

Discolored is a surrealist spy thriller by way of Myst

It can be difficult to find time to finish a video game, especially if you only have a few hours a week to play. In our biweekly column Short Play we suggest video games that can be started and finished in a weekend.

At the start of this year, I wrote about *What Never Was*, a first-person puzzle game similar to *Myst* or *Gone Home*, though on a much smaller scale. In the game, you are confined to a single attic room where all of the puzzles and storytelling takes place. *Discolored* is similar, except you are confined to an entire deserted and desaturated desert diner.

In *Discolored*, you play what seems to be some sort of secret agent working to return color to a world that has mostly become monotone due to some strange force. There is a 1960s surrealist spy movie feel and look to the world, which only gets stronger over the course of the game; the vibe steadily influences the puzzle design, for better and for worse.

[embedded content]

The game opens in a fully colored office, which serves as a basic tutorial for the game's few controls. Mainly, there are certain items that can be picked up and put into an inventory, some items can be combined with other items in the inventory, and things can be taken from the inventory and used on something in the world. For instance, you might find two pieces of a broken key. By dragging one on top of the other in the inventory, they'd combine into a single key, which you could then drag out of the inventory to unlock a door.

After using some items in the office, you find yourself – through rather surreal means – inside a monotone painting of a remote desert diner. By poking around inside and outside the

diner, you'll find various objects and a few puzzles to solve, which mostly amount to some trial and error to figure out where to use specific items. Eventually, this will get to the game's unique twist: returning color to the world.

There are three crystals – green, blue, and red – that you'll find over the course of the game. When one is placed into its specific location, that color returns to the diner. So placing the green crystal in its slot returns color to green things like plants and some of the walls that were painted green. But anything that is red or blue continues to be in grayscale.

It is more than just an aesthetic change, though. Certain items are only visible when one of the colors is revived. For example, a door might be missing a doorknob, but when green is returned, you might suddenly find a green doorknob where one wasn't before. As the game progresses, so much of the puzzle-solving becomes about finding ways to use the different colors to add or remove things from the environment in order to solve puzzles.

Unfortunately, perhaps because of the surreal nature of the game, it is often difficult to grasp exactly what you should be doing next. That's in part because the logic doesn't always make sense in coordination with how a puzzle is supposed to be solved, which can leave you feeling like you are just brute-forcing it by trying every possible option with every possible item until you get the right combination of things. It can make it feel less like you're clever, and more like you managed to get the square peg through a round hole by hitting it hard enough.

However, despite feeling a bit frustrated with some of the

puzzles, I found myself excited at the possibility of more. Much like with *What Never Was*, the ending implies that there is more story to be told. The narrative framing of *Discolored* – a surreal secret agent battling against something that has removed color from the world – is well-realized, and I want to see what happens next and what challenges lie ahead. *Discolored* isn't perfect, but it's interesting enough to overlook its problems.

Discolored was created by Jason Godbey. You can get it for \$7.99 on Steam (Windows) and on iOS with an Apple Arcade subscription. It takes about two hours to finish.

<https://www.theverge.com/2019/12/8/20994154/discolored-review-apple-arcade-surreal-spy-myst>