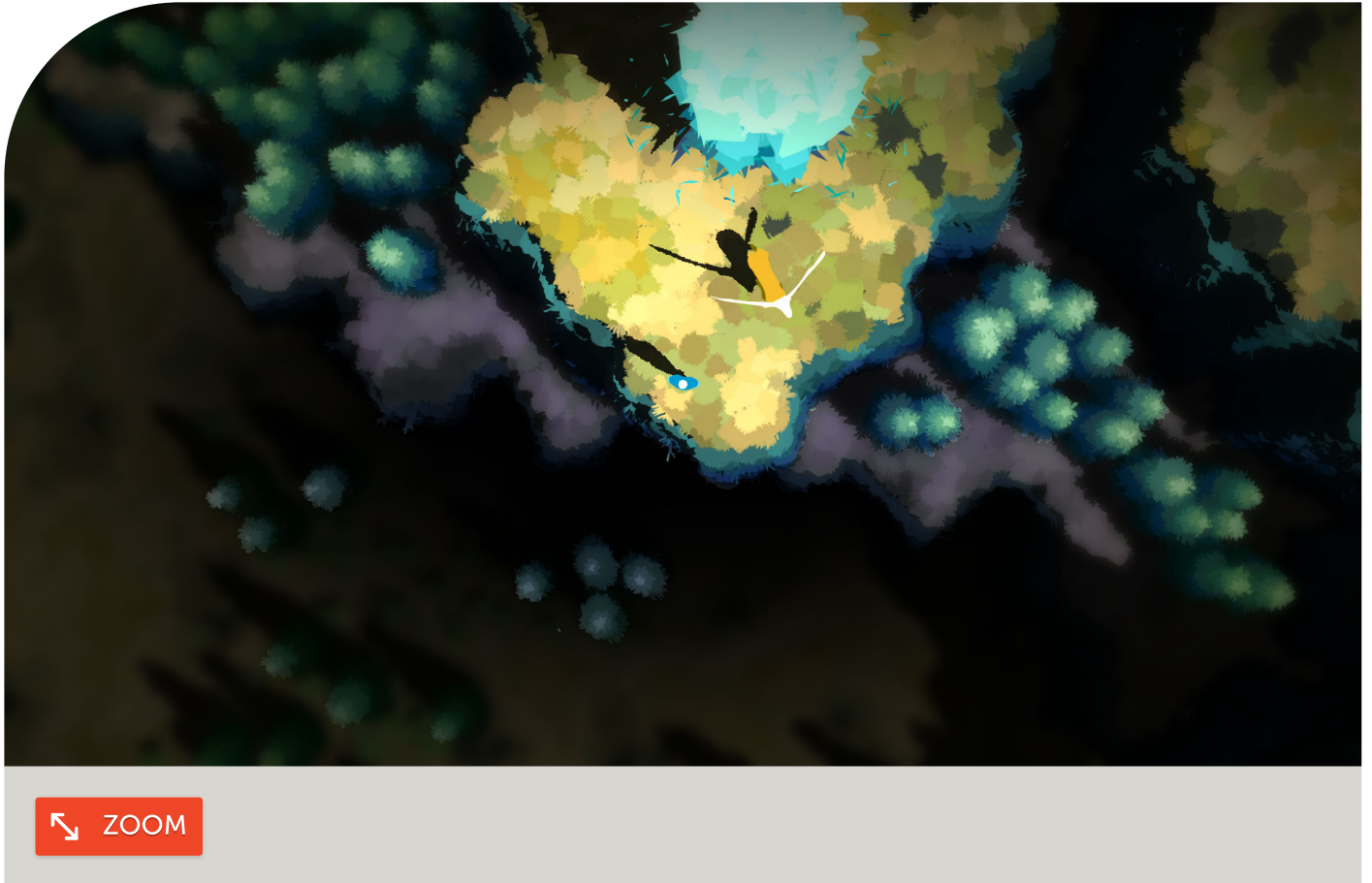
The one constant is that each world starts you in an empty central field. When you press any button your ambiguously-gendered character bubbles into being, evaporating all other living things in a circle around. From that first screen you can set out in any cardinal direction, uncovering a world filled with surrealist landscapes punctuated occasionally with equally surreal puzzles and challenges. Sometimes there is a school of fish that swims through the air like a swarm of bees as they chase you. Other times, clearing the moss off an ancient sigil causes an eruption of flowers that inscribes a floral road to lead to a milling flock of sheep hidden deep in a ruby cavern. Ascend to a mountain top, or slip into a glowing cave, and you might find a spirit guardian in the form of an reclining antelope or giant Angora rabbit that gives your character cryptic advice.

Each of these many worlds are also filled with moments of ambient beauty, and increasingly difficult challenges, pressuring both the player's mind for puzzles and their reflexes. Thankfully, you have unlimited attempts at any world without penalty—dying only resets you to the start of that map chunk, often with any progress retained. One of the most touching small details that shows the level of deliberation is that you leave an evergreen tree wherever you die. Indeed, every species of creature leaves a different kind of persistent plant where they pass from the world.
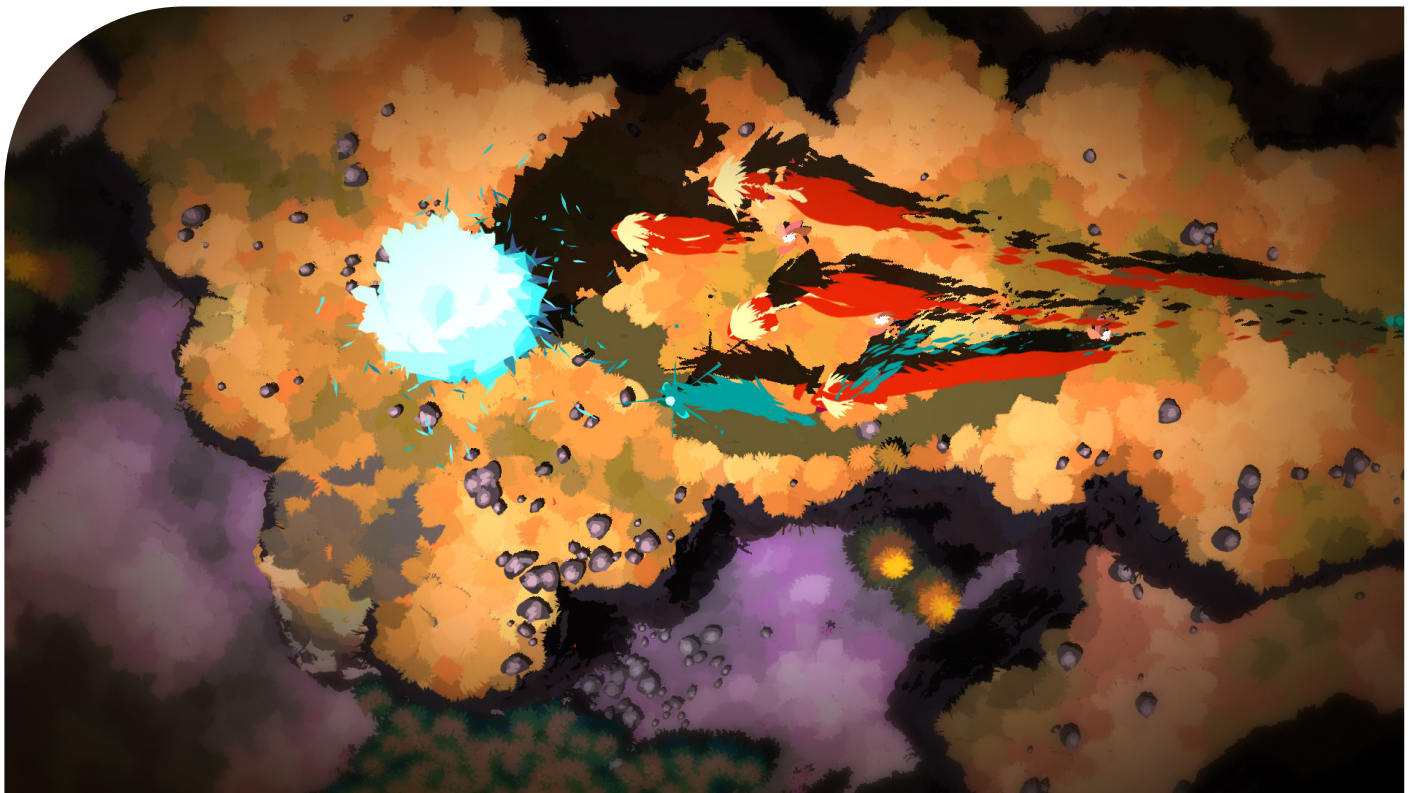

ZOOM
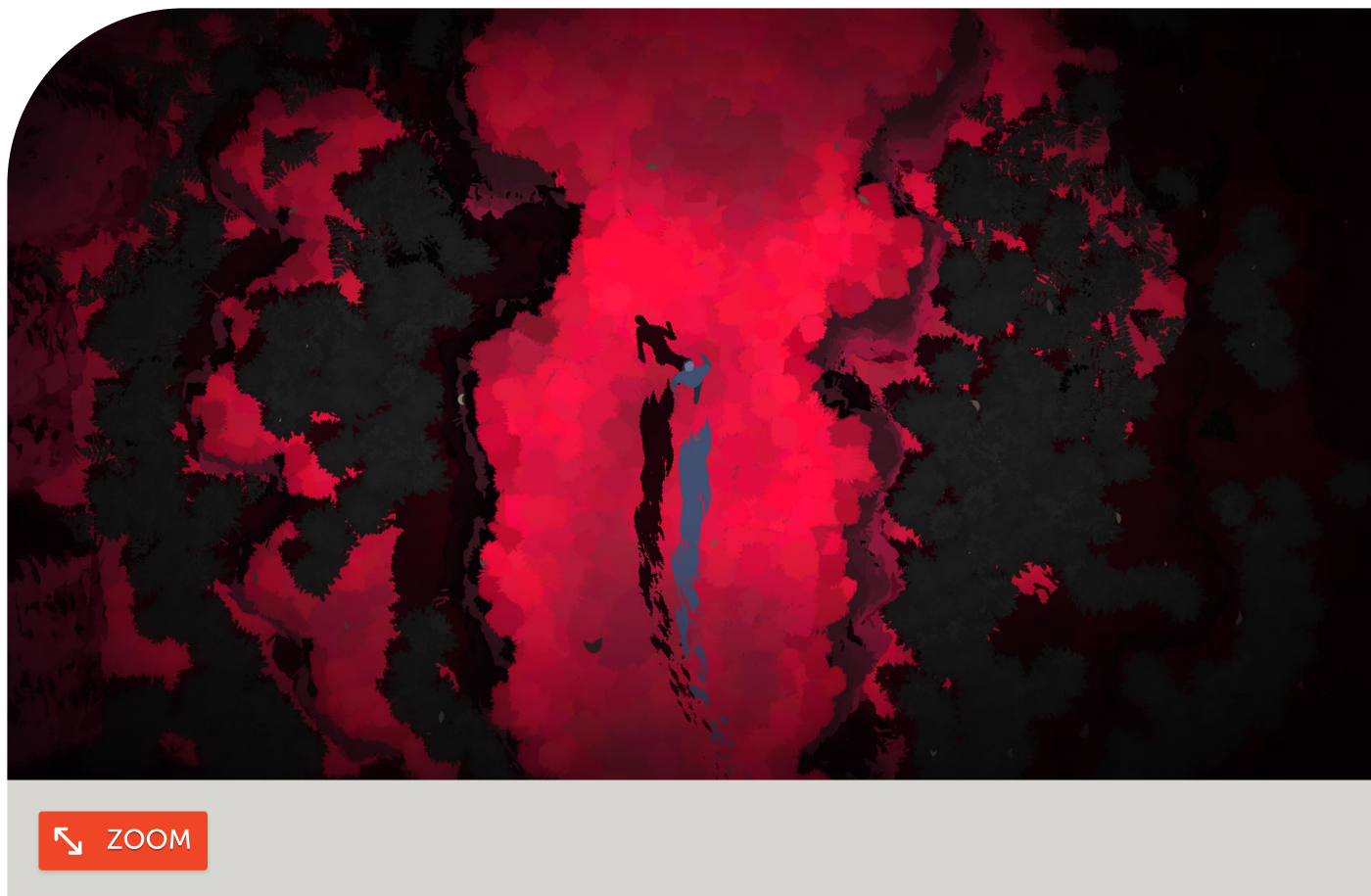
There is a particular scene in the game, which I don't want to entirely spoil, but which is so terribly striking that it is almost worth playing the game for in itself. As the scene plays out, the scale of forestation-*cum*-death reaches such a rending crescendo that I had to pause the game. In that long moment of vertigo, I started to grasp at something beyond the scale of my comfort: that for all its beauty, the vast forests of colorful plants in the game, seemingly as many as stars in the sky, must at one point or another be the product of nearly infinite death.

I started to grasp at something beyond the scale of my comfort: that for all its beauty, the vast forests of colorful plants... must at one point or another be the product of nearly infinite death.

Future Unfolding's first three or four hours are both enchantingly spacious and deeply confusing. But as the game progresses, the worlds seem to get more manic and more cluttered with the kind of doubling-down on preexisting enemies and puzzles that videogames traditionally tend to do in order to signify progress. Dense puzzles spanning multiple screens are seeded with masses of creatures, all of them striving to strike you down if you stop performing the correct set of evasive maneuvers for even a fraction of a second.

But density is the enemy of ambient art, and clarity of purpose is the enemy of surrealism. The most intriguing moments of *Future Unfolding* are when I'm left wondering "Am I going the right way? Will this forest ever end?" as I chase a rabbit through the underbrush for ages, birds flying overhead. The increasing adrenaline that comes with the constantly triggered fight-or-flight reflex burns away any of that twilight shimmer, replacing a sense expansive exploration with a functionalist urge to "master this damn game." I mean, how can you stop to give your full attention to the world's subtle details, when ever-larger swaths of it are too ferociously lethal to be near?


⤢ ZOOM

While jarring, this increasing frenzy should probably be expected given that from a videogame history standpoint, the clear referents for *Future Unfolding* are the classics of adventure games: the freewheeling, often obtuse spatial puzzles of the Atari 2600's *Adventure* and *Pitfall!* and branching map design of the original *Zelda*. I mean, The first screen of *Future Unfolding*'s worlds

has that unmistakable set of a set of four obvious paths through a forest to start your journey. The rest of the layout, the rest of the way you transit the worlds, is also clearly trying to capture that sense of abstracted tension and mystery key to many of those pre-16 bit console adventures games.

The absence of tutorial, or even a list of controls, helps evoke that potent but indeterminate quality of early adventure games, where you as a player are struggling to make sense of a beautiful but arcane world. Only deep into the game does any emerging sense of narrative direction start to come to the foreground, and only then because you've assembled one in your own head.

I mean, even though I finished the game, I'm still not exactly sure how all of the various interlocking parts of *Future Unfolding* work. This includes little things like the turnip/flowers you collect, to the largest scale, such as what even counts as "beating" a level. The last time I felt that tang of tantalizing anxiety of having no clue what I was supposed to be doing in a world, of how vast or tiny it might end up being, of how terrible its challenges might be, and having to just majestically bash against it was probably *Zelda 2* or *Castlevania*.


ZOOM
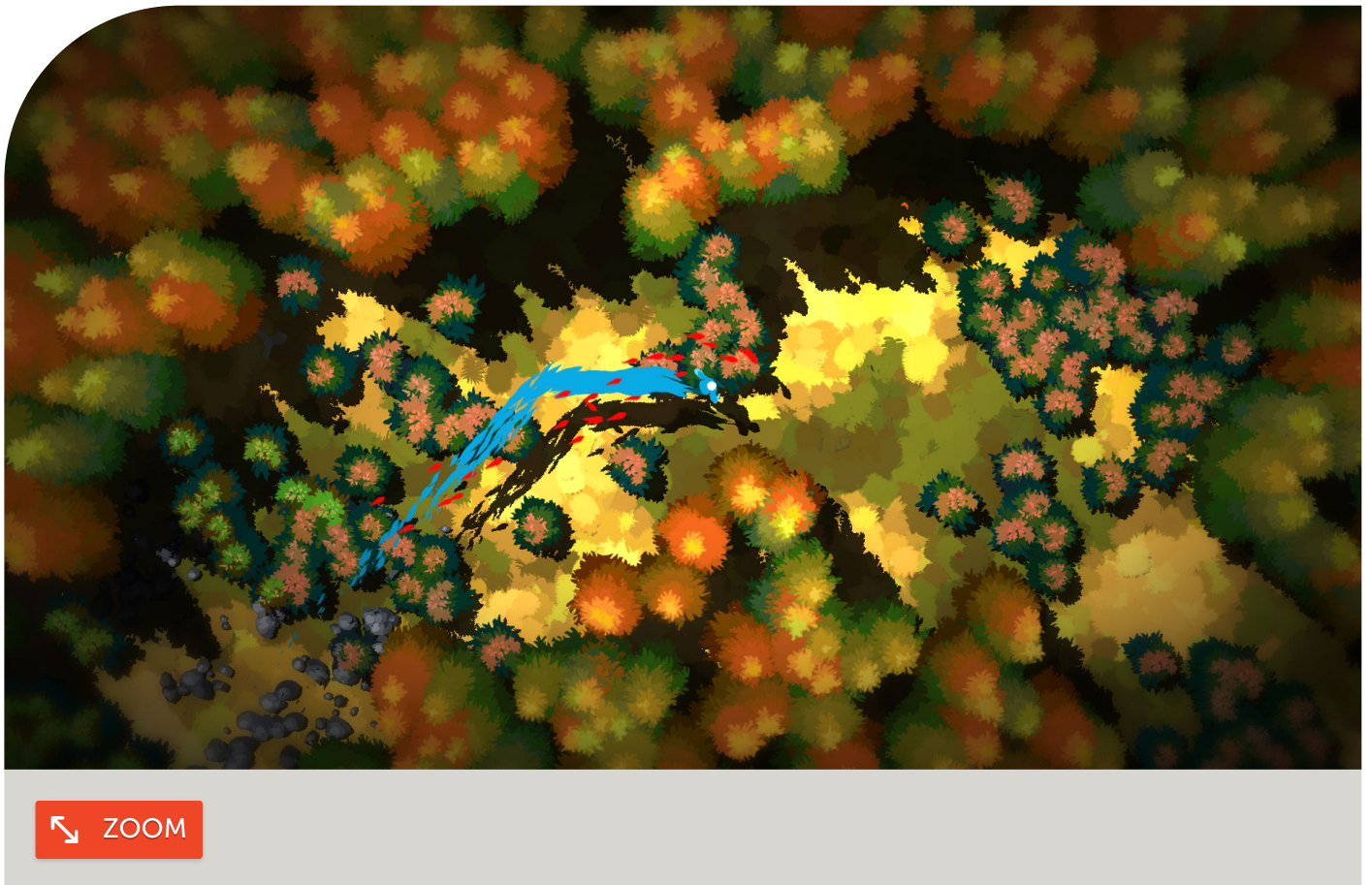
That isn't to say the game lacks polish or relies on a retro styling. Indeed, the first moment you go swimming in a pond with glowing lily pads, you can clearly perceive an incredibly refined,

tasteful elegance to the animation and character design. The game bursts with an appreciation of art history, connecting a firm but expressive use of line and along a grand sweep from the cave wall paintings of Lascaux to Matisse's dancers.

The dominant visual style of the game, as well as much of the way the dream logic of the world plays out, is deeply rooted in European surrealism.

But the dominant visual style of the game, as well as much of the way the dream logic of the world plays out, is deeply rooted in European surrealism, with its hallucinogenic mix of myth, dream, subconscious, and desire to access the "primitive" (i.e. pre-rational) aspects of humanity. More than any other art historical reference, *Future Unfolding* seems most tied to the naive jungles of Henri Rousseau paintings with their lone statuesque dreaming bodies, stylized lions, crystalline starlight, and geometric forests whose shadows ward off any attempt at complete knowledge.

Future Unfolding is admittedly very inconstant, both in its challenge and in its beauty, veering into hair-pulling frustration and muddy visual monotony at times. There were a few moments where I shouted at the screen after being dropped into a pit of dozens of giant acid spitting snakes for like the third time, each of which spews venom that splits and reflects of every surface. But every time I was about to give up, I would stumble across some image, some poetic moment, whose meaning is difficult to pin down, let alone share, but which I am utterly sure will stick in my mind for a very long time.
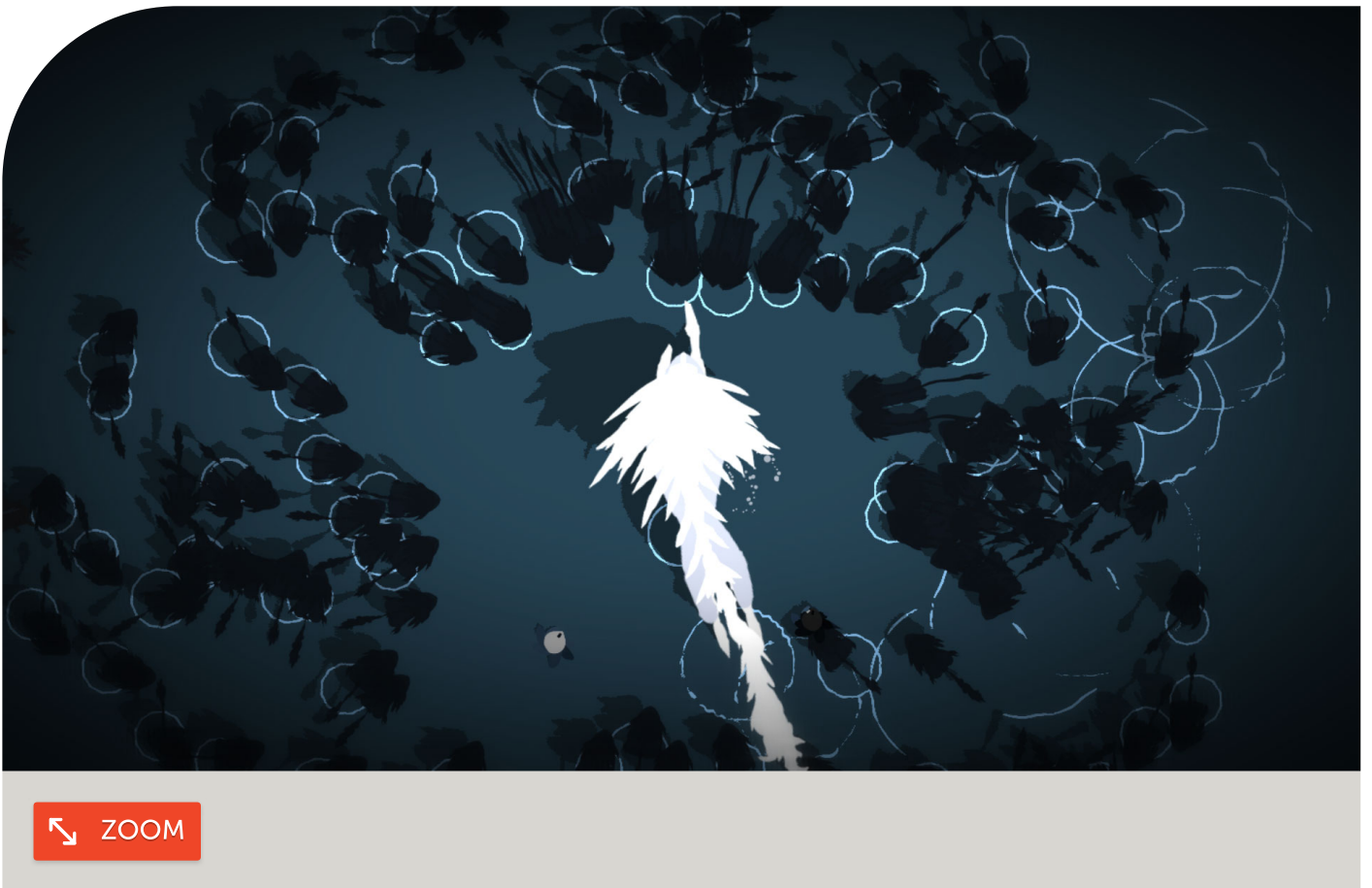
There are a few particular moments that feel like a knife wounds in a dream—half-remembered but lingeringly piercing—one of which includes a cave, water, a whirlwind of lions' shadows, and a melting moon (of which I won't say more in case you get lucky and work through it yourself).

This revival of a fetishization for some sort of primal culture [is] almost inevitably stereotyped and ultimately colonial. *Future Unfolding* especially tends to fall victim to this malaise of pantheistic New Age-ism whenever it introduces text.

But the exoticism for "primitives" in Rousseau and the rest of surrealism also has its problems, which plague *Future Unfolding* at times as well. Right around the time *Adventure* and *Pitfall!* were being made for Atari, you had a raft of other "adventure" in media that equally glorified non-western people as having deeper access to some sort of epic truth that us First-Worlders had lost owing to rationalism and science. This revival of a fetishization for some sort of primal culture could be seen at both biggest level with films like *Star Wars* and *Raiders of the Lost Ark*, and also within the work of underground art luminaries like Brian Eno and Jon Hassell's *Fourth World Music*.

In the end, these weren't attempts to understand their sources, but rather a way for artists to create a shorthand, uncritical symbol for "deeper meaning" through generic mash-up of pre-industrial, subconscious humanity. Whether it is the sitar or African masks, these references are almost inevitably stereotyped and ultimately colonial. *Future Unfolding* especially tends to fall victim to this malaise of pantheistic New Age-ism whenever it introduces text. (I mean, the name of the game itself could be some hippy-Burner aphorism.) Most of the text in the game is, of course, spouted by shamanistic-spirit-guardian-avatar-god-things. This seemingly randomized mushy universalist meaningfulness ultimately ends up feeling trite and white-bread, intoning, "This is a not a tutorial, this is a universe," at one moment and, "One day the turtle fell from a hole in the sky into the primeval sea," at another.

ZOOM
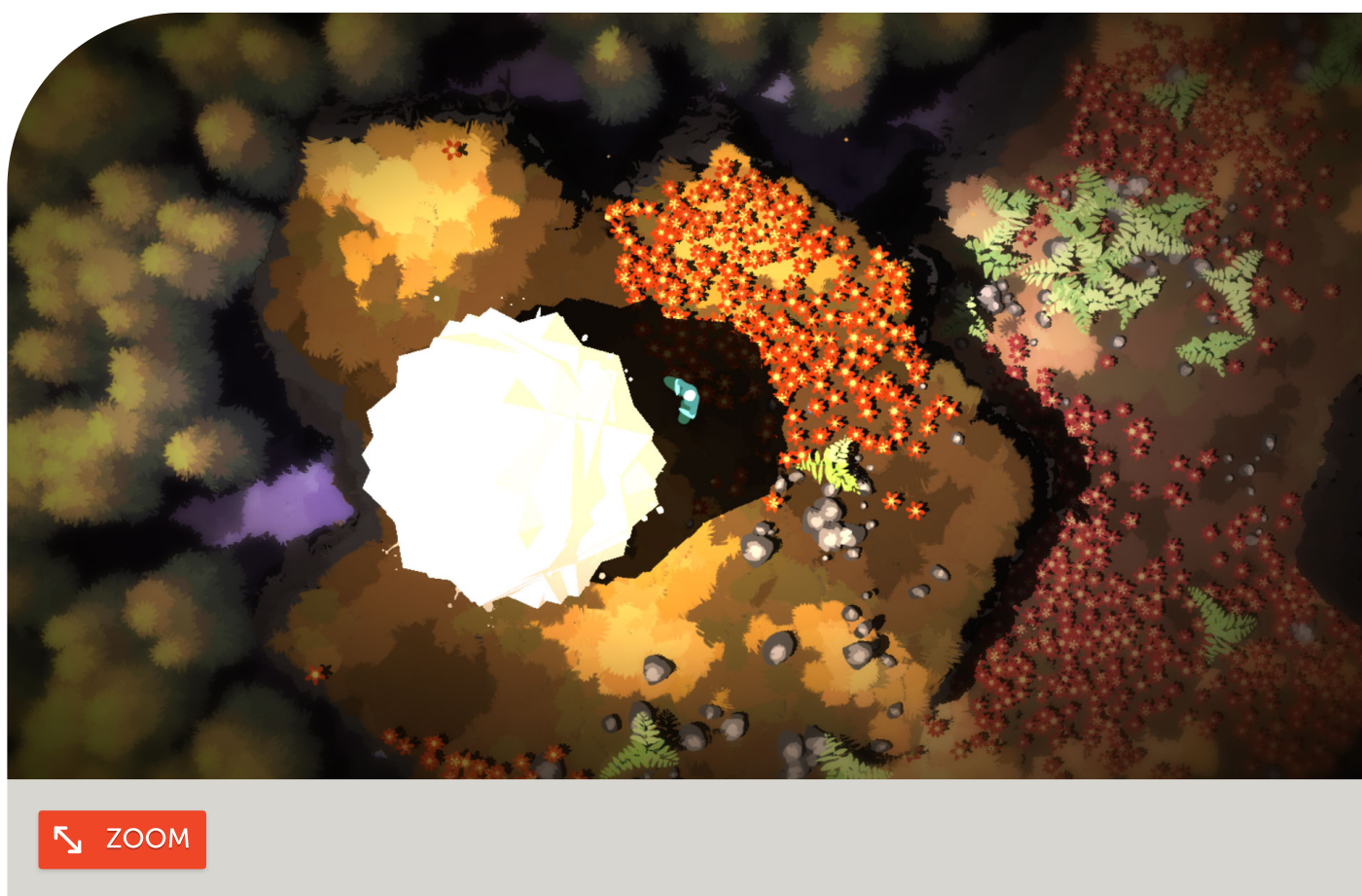
The music deserves special praise for balancing wonder and tension. It deftly drifts back and forth between crystalline tones punctuated with meaningful silences (always wonderful to see in any media!) and ominous screeches and rumbles at the presence of fear. It is quite wonderful to see a use of expanded compositional techniques and voicings from contemporary ambient and experimental music inflecting the traditional filmic cues that most videogames bluntly use to double down on a melodramatic moment. Indeed, the only times the music seems to flag a bit is

when it reverts to simplistic *Peter and the Wolf* replications, such as with the fish-insects and their buzzing tremolo accompaniment.

I'm still not clear who is the right audience is for *Future Unfolding*: One moment, it seems to reference an obscure 18th century literary work (*The Novices of Sais* by Novalis, which was also a favorite of the surrealists); then snaps into a hand-eye coordination running sequence that would make a fan of *danmaku* ("bullet hell") games sweat; then requires half-an hour to solve one screen's devious logic puzzle involving teleporting sheep; then leaves you with no direction but to to enjoy leisurely walking through the humming cherry blossoms, a friendly rabbit in tow, which poops full size shrubs at random intervals.

Be careful but be curious.
Immerse and be immersed.
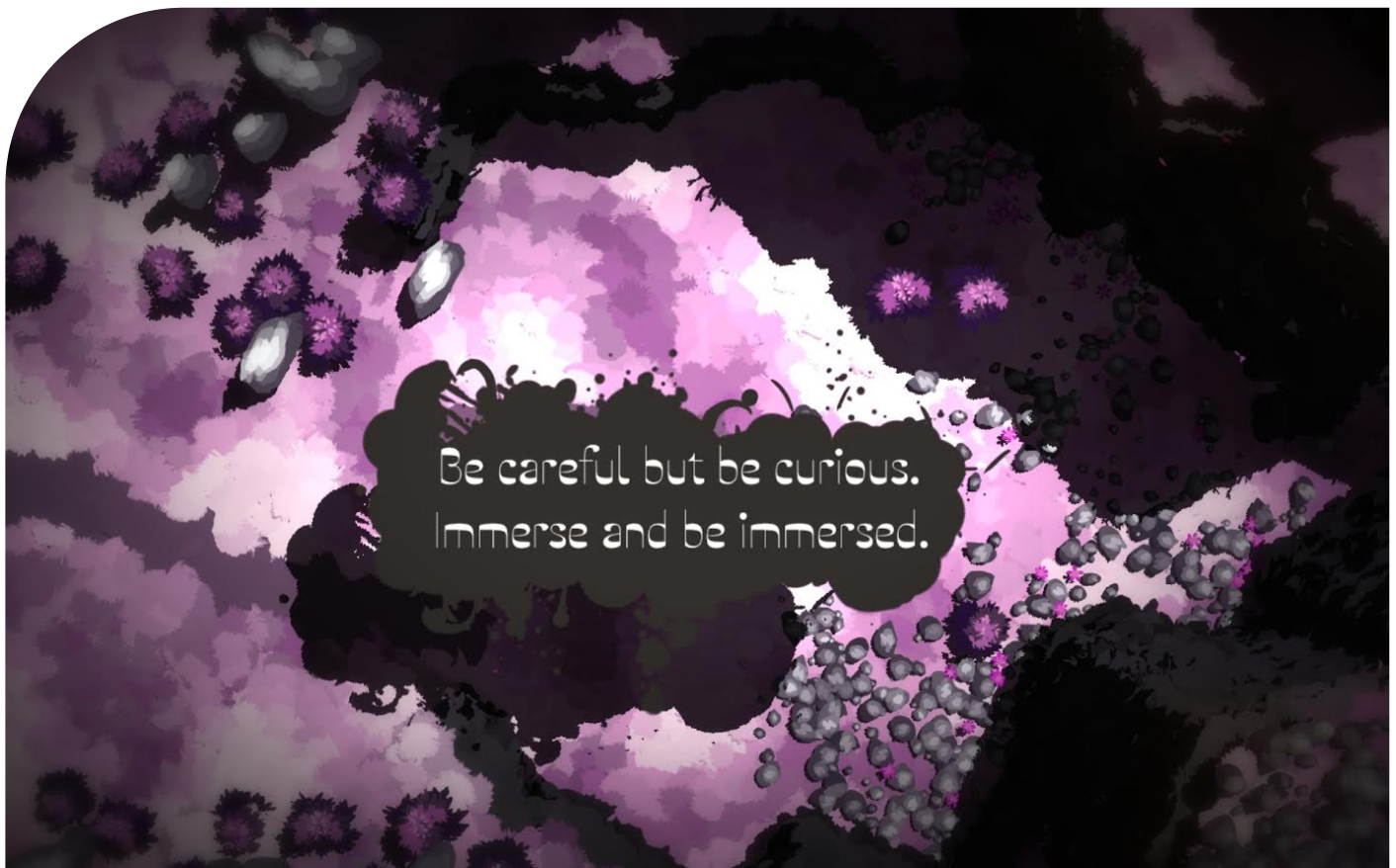
⬈ ZOOM

Despite occasional New Age banalities, and its densely lethal and repetitiously ramping late-game challenges, *Future Unfolding* is an immensely ambitious game that makes an eloquent argument for the relationship between that anxious feeling of freedom in the early days of adventure videogaming and the lingering shadows of surrealist art. While my opinion is that it might have been better as a four hour game than a seven-hour one, whatever faults it has, *Future Unfolding* held some of the more potent poetic moments I've experienced in a game in recent

years, and it accomplishes those moments through subtlety and trust in the player, not self-congratulatory bombastic technology.

There is a true artistic richness in *Future Unfolding*, like plunging into an ocean current deep below where the sun shines.

Even more than its exquisite artistic direction and savvy design, that empowering of the player's experience is perhaps the most important, and radical part of *Future Unfolding*'s success. The game hands over vast and important parts of the experience to the player to make of it what they will. Its inscrutability—so disorienting at first—becomes the the very method through which the game generously provides so much room for the player to inhabit. Which is even more powerful because of the rarity of such generosity in a videogame era that strives to make elevator-pitch-able, media-soundbite-ready, press-X-to-tutorial products above all.

There is a true artistic richness in *Future Unfolding*, like plunging into an ocean current deep below where the sun shines, a hidden power that subtly but powerfully rewards to our patience, curiosity, and imagination.
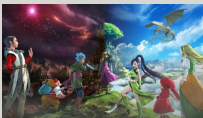
Verdict: Yes

#	FUTURE UNFOLDING

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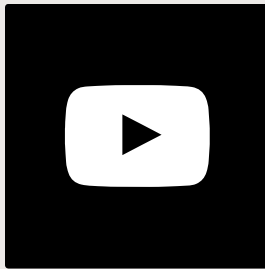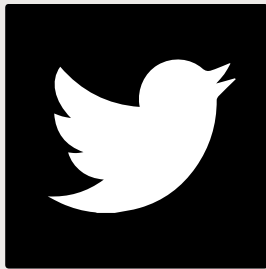

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