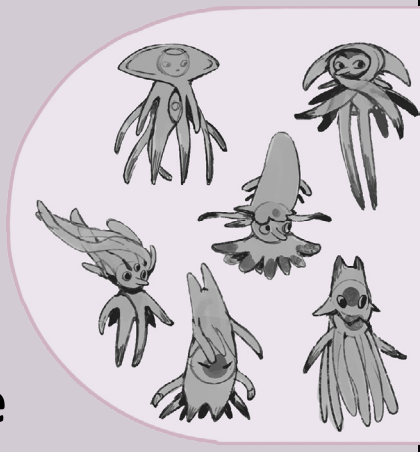
GUT FEELINGS

A wholesome adventure-puzzle game, where the narrative unfolds through sincere, playful moments, carried by lived gameplay interactions. Its purpose is to embody a fundamental truth of gaming culture:



“Letting your little brother win without him noticing (or simply not handing him a beatdown) is an act of love.”

This intuitive tenderness is expressed here as a deliberate game system. Where most games challenge the player’s cognitive and mechanical skills, *Gut Feelings* actively challenges their empathy. Reading the other is the heart of the experience, within the microcosm of the human body.

Cozy, Refocused on the Human Experience

The Wholesome/Cozy market is emerging, but rarely steps outside its life sim conventions. In parallel, the narrative genre is exploding. The two converge naturally on emotional resonance, that elusive quality which propels some titles to outperform their genre’s expectations (*Spiritfarer, Undertale, Dave the Diver*).

Gameplay Loop: Verse + Chorus

VERSE (variable, intimate, exploratory)
The **empathic tuning mini-games**, the project’s design innovation, where the player gets to know the creature and must calibrate their performance based on its particularities, on its home turf. Designed to be lean, modular, and reusable, these moments offer thematic variety while sharing the same conceptual and technical core.

CHORUS (structuring, intuitive, reassuring)
The **overworld** draws on the **Sokoban** mechanic (*Order of the Sinking Star, A Monster’s Expedition, Baba Is You*). The player solves the board’s obstacles through observation, experimentation, and deduction. The game thus claims its own space, through an ingenious mode of transport whose friction is scalable. The puzzle is one component of *Gut Feelings*’ rich ecosystem, not an end in itself.

The clean “Verse + Chorus” design structure gives the game its rhythm, its breathing room, and its depth. It calls for elegant, tactile ergonomics close to those of tabletop eurogames, where every rule must earn its place. Noise is kept to a minimum to reach benevolent, mainstream accessibility, without combat and without domination.



The Micro Echoes the Macro

An improbable duo of microbes lands in an unknown and fascinating microcosm, journeying with curiosity to find its exit. This unprecedented universe blends anatomy at the microscopic scale with the immensity of the deep sea, in an immersive and atmospheric extra-terrestrial distortion.

The stylized anthropomorphic microbes players meet along the way are rendered in an intimately authored illustrative style, which humanizes them and creates a contagious sense of proximity. It's an offbeat world, oozing, riddled with endearing imperfections and magnificent contradictions. A wholesome reality in our image, intimate and organic. A warmly human adventure, at microscopic scale.

This interior-exterior mise en abyme is the central metaphor. This living world isn't a mere anatomical backdrop, it has its own logic that surprises the player at every turn. Players intuitively grasp that they're moving inside a person, which deepens the weight of their actions. It's a manifestation of the visceral intelligence that precedes thought.

The player's narrative takes precedence over the game's: they tell themselves their own story with every encounter. No dialogue, few cinematics, almost everything is built through gameplay. Players take ownership of an experience they'll want to share. The creative intent is organic viral content (queasy pun intended, and gladly so), expressive and caricatural, inspired by slapstick and silent film.

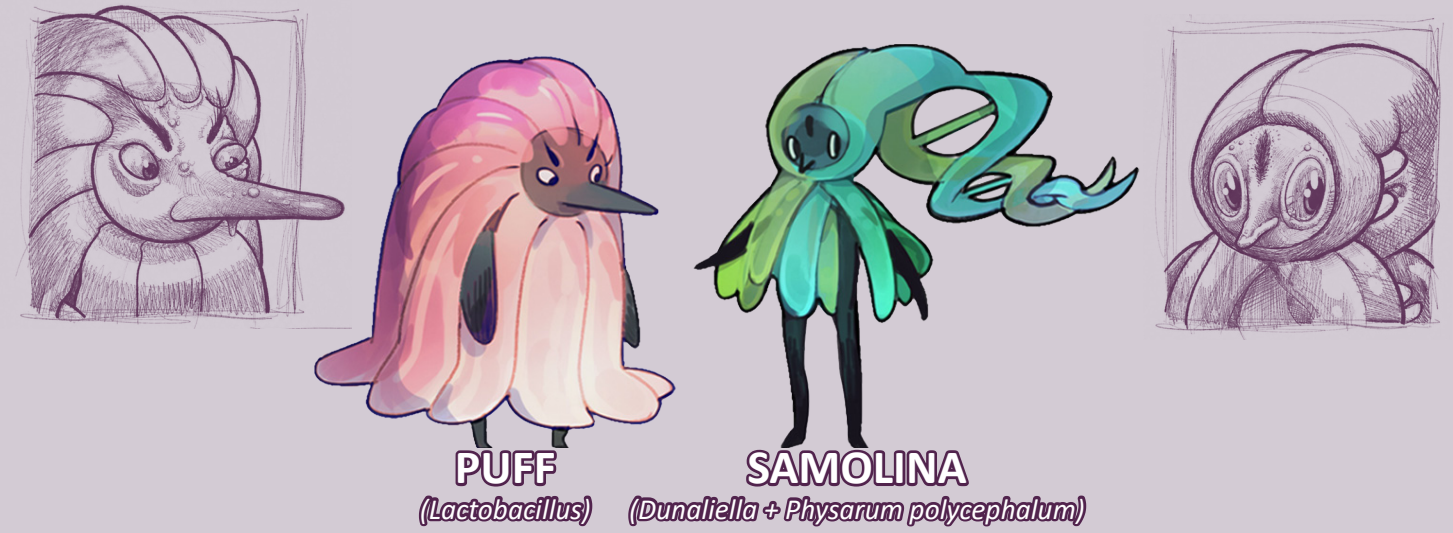


Technicolor Electron Microscope

The colourized electron microscope rendering, scientific imagery that has become part of the collective imagination, has never (to the best of our knowledge) been brought to interactive entertainment. What's new isn't the microscopic subject, which a few games have tackled, but the rendering itself: diffuse enveloping lighting, tangible surface grain, economy of detail and procedural fractal patterns, artificial colours evoking technicolor, accentuated surreal contours.

The creatures of *Gut Feelings* don't have the shape of microbes. They're made of the same stuff.

On top of this comes a striking artistic effect, where close-up details are deliberately exaggerated: what looks clean, appealing, and wondrous from afar becomes strange and repulsive when seen too closely. It's a time-tested cartoon gag, since abandoned by modern animation and underrepresented in video games.



The Empathic Tuning: Winning, Together

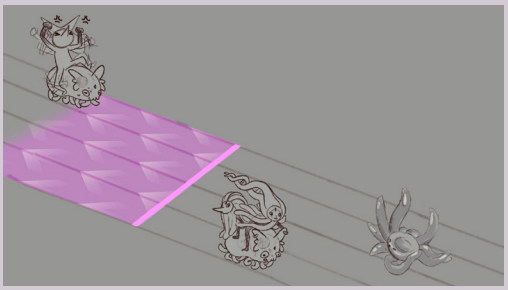
Each encounter with an endearing gut-dweller draws players deeper into the game. That peculiar creature launches an exotic mini-game, offering an unhinged window into its inner world. The player must quickly adjust to the creature's reactions, while absorbing a sharp break in context.

The goal is neither to win nor to lose, but to give their "opponent" a good time.

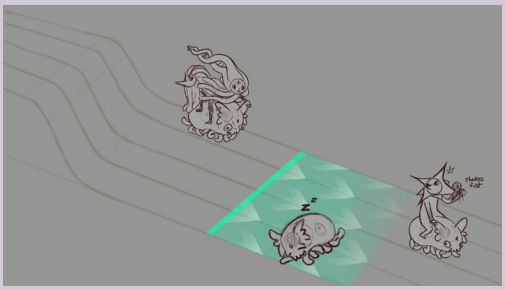
Empathic tuning draws on a chromatic guitar tuner, with its "hot/cold" gradation rather than a binary "success/failure". Some mini-games aren't even competitive. Each creature has its own version of a harmonious encounter: the same performance can delight one and shut down another.
The player never sees the values that define this balance. They must deduce them from the creature's reactions and adjust their performance accordingly, with the interface supporting this emotional reading without quantifying it. If the gap grows too wide, the creature shuts down and the tuning starts over. The project's central difficulty is making this continuous state viscerally readable without making it cerebral. Prototyping will therefore aim to reduce extradiegetic signals in favour of immersion. A tuned creature will, for example, sport merchandise bearing the likeness of Puff and Samolina.
Each of the 3 prototyped mini-games, revisited several times (in remixed versions) to demonstrate its depth, is tied to a single creature. This constraint will be lifted in the final game, revealing the microbes through multiple facets.

Mini-game 1: Race

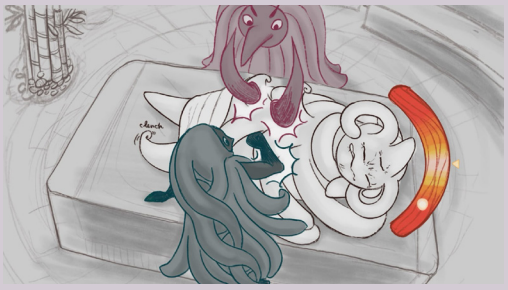
The classic racing mini-game, except the goal here is to hold the gap (stay within the band where the creature feels challenged without being crushed), a kind of illustration of the flow zone (Csikszentmihalyi). The gameplay is rudimentary, but each creature offers a unique remixed version, where the player must pay attention to its reactions and adapt. Some want to win without feeling the player let them win, others want to be challenged without being humiliated.







Mini-game 2: Massage

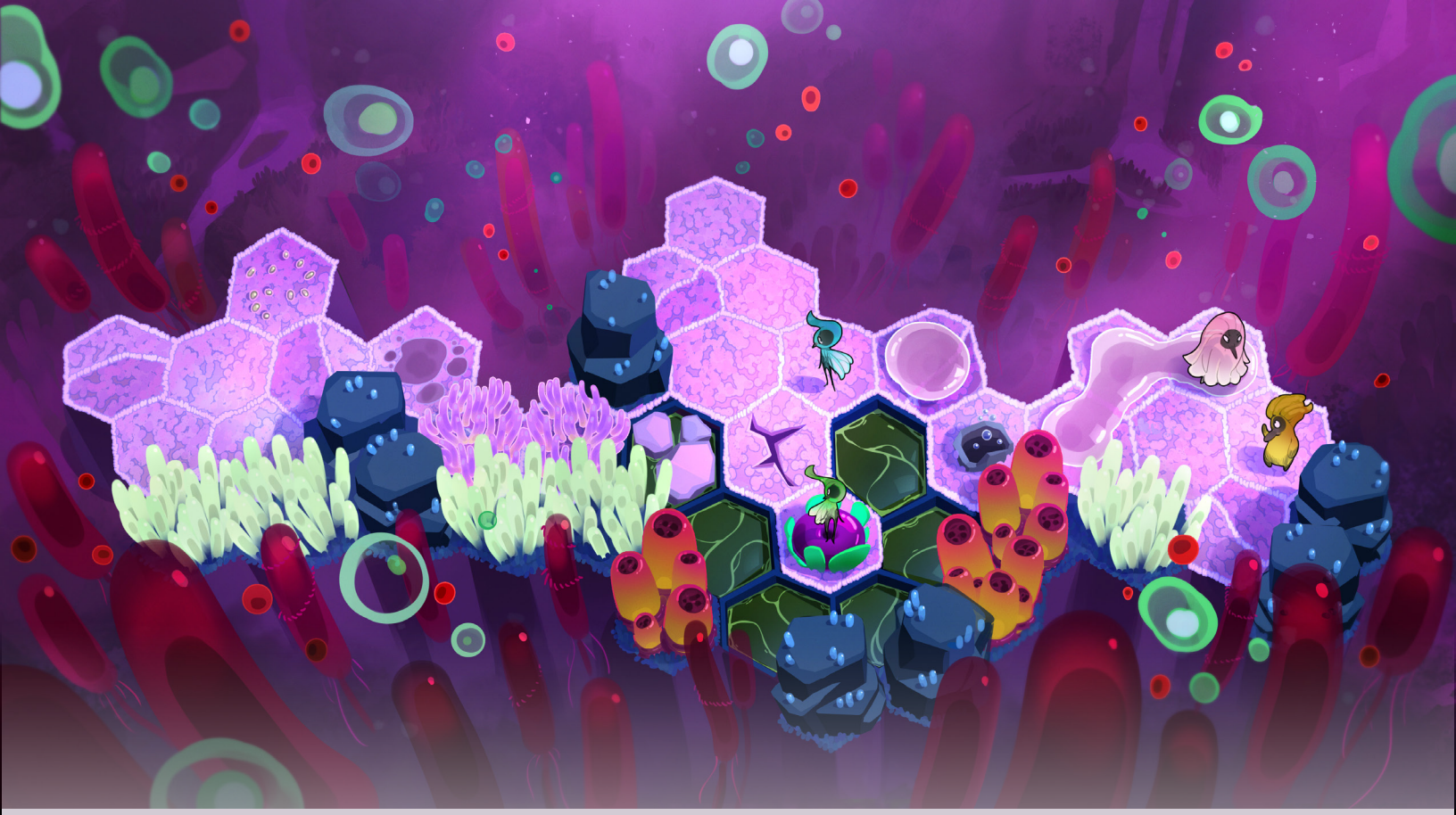


The line between care and cruelty lies in the player's hands. Massage therapy techniques that resemble martial arts can quickly get out of hand: it's up to the player to find the right balance to release tension points without hurting their patient, while too light a touch leads to disappointment. The goal is always care. What changes is the location of the tension points and the pressure threshold the creature can take, which the player deduces from its reactions.

Mini-game 3: Pizza



In the vein of customer service games (*Potionomics, Good Pizza Great Pizza, Miracle Merchant*), the player must fill their customer's order while respecting its tastes. To do so, they must hit the exact requested amount of three types of flavour palettes (juicy, spicy, salty) while staying alert to the customer's secret preferences, revealed through its reactions.



Overworld-Sokoban: DNA of a Board

A board is made of 3 types of hexagonal cells:

- **surface**, traversable, where characters can move;
- **obstacle**, impassable (wall or chasm);
- **dynamic ingredient**, which can change state (above: pushable object, toxin, geyser, pustule, fragile cell).

Each ingredient is taught progressively, then recombined with everything the player already knows. Boards are deterministic: cells always behave the same way. The two protagonists complement each other. Every step one takes changes what the other can do next, giving weight to the player's sequence of actions.

Puff leaves behind a trail of mucus that blooms (persistently) on fertile cells, strikes to break toxins blocking the way, and is strong enough to slide heavy pushable objects (these dynamic ingredients can fill otherwise impassable chasms).

Samolina absorbs mucus and can transform into unique characters, **Sam** and **Lina**, through cellular division. These two smaller microbes, unable to push objects, can interact with two dynamic ingredients at once and are light enough to cross fragile cells without breaking them. They get stuck in mucus or in bloomed flagella, which they can only cross by recombining.



Most boards are transition spaces, breathers, and places of discovery. Those that contain a creature resolve in three phases:

- **taming**, where the creature reacts to the player characters (inspired by Club Soko);
- the **tuning** mini-game;
- the tuned creature unlocks the **passage** to the next board.

Difficulty Balancing

The “Undo” and “Reset” mechanics, borrowed from the PuzzleScript formula (Stephen Lavelle), are essential to a fluid experience. The overworld-sokoban imposes no reaction-time constraint, no permanent failure, and no loss of progress. The target experience is **accessible**, with a difficulty curve that settles in **gently**.

Sokoban is PSPACE-complete, a complexity class that encompasses NP. In practice, a board’s perceived difficulty depends not on the number of mechanical elements but on the density of dead-end states in the play space (Jarušek and Pelánek, *Difficulty Rating of Sokoban Puzzle*, 2010). It’s a complex system with considerable potential for cognitive overload, to be dosed carefully. To guarantee a fluid experience and avoid frustrating cognitive blocks, boards offer more than one solution path, so the player feels like they crafted their own success.

Dead-end density and the plurality of solution paths are hard to assess by eye, and verifying them manually takes time an independent studio’s schedule can’t afford. The project is therefore developing its own procedural generation tool for this purpose. Boards are filtered by configurable criteria, analyzed for their solution paths and dead-end density, then sorted by difficulty. The design team then adds its touch by selecting the most fun, elegant, and intuitive ones. Human resources thus focus on content quality rather than technical validation.

Execution Stack

The project is currently in preproduction. The art research and mechanic design work is mature enough to move into prototyping. The project’s mechanical challenge is concentrated on empathic tuning rather than spread across several simultaneous high-risk fronts, which is what makes the prototyping phase deliverable within the proposed budget and schedule.

Unreal Engine 5.7 was chosen for the maturity of its native systems (Gameplay Framework, Blueprints, State Trees, Lumen), its licensing model favourable to early-stage studios, and its cross-platform integration (target floor: Nintendo Switch and iPhone 15).

Audio is implemented with Wwise (Audiokinetic). Tuning is read as much by ear as on screen: the rightness of an encounter is heard before it’s understood, exactly like a chord falling into place. Each tuned creature adds its layer to the whole, so the game’s score builds itself across the friendships the player forges (in the vein of *My Singing Monsters*).

Generative AI (Claude, ChatGPT) is used as an ideation support tool and for documentary research. No generative output ships in the deliverable: no code, no visuals, no animation, no audio, no game text. *Gut Feelings* is 100% handcrafted, from skin to skeleton.

The prototype delivered at the end of the phase, on PC, demonstrates the concept end to end: **10 boards, 3 mini-games, and 3 creatures**. The PlaytestCloud platform will be used to outsource its validation, bypassing the team’s internal cognitive biases, with an audience representative of the project’s target:

- **Puzzle navigation on cellular grid:** Abilities and dynamic elements produce readable and interesting situations. Players understand the rules and find solutions without recurring blocks;
- **Empathic tuning:** Players interpret a creature’s reactions and adjust their behaviour. They progressively understand what the creature is looking for, without having to guess arbitrarily;
- **Mini-games:** The three contexts offer real variety while expressing the same core mechanic. Players tell the contexts apart, but recognize the shared tuning logic.

