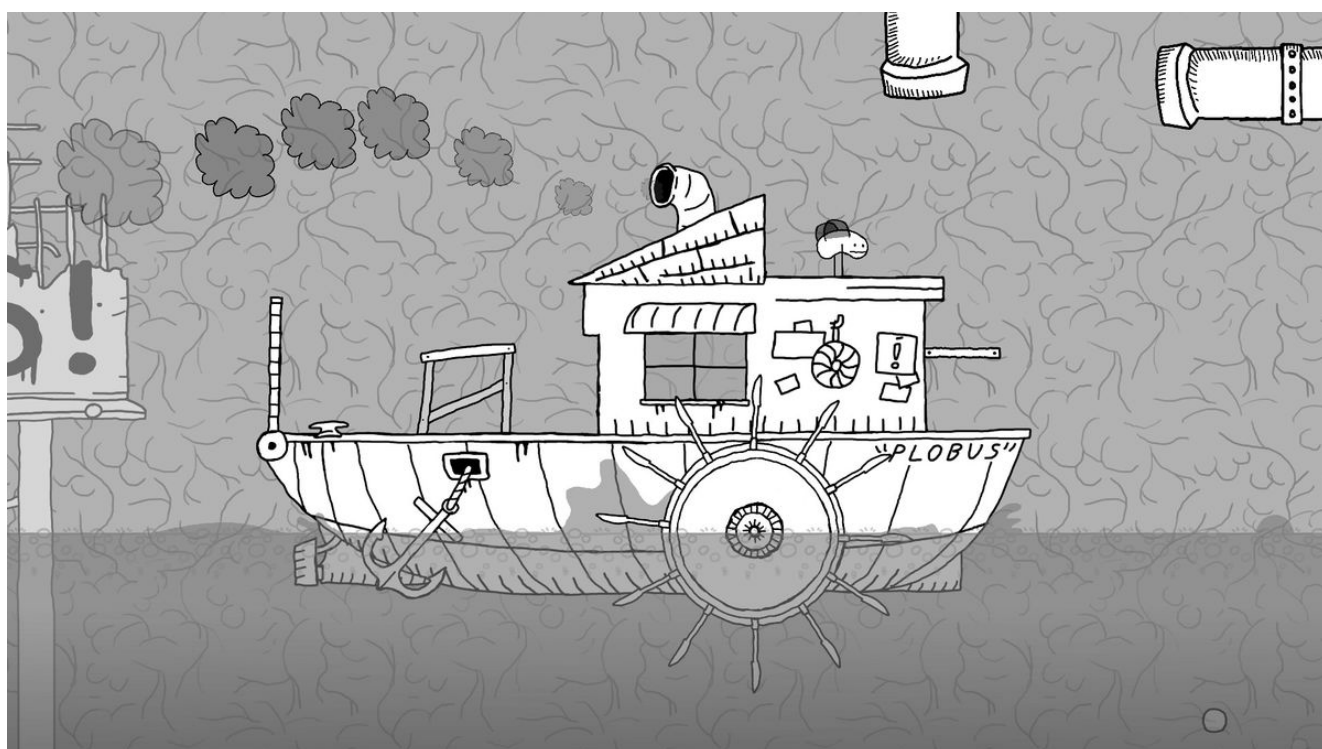


In BirdGut, you try to escape a dystopian society inside a bird's stomach

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.

I've written about a number of weird games for Short Play, but *BirdGut* might have the strangest premise so far. It's about a disabled bee who is kicked out of their hive after being born. The bee manages to make its way through the world, despite not being able to fly, but eventually it's eaten by a bird. It turns out that the bird isn't eating insects for sustenance, but rather to brainwash them into mindless slaves who help operate and maintain the machinery inside the bird that keeps it alive. Due to the bee's bent-over posture, the brainwashing chip isn't implanted correctly. The result is that you can freely move within the bird to find a way out.



The game's 2D puzzle platforming gameplay is fairly simple; the bee can mainly just walk around, jump, and slow their fall thanks to their wings. But actually escaping the bird isn't an easy task. The puzzle design of each level keeps things challenging as it finds ways to layer in new mechanics without complicating the gameplay beyond moving and jumping. You might have to find fuel that you have to push back to your ship to get it to move, or lasers that need to be angled just right to correctly open a door. In this way it makes the gameplay feel concentrated as opposed to simple.

What's perhaps most interesting about the game, though, is the sense of place the levels have. It reminds me a lot of *Hollow Knight* (and not just because both have bugs) as each area feels distinct and says a lot about what the world inside this bird is like. As you make your way through the bird, you find that bugs aren't just working all the time, but there are actual homes, including city blocks of apartments. You pass bugs mining or transporting materials, but also building and policing. It's a bad civilization of brainwashed, enslaved bugs, but it's more of a society than you'd expect to find.

Unfortunately, the second to last area of the game ignores a lot of what makes it really good. It adds a completely new shooting mechanic, along with a new mouse control for firing. Until this point, the entire game can be played on just a keyboard; in fact, the default control scheme is set up so you can play it pretty much with only your left hand. I remapped this when playing so that I could control movement with one hand, and everything else with the other, in order to make the platforming easier. But this new mechanic requires the use of your mouse, which meant I had to go back to the default scheme so that I could move and jump while aiming and shooting with the mouse.



This was annoying, but less of a problem than the enemy encounters which demand a precision with the shooting mechanic that you don't really have enough time to properly learn. The time between shots feels especially long compared to how enemies move and how often they appear, often leading one missed shot to cause an enemy to hit you and then you have to start the section over again. It's a frustrating part to a game that until this point isn't particularly frustrating, thanks in large part to frequent check pointing. Unfortunately, while that's helpful for the platforming section, it doesn't do much for the shooting.

That said, while it is a pain, it isn't really a deal-breaker on recommending *BirdGut*; the last section effectively adds only a little more time to a game that takes at least two hours to finish. It also helps to highlight how much more effective the rest of the game is – at its best, *BirdGut* is a fascinating blend of simple controls and very strange situations.

BirdGut was created by Micah Boursier. You can get it on Steam

for free (Windows and Mac OS). It takes about two to three hours to finish.

<https://www.theverge.com/2019/5/26/18636004/birdgut-weird-game-dystopian-platformer-steam-short-play>