“Ice-Pick Lodge is alive and not going to die”: a talk with Pathologic creators — on motivation and future projects.

Nikolay Dybovskiy with a team share thoughts on game’s reception and tell about what lies ahead.

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https://dtf.ru/gamedev/115880-ice-pick-lodge-zhivet-i-pogibat-ne-sobiraetsya-beseda-s-avtorami-mora-o-motivacii-i-budushchih-proektah-studii

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“Pathologic 2”, a remake-reimagining of a debut title by Moscow studio Ice-Pick Lodge, came out on May 23rd 2019, - almost five years after Kickstarter campaign.

Initially, just as in the original, there were supposed to be three campaigns - Bachelor, Haruspex & Changeling. But due to circumstances only Haruspex’s one came out - others will follow.

In DTF’s big interview from August the head of studio, Nikolay Dybovskiy confirmed that sales of PC version by that time were unsatisfactory and told that the studio would be shrinked down. Due to this there have been a lot of rumours circulated about the state of Ice-Pick Lodge. But by this time, the game released on consoles (port was outsourced to Pingle Studio) and was added in Xbox Game Pass, so the situation might have changed.

Independent Expert and Managing Partner of DTF, Sergey Babaev talked with Nikolay Dybovskiy and found out how things are now. Technical

director Ayrat Zakirov and art director Peter Potapov also participate in interview.



Hi, Nikolay! I want to congratulate you, albeit belatedly, with "Pathologic 2" release. Perhaps this is the finale of some big chapter in your life?

It is not the chapter's finale yet, it has not been completed. It's just that the chapter itself has overstayed its welcome, time to start a new one. Actually, we did - books (even if it is a book of life) are not always written strictly in chronological order. But I'll talk about this later.

The initial reception of "Patho2" can hardly be called warm - some fans even wrote that they didn't even know about the release. Was it true?

Yes, it was, no doubt. Our games are not easy to promote. We are constantly experimenting. For example, this "Pathologic" was originally an attempt to work with the task of independent goal-setting - unbearable and, possibly, generally contrary to the canons of proper gamedesign (well, in games of such kind - where the basis of the gameplay is not a kit, but a story-oriented survival).

Naturally, the result is something unexpected: as in most experiments, some cool side effect is accidentally found, which you can work with later - but the main goal is not achieved, the adjustment is disproved. It's hard to sell it, it's hard to explain to the general gamer.

Our tinyBuild colleagues have their own approach, which we do not interfere with. And, probably, this is for the best. This publishing house is famous for its non-trivial, individual approach to each title. They know better how to and how not to work with this market. And in general, we hope that the commercial fate of "Patho2" will still bring us a couple of pleasant surprises.

Despite the hard start, as I heard, the project has gained momentum, and you already receive royalties. So... there is a long tail sales-wise?

Yes, we are receiving them. The release of the game on Xbox Game Pass helped us a lot. And a part of this income, by the way, we are now spending on finalizing and producing the promised physical rewards for backers.



A little more than two years ago we already met with you for an interview. The material turned out to be voluminous and was warmly received by DTF audience, so I will not address historical topics today. But one question from that interview still lingers: is it possible that after the release of "Patho2", Nikolay Dybovskiy's studio will make a game headed not by Nikolay Dybovskiy? It was never done before, and every project of the studio was originally concepted by you?

Nikolay: Not every one. From the very beginning, we conceived the studio as a community of authors. I really do not like the fact that some people perceive it as a "workshop of Dybovskiy's games." So happened historically.

In 2005, for example, one of our leads proposed a rather unusual project inclining to vivid visualization, but back then, because of youthful maximalism and for a number of personal circumstances, we rejected it and decided to do "Turgor" <*"The Void" for international audience - translator note*>. We sat with the guys in a pub on Lavochkina Street, where Ayrat <*Zakirov, Technical Director of Ice-Pick Lodge*> lived, and during evening made up gameplay draft. It seemed to us that the thing turns out to be amusing, and most importantly - frankly going against the mainstream and the most importantly - against "Pathologic" itself! We were afraid to become "prisoners of the same genre." Well, it was interesting to do it for everyone, it was also an interesting experiment - drawing, concept of a single resource, macabre world...

Ayrat: We were joking that that's enough for gloomy, depressing stuff about death. Let's make a cutesy game about naked women.

Peter Potapov: What shall we do? Dating sim of course! And what should be there? Well… *dripping liquids*, for example.

Nikolay: … and so it was Turgor then. Me again made decisions on the content, because the vision was stored in my head. But "Cargo!" was a different beast. That one already was a joint project. While finishing "Turgor" colleagues inadvertently made an interesting physics model. Ayrat was radiant: "Look at this cool thing!". Little Big Planet had just released, it was a very inspiring game. And we decided that we can also play with physics.

Ayrat wanted to make a fun game for children, which would sell like hotcakes - here he decided what's going to be added to the project and what wasn't, but he delegated quite a few decisions, including to me. As a result: "Cargo!" was born in heads of Ayrat and Peter, and by tradition I was engaged in setting and script development, de facto under the direction of Ayrat.



Does such approach feel comfortable for you?

Yes, I really want everything to be just like that moving forward: different people manage projects and act as *vision keepers*, but at the same time we work together and help each other. Things are already being developed in the studio that I don't even interfere with and don't decide anything. And I really like it.

As for new projects, for now I can name two - "Know by Heart" (Ayrat's) and "Franz" (mine). We will definitely tell you more about them, but not today.

Can you talk a little about “Know by Name”? More from the founder’s point of view which has a *business* relationship to the product, and not *creative*.

I help a little with text editing, but I don’t interfere in the creative process at all. I can advise something, offer an idea, but it’s up to Ayrat to listen to me or not, he’s the director, this is his story. Great plan.

Over the past couple of months, the situation with Ice-Pick Lodge has overgrown with crazy rumors: let's try to figure out how things really are. One particular publication said that you are almost in a voluntary exile from the "rebellious team", trying to learn how to make games alone...

Nikolay: As I understand it, the question was asked in the context of last year's Igromania material (by the way, I gave an interview for a completely different publication - it was published there without my knowledge and without promised proofreading).

When it came out, many, of course, were perplexed. The impression that "the studio is doomed, Nikolay is done for, he is exhausted, he is about to lose the lead privilege, the studio is tearing apart" And so is the way for such eccentrics. Well, what can I say - the article turned out to be bad, in the tone of "exposing false idols" The meaning of the answers was twisted - and the most unpleasant thing is that this was obviously done on purpose.

I understand that someone wants to prove that abnormal studios and strange people are non-viable. Someone is pleased to relish other people's problems. Someone is pleased to call a scandal. Well, to each his

own... from now on I will be more careful with unfamiliar journalists: before that I was somehow lucky with professional people.

And about the "rebellion" of some kind - this is just nonsense. Words taken out of context and devoid of the humorous intonation with which they were spoken.

Peter: Everyone has a disagreement. But we somehow survived them all, there were rougher. In the article, by the way, this was also mentioned. But no matter what is written in it, it is impossible to draw any definite conclusion from the material, in my opinion. You won't call the divorce just because the couple couldn't share the pair of slippers?



It seemed to me that a number of theses were simply not understood by the author of that article - I recognize quotes, but I understand that they were interpreted (not in bad faith, I hope) in a wrong way. What is the story of the small "family quarrel" you just mentioned?

Ayrat: An interesting fact: just a week before that interview, I went up to Nikolay and said that we want to re-release "The Marble Nest" <*2016 vertical slice demo remade as DLC*>. And what will be right if he does not take part in this, and in order to guarantee non-interference, he will relieve himself of the powers of the general lead for several months.

Nikolay: Yes, that's right. So was it. Of course, I was very upset then, I was not in the best mood. In that article, this moment is extremely bloated. And in those days, some acquaintances from the industry said to me a couple of times: your associates say that you failed the project, why so? Of course I was angry - well, it's my friends who say such things about me, it's terribly unfair!

We then shouted a lot to each other, there were unpleasant conversations, but in the end we found out the truth and reconciled. We have minor contradictions, but we always resolve them. There is no toxic bullshit between us.

Ayrat: Yes. At that moment I felt that Nikolay couldn't make reasonable decisions, and therefore proposed this option with "Nest". It seemed to me that due to the mood of Nikolay, we would make it for three times longer than needed. And it hurt him very much. For him it was in principle.

Nikolay: Correct. I was in a terrible state after the release, generally not like myself. But then, when the emotions calmed down, I realized why Ayrat proposed this. And the conflict came to naught by itself. Ayrat in general is the voice of reason, he is always on the side of common sense.

I want to emphasize again: Ice-Pick Lodge is alive and is not going to die. We don't intend to quarrel either. And we have excellent relations with people who left the studio after Patho2, many continue to come here and work on other projects in these walls, simply because we are friends. And we work with a double spirit. Lack of funds also never ruined us, we already have immunity against it. As against many other troubles and catastrophes.



And as for the phrase "Nikolay burned out" - I really need to physically recover and take a break from “Patho” to look at it with a fresh and interested look. Many directors work according to this scheme: you made a film, then you are silent for several years, bearing ideas for a new picture. It’s hard to slap up for years without a break: you need to look around and concentrate. Otherwise, you will stagnate.

But I’m involuntarily thinking about the new “Bachelor” <*a campaign*>. It will not be similar to the scenario of Haruspex even in terms of gameplay. It will be different in rhythm, perception of the world, not to mention the plot. And, of course, there will be a different view on the disease and a different version on what happened.

“Franz”, by the way, can also be considered part of this work - the concept was born as an iteration test of the Bachelor’s interaction with The Pest.

Let's move from rumors to a more creative topic: how do you see your future project from an emotional point of view, what kind of experience should it give the player?

After three years of teaching, I seem to have managed to analyze over two hundreds of student projects. Studying them, I began to conclude that one of the most interesting things in games is the topic of control. The player is used to considering himself the master of the situation: he controls everything. He presses the buttons, and the virtual creature somehow reacts to this.

I want this feeling of self-confidence in a person to gradually shake. The player should start to worry and doubt within their capabilities. According to the mood, it will be a horror, creepypasta.

The source of inspiration was Kraina Grzybów and the Wyoming incident (I've been returning to it mentally for many years). In these stories (well, even if this is a fake, who cares) I am especially fascinated by the fact that it is completely unclear who started this and why, what was the point. And I don't want "Franz" to give clear answers to all the questions at the end. The mood is anxiety.

Is this a mobile title?

Yes. But not free-to-play.

Ideologically, there is a similarity with "Knock-Knock", and this is your most commercially successful game...

Well, there is no connection between them. "Franz" is ideologically much more closely connected with "Pathologic".

Do you really want to work on "Franz" alone? Is there any existential meaning here or what is the point?

In the interview that appeared on Igromania, I said quite the opposite: like, I no longer want to make games with my comrades. Nothing like this! Making a small game on your own is a personal task. Such challenge to oneself.

On my course, I see a lot of young guys and girls who come, not knowing how to do almost anything, except maybe drawing. Some are panicky afraid of the word "engine", they immediately think that they will now be

forced to code on C++. And just after a year they are compiling a full-fledged game build! It might be a little work, but it was done from beginning to end with their own hands. So it's embarrassing for me that my students know what I don't know myself! This is not good. I want to go through the whole cycle from and to together just like my students.



Since we started talking about your teaching activities, surely there are promising students among yours. Have you ever thought of somehow taking them under your wing, cheer up when need to, to steer where need to, to act as a mentor, teacher and partner when launching new projects?

Indeed there are such plans. And we have already begun to try, but so far quite cautiously: there is only one such project in work. After all, this is factually publishing activity, completely new to us. Even if we are talking about the launch of low-cost non-profit indie projects that should at least pay off - the very fact of the release is rather important here.

I sincerely admire the things some of my students do. They deserve to take prizes at exhibitions, sometimes there is a breathtakingly new, bold, interesting design, sometimes very impressive visual performance.

In general, I really like working with people who are clearly more talented than me, who think differently. So I sincerely want to help them find place in life. But of course I also hope for some profit.

Can you briefly describe the basic postulates on which your program is formed? What do you want to convey to your students, what are the main thoughts and skills?

You know, I think that a person cannot be taught. He can only learn by himself. Moreover, I am not a teacher: I came to the HSE from the techschool. What can I do? I try to wake up thoughts and imagination of my students. Together with them we try to look at familiar things from an unusual angle. We ask each other tricky questions.

In general, I see myself as a wall against which the tennis player serves. My task is to reflect this ball so that it flies to an unexpected place. But only the person himself can decide to serve. To the best of my ability I try not to throw “pre-calculated” balls at them. And I do not impose ideas: although the temptation is very great, but I constantly stop myself. Moreover, they teach me even more than I teach them.

Students give me a lot and significantly change my picture of the world. For this reason, by the way, I change the program quite a lot from year to year: simply because I am changing myself and changing my ideas about game design. Over the past four years, I learned about gamedesign twice as much as in my entire life before.

What else... oddly enough, I ask them to make as little emphasis as possible on what Ice-Pick Lodge does best - on the atmosphere, setting, small stories, plots. Many people think at the beginning of the path that the more unique content there is, the better the game will turn out. But this is not true! It is much more interesting to make a game about a sundial or a spring, revealing the essence of this simple thing through action, to come up with a metaphor and a beautiful idea.

Still, we focus on training one-man-indies: I believe that the future lies with such developers. It is clear that not everyone shall become Lucas Pope, Toby Fox, Notch or Jason Roberts. But general survival skills will come in handy in any situation and in any company if a person can make or repair gameplay, relying not on expensive content, but on a bright engineering idea.



Tell me, do you regret at all that you even decided to do new "Pathologic"? Or everything happened as it was destined.

It was a messy situation from all points of view. We underestimated it. For all that, we came out with minimal losses.

Firstly, we did not give up and went through it all with dignity. They pulled out a very complex project that had no funding for long time: funds from Kickstarter ended rather quickly, and the investment transaction fell through. It was like taking an all-terrain vehicle across the desert, counting on an oasis of fuel, but forgetting to bring fuel... and you couldn't just drop the vehicle, and there was nothing else to drive, had to push it with your own hands. But we clenched teeth and brought the game to a state for expo and show it to the publisher.

Secondly, we managed to give it new feel, to make it so that we ourselves were interested in entering this river again. Changed the concept several times, while carefully preserving the spirit of the game. And, by the way, we will change it again in the following scenarios. Both will be neither like the game for Haruspex, nor like each other.

It seems that now you are more than ever ready to put an end to "Pathologic" and not return to it. Is it fatigue or is it just a feeling of completeness?

Personally, I'm tired of "Patho", of course. That's why I'm doing this little thing now, "Franz". You can't live on one project for so many years. So many interesting things can be done... The same "Turgor" was much more innovative than the "Patho1". It should be interesting for us to work ourselves, try new things, push boundaries. Just for this reason,

now I’m looking for a new perspective, a new look at “Bachelor” and “Changeling”. And, in general, have already found.

What are your relationships with tinyBuild? There are various rumors. Let's clarify this topic for those interested?

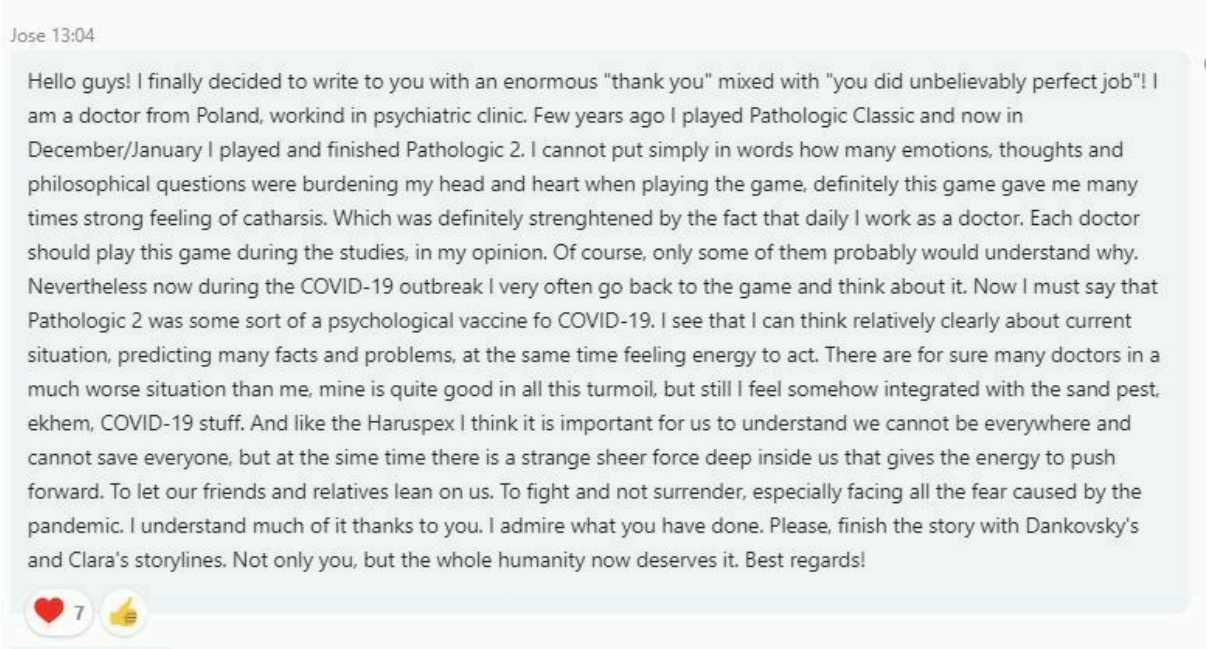
I would not want to comment on the actions of colleagues. They know their job. We - know our own. In fact, we have little overlap on work tasks. We make games, they sell games.

We have to say thanks to Alex <*Nichiporchik, the head of tinyBuild*> and Andrey Podoprigora, our producer, for a lot of things. Recently, by the way, we noticed that they took a lot of active actions - the game was in Steam tops on the first page for a couple of days. We appreciated it.



A bit of an abstract question: did the situation in the world, virus, isolation, positively affect sales? All my friends reviewed old films about infections, for example - some kind of psychological reflex. Or there's no direct connection?

I do not know. We receive reports with a two-month delay. But, of course, to hype on someone else's fear and grief is a bad thing, and we are not going to take any steps for this. I even feel a bit of an inexplicable guilt. Although we sometimes receive such things (review by a doctor-practitioner):


Jose 13:04

Hello guys! I finally decided to write to you with an enormous "thank you" mixed with "you did unbelievably perfect job"! I am a doctor from Poland, workind in psychiatric clinic. Few years ago I played Pathologic Classic and now in December/January I played and finished Pathologic 2. I cannot put simply in words how many emotions, thoughts and philosophical questions were burdening my head and heart when playing the game, definitely this game gave me many times strong feeling of catharsis. Which was definitely strenghtened by the fact that daily I work as a doctor. Each doctor should play this game during the studies, in my opinion. Of course, only some of them probably would understand why. Nevertheless now during the COVID-19 outbreak I very often go back to the game and think about it. Now I must say that Pathologic 2 was some sort of a psychological vaccine fo COVID-19. I see that I can think relatively clearly about current situation, predicting many facts and problems, at the same time feeling energy to act. There are for sure many doctors in a much worse situation than me, mine is quite good in all this turmoil, but still I feel somehow integrated with the sand pest, ekhem, COVID-19 stuff. And like the Haruspex I think it is important for us to understand we cannot be everywhere and cannot save everyone, but at the sime time there is a strange sheer force deep inside us that gives the energy to push forward. To let our friends and relatives lean on us. To fight and not surrender, especially facing all the fear caused by the pandemic. I understand much of it thanks to you. I admire what you have done. Please, finish the story with Dankovsky's and Clara's storylines. Not only you, but the whole humanity now deserves it. Best regards!

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But even if it does, I don't think we will be happy: I would not want such bad reason behind the commercial success of the game.

Would you work again with Alex and his team?

I think that my comrades and I would definitely consider such an opportunity if Alex offered. Here, after all, much depends on the project. I understand perfectly well that "Patho" is not quite a tinyBuild project, it

was a black sheep in their lineup. Such a little antimatter for them. Therefore, it is not easy for them. With another project, perhaps everything would have turned out very differently.

What is the current staff of Ice-Pick?

The main skeleton that works directly in the office is about ten people. The numbers fluctuate, because some come and go, then come back. There are a number of people who work remotely, and there are those who help the studio on a voluntary basis, because they like what we do. Some just keep coming: they say their family and home are here… although they work in other companies. So be it.



Is there enough funds to support the team and development, or are you in search of funds and partners?

Yes, enough. We don’t need a partner yet. This immediately imposes restrictions on the studio: for the money you took, you need to answer.

And we persistently want to reach the level of self-sufficiency. After “Knock-Knock” this would have happened if we hadn’t grabbed onto such an impenetrable bar as new “Patho”.

From time to time we are offered to start developing third-party projects, for very good money too. But no matter how pathetically it sounds, we really really value our independence. It means more than money. It is sometimes quite difficult to explain this to an investor or partner.

Nikolay, you talked about new projects, so when we should wait for them? What are your deadlines?

Let me just say for the time being that the upcoming announcement will take place this summer. Moreover, you see what is happening on the streets - now it is difficult to plan something even approximately. We are working - and thank God for that. As soon as there is something to show, we will show.