

I DIED ALONE WITH A VERY HIGH SCORE

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Days after my fourth anniversary with my girlfriend we came upon the stark realization that things just weren't working anymore. Over the years she'd begun distancing herself from friends, relying on me almost entirely for all forms of relationship. Meanwhile I'd grown aloof, antsy as the tenure of our relationship extended with each passing month.

It was only days before the anniversary that I stumbled upon *Passage*, an incredibly evocative indie title by minimalist Jason Rohrer. In a very subdued fashion the game chronicles the life of a couple, from first encounter to final moments.

Passage is beautiful because through the subtlety of its design and the simplicity of its mechanics the game takes the player through the impetuosity of youth to the recollection of old age, all in a span of 5 minutes. The centerpiece for this journey is the pixelated relationship between the protagonist and his love.

As the two move in tandem through the 100x12 pixel landscape they take up enough room that passing through certain gaps in terrain becomes difficult or impossible. This makes many of the game's hidden treasure chests inaccessible regardless of how you maneuver the lovers.

Because we had come to the decision to break things off over the phone we agreed it would only be right to meet the next day and do it in person. Thus came one of the worst 24 hours of my life. It felt like the scene in *Gladiator* where Russell Crowe is bravely waiting to enter the arena for the first time. Except I wasn't Russell Crowe, I was the squeamish guy that pisses himself with fear.

Thus, I retreat in to games; *Street Fighter*, *Unreal Tournament*, whatever could make me forget about the impending fate of my relationship. But I find no solace in these experiences; they're distractions and provide no real comfort. So, as I go back to my bed to contemplate some more I take my iPhone and play *Passage* one more time.

There's a very small window in the game where you can bypass the relationship the entire story is structured around. It's not likely to happen because it requires the player to go out of their way to avoid the girl. I do this, if only to see what could happen.

Things progress as normal, but the former immobility is gone. I'm free to move through narrow hallways and get every treasure chest I see. I'm showered with big blue stars as each chest displays its satisfying animation. My score rises higher and higher, breaching my former record.

Then I get old. I'm slowed, but I'm still collecting. My score continues to climb, but I know what's coming soon. I look back one last time at the obscured past; if my love is in there she's miles back and completely forgotten.

So I die alone, my record score sitting pixels above my deathbed. My tombstone sits patiently while the title screen washes it and any record of my high score away forever. The loveless life I'd lead and all its accomplishments are forgotten completely.

Passage isn't about the score; in fact it's quite the opposite. The personal conquests of a single soul don't matter when the final curtain is pulled. Love is the only reward and though that love can hinder your life, holding you back or challenge you to progress, it's the only thing worth doing.

As I write this, it is hours before I'm scheduled to see my girlfriend and potentially break up for good. *Passage* has made me even more scared than ever. While I still see all our flaws and hindrances, I now feel like that's just part of life and it's something you need to work through.

Passage doesn't give you the option to have a spotty relationship. If you're in with the girl, you're in for life. Life is unfortunately not like that. I don't know what's in store for us, but if there's a way to stay together I want to try it. I don't want to die alone with a very high score.

