

ZERO LIMIT

Boinihi: The K'i Codex | Review

A hand-made point-and-click adventure worth getting lost in.

Getting stranded in space is nothing new in the grand cosmos of video games, science fiction novels, television shows, movies, comics, and more. Likewise, stumbling across what's left behind by previous civilizations and explorers is also familiar ground, one could say it's a universal in human history and art. Be it the grand scale of *The Odyssey* in classical literature, or more recent (recent, at least, compared to Ancient Greece) mysteries such as the disappearance of the **Roanoke Colony**, the themes of exploration, mysterious landscapes, survival, and the uncovering of ancient or forbidden knowledge has a long legacy, and it's one that the fictional story told in *Boinihi: The K'i Codex* certainly aims for. Building on this legacy, *Boinihi* is, without a doubt, a fantastic little adventure game that presents the player with an intriguing journey set in the larger backdrop of the developer's own "**Black Cube**" series. The game exudes a charming, hand-made, DIY aesthetic that gives off a lo-fi feeling capable of transporting the player to a time way before hyper-cutting-edge visuals set the standard of science fiction on the screen. *Boinihi* represents some of the best of what an "indie" game has to offer—and by indie, I mean that not in the sense of a "genre" to list products under in a corporate store, but rather the output of one person's ambition to build an experience to share with other people, combining the resources available to him with his own creativity to create something entertaining and engaging.



Though it's connected to a larger series, one that certainly will be rewarding for those who've played previous entries, *Boinihi* feels self-contained enough on its own to be welcoming enough to new players. As I mentioned before, its themes are timeless—we've heard *this* story before: We're sent to a isolated world, forced to fend for ourselves and unearth secrets during our journey. *Boinihi* is not derivative, though. This is an experience that follows a form to tell its own story, not something that lifts from the beats of another—or at least not in any discernible way. There are no filed-off serial numbers here. *Boinihi* is invested in adding depth to the "Black Cube" series while telling its own story of exploration and discovery while, in some cases, flirting with the meta as it gestures to its own hand-made creation—but more on that later.

Whether by design or the natural result of it being the creation of a solo developer who spent countless hours in the creation of this world, *Boinihi* has an undeniable neo-vintage vibe; it's got an original wax kind of feel. I almost want to play this game on an old CRT monitor with a computer decked out in beige and a hard drive that's just a little too loud, tucked in the corner of my middle school's computer lab. This feel themes the entire experience and perhaps is something that enthusiasts of this genre may come to expect. For me, however, this was a nice departure from the overly realistic and flashy, wiz-bang, nature of most visual presentation in modern science fiction. That much of the game centers on navigating puzzles that feel tactile and often involve materials such as plants, clay, ink, water, and paper, reinforces the spirit of its aesthetic *and* its narrative.



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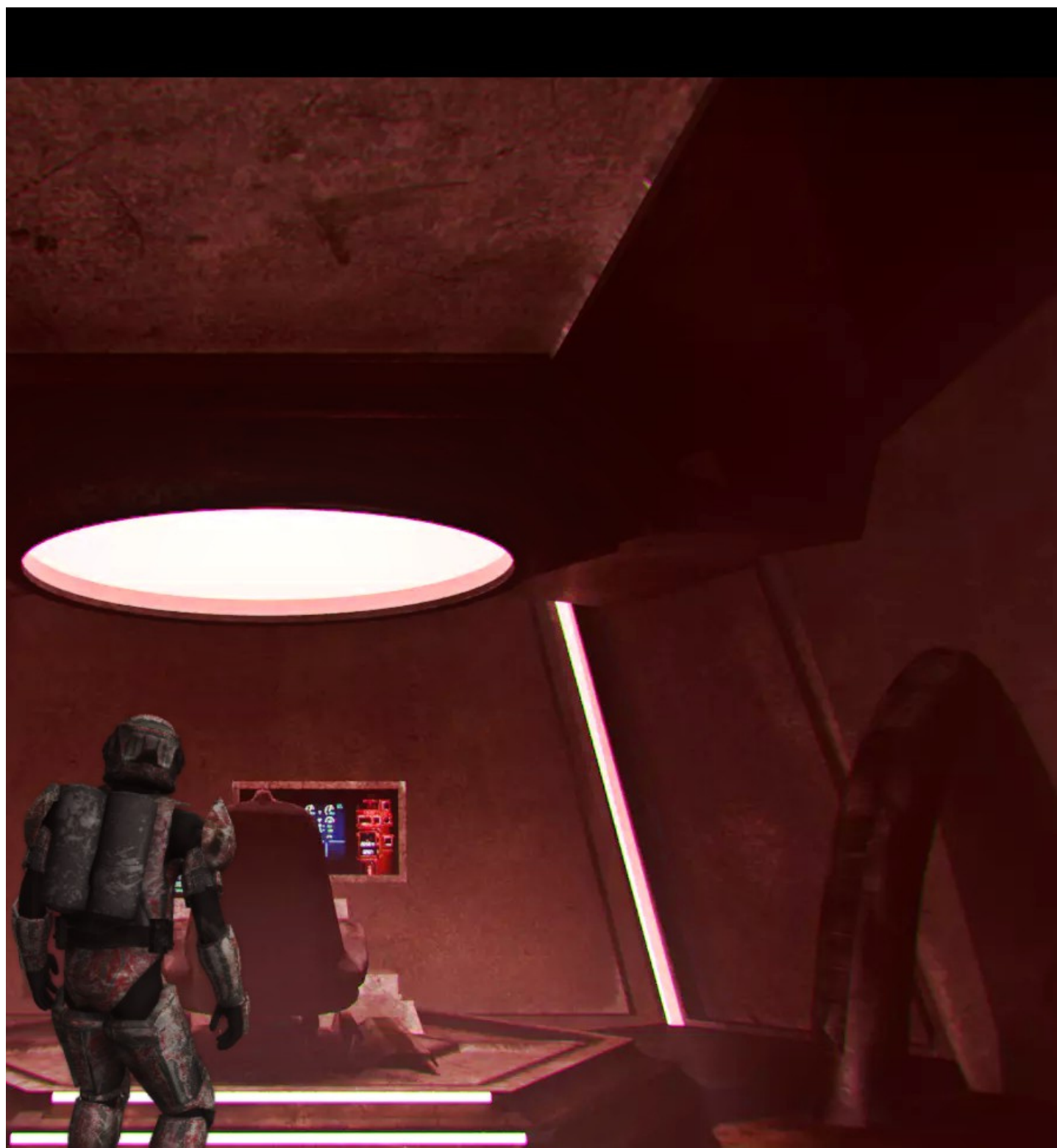
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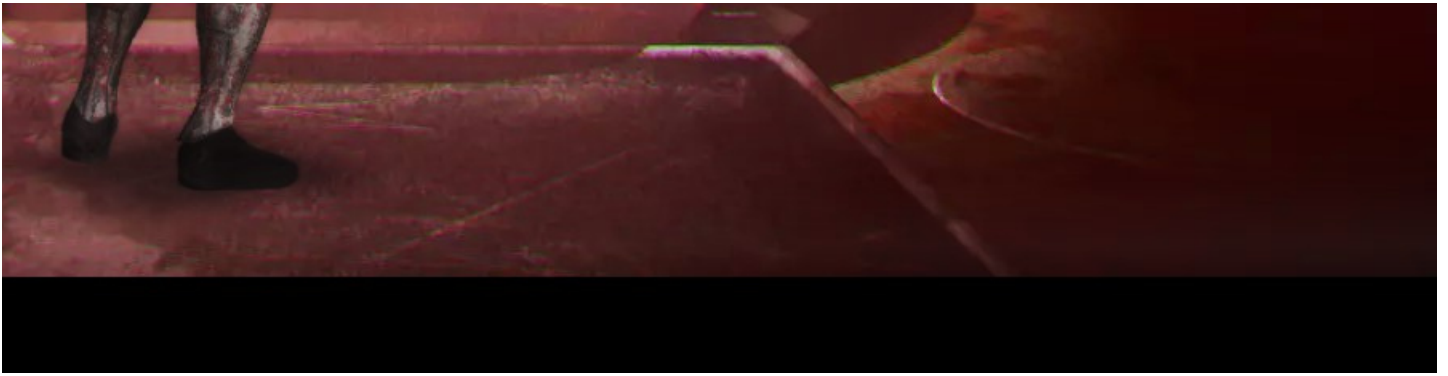
Our lone space-venturing protagonist won't have many high-tech tools to rely on as he navigates this strange moon. While his ship-board computer and AI do play a role as the story progresses, this point-and-click adventure has the player using much of what can be found in the surrounding environment and what has been left behind by a previous explorer. This is quite an interesting and perhaps clever choice as the story revolves around some pretty high-tech concepts and is clearly set in a world where sentient beings have the capacity to venture deep into space for extended periods of time. The astronaut, and by extension the player, has to rely on their wits and impressions from the world presented before them. Much of this experience

could've been diluted by granting too much high-tech magic to the player, but *Boinihi* is invested in the strength of its setting, giving the player a stage waiting to be unfolded by the player in a very natural way. The end result is a world that almost feels like you can reach out and touch; what else could you ask for in a point-and-click game? This is all delivered with a fitting soundtrack and sound design that feels suitably retro; that satisfying paper-shuffling, bag-stuffing, drawer-clicking aesthetic is in full force here—though I do wish the ship AI, MAIDEN's, sound was a little *less* harsh on the ears.



Boinihi does depart from many adventure games of this sort, however, in that it presents a third-person perspective for much of its exploration, saving the *Myst*-style first-person perspective for interaction with specific puzzles and environments. I found this to be an interesting experiment in perspective. It *mostly* works and with future releases I think it could end up being a pretty cool way to mix things up. This doesn't present any problems so much as it leaves the player wanting more. Much of the "exploration" just involves guiding the astronaut down pretty limited, straightforward paths—movement which isn't represented in real-time on its static minimap. It gets a little repetitive in the later portions of the game that have the player jumping around different locations of the moon. If a game of this kind is going to combine some 3D adventure dynamics, I think it could stand to allow more space for the character to navigate—to really get "lost" on this moon. The experiment of adding in a third-person character to navigate is undoubtedly a success, but it demands more. I'd love to see the paths chucked out in favor of a more freeform and explorable environment—*provided* that it wouldn't take away from the adventure experience too much. None-the-less, this does make the world feel more "physical" than it would've had it stuck to a strictly first-person perspective all the way through. There's a sense of depth and dimension that brings this location to life in a way I wasn't quite expecting.





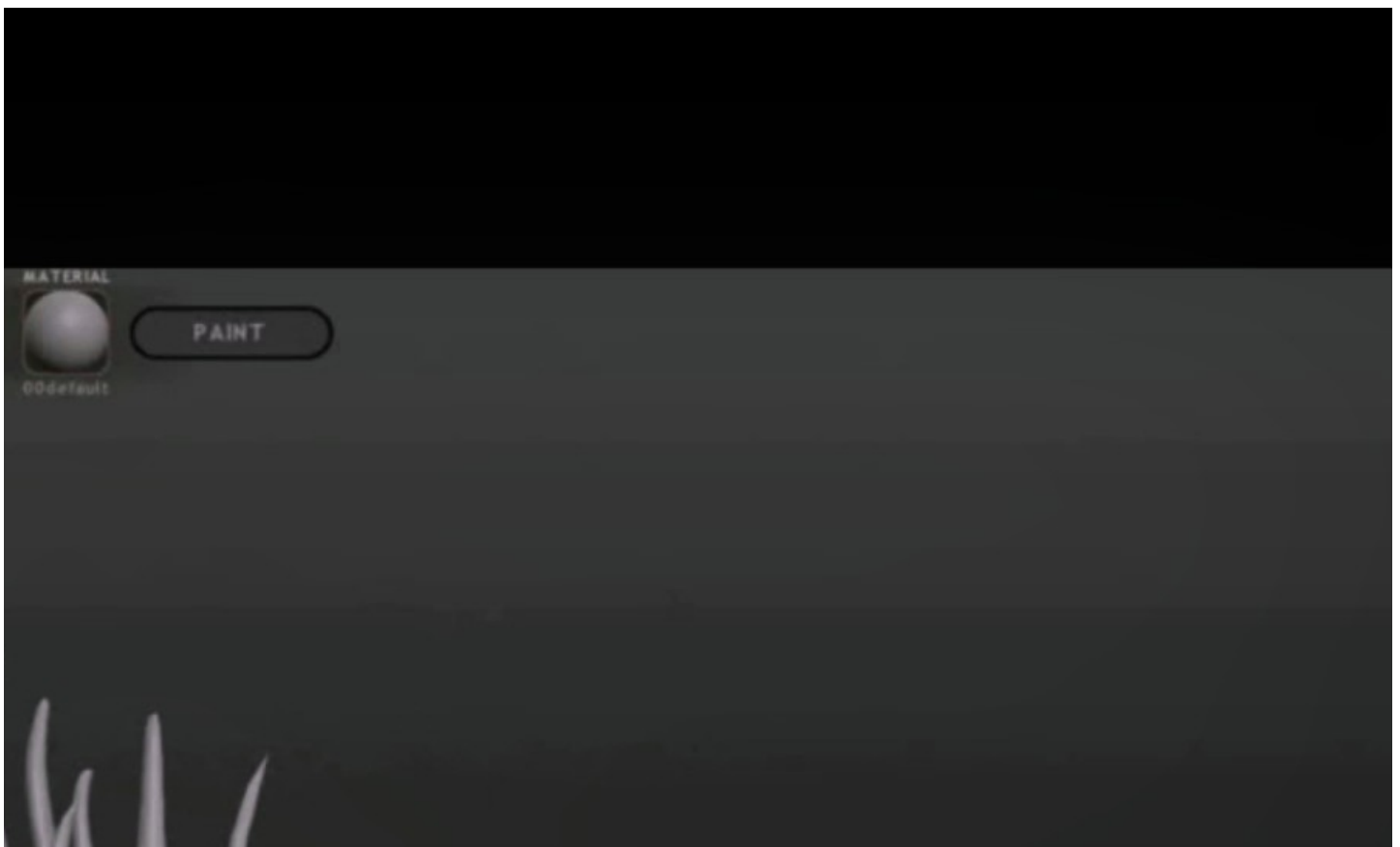
Boïnihi's puzzles can be quite challenging in that the game doesn't make things too obvious—add to this the fact that it being an under-the-radar indie game means that solutions are *not* a Google search away and I really do feel like I'm playing a computer game in the 1990s all over again. Some may take issue with some of *Boïnihi's* more mysterious solutions and hidden items, while others might find it very fitting for a game that's specifically supposed to give a sense of being lost in the middle of nowhere. In some ways it feels like the *Dark Souls* dilemma: yes, it's challenging, but isn't that what people come here for? I hesitate to go too much into detail about any one of the game's puzzles as that might spoil a bit too much of the entire *point* of playing this game, but prospective players should be expected to think things through quite a bit—and perhaps think a little outside of the box in some cases. Unfortunately, I don't have enough experience with games of this genre to get a sense for how it fits in with others, but I have to say that I personally enjoyed cracking these puzzles—especially ones which were made easier by me physically breaking out pen and paper to find some of the solutions. In fact, I could've used *more* of that sort of experience.



Boïnihi isn't likely to win any awards for the originality of its plot's premise—but that's not a bad thing. As I said earlier, this game's narrative fits in with a greater legacy of themes very familiar to literature and media more broadly. To me, "originality" has less to do with its premise in that case and more to do with its execution—and *Boïnihi* certainly satisfies here. Hidden, ancient, alien technology that may or may not be a threat to sentient life is far from anything new, but exploring the way it impacted the titular character and the stranded astronaut leaves a lot of space for some creative interpretations of the story—and the development and conclusion of the story even ends up going down a path that started to remind me of 2016's *The Arrival*. The presentation here is clever, engaging, and more than skin-deep. There's a bit more here than just a story about someone finding a powerful alien artifact. *Boïnihi* is committed to connecting its science fiction tropes to the experiences of its characters—there's genuine concern for how individual and collective lives are affected by the development of technology and the expanse of a people throughout time and space. It's unfortunate though that the the dialogue, at least the English translation that is, is a little shallow; I wish it had a more elaborate vocabulary to help it feel a little less stilted, though Klemens Koehring (who also plays Poe in the fantastic *Dark Nights with Poe and Munroe*) does a great job at bringing both the astronaut and *Boïnihi* himself to life.



My favorite moments of *Boinihi*, however, are undoubtedly its gestures to the fourth wall. Its plot and characters, in a way, seem to be somewhat aware of the fact that they're fictional creations. This is not an overbearing aspect of the narrative; it's no Hideo Kojima "turn the game console off" sort of moment. Rather, it's subtle things like a character talking about his excitement over creating his own universe and being artistically inspired, or a stack of games from the Black Cube series itself appearing in an unlockable video, as well as a bonus video that shows the entire creation of the game. This only adds to the honesty and charm of the experience. Combined with the hand-made aesthetic of many of the game's assets, the game's creator, Simon Mesnard, seems to be inviting the player into the very private and intimate space he inhabited during the creation of the game. Science fiction and fantasy has a tendency sometimes to take itself too seriously, to try and hide behind the "seriousness" of "creating a world," yet *Boinihi* doesn't fall for this; it manages to not take itself seriously, while still being honest and not resorting to comedy or absurdity to carry its self-referential moments. There's a disarming and inviting atmosphere extended to the player through this—one I, as a musician and writer myself, have been able to draw inspiration from. It's great to see a bit of the character of its author, and the process of the game's creation, come through in the final product. Personality is often sorely lacking in modern media and we're asked to forget that real people make these products—*especially* in science fiction.





Boinihi: The K'i Codex is like a local indie-band's hand-made cassette demo—the kind made on a 4-track recorder the group picked up at the local second-hand store and recorded in their garage. It's a photocopied, handmade, poster advertising a gig for said band at the local bar. It's raw and full of ambition and disarmed beauty. It's a testament to the fact that creativity and entertainment in gaming aren't always locked behind the gates of monolithic corporate entities with endless budgets. When we think of "indie" games, this is the kind of experience we should have in mind—and it's the kind that reminds us that with some creativity and passion of our own, we all can build and create our own worlds.

Special thanks to Simon Says: Play! for providing a review copy of the game.