

# Little shop of horror

Bruised but not beaten, Red Candle Games has found **a home for Devotion**: its own web store

While the narrative of Red Candle Games' *Devotion* is driven by religious fanaticism, the story of the game's development and release is one of tenacity. First released in 2019, the Taiwanese horror game was swiftly removed from Steam when references to China's president, Xi Jinping, were uncovered by Internet sleuths. Then came the backlash from mainland Chinese players, which even saw the business licence of the Chinese publisher revoked for allegedly threatening China's national security and social fabric.

*Devotion* was stuck in limbo, inaccessible to new players. At least, until late last year, when GOG.com – the CD Projekt-owned digital distribution platform formerly known as Good Old Games – announced that *Devotion* would get a second lease of life on its storefront. What followed was an uncharacteristic display of backpedalling by GOG. Mere hours after the announcement, the storefront declared it would cease all plans to release *Devotion* "after receiving many messages from gamers".

Red Candle seemed to be as taken aback by the news as everyone else. The team had reached out to several online storefronts to discuss the game's rerelease, and GOG's reception to this proposal had been positive. "Unfortunately, just a few days before the scheduled release date, [GOG] informed us that the plan was cancelled," Vincent Yang, co-founder of Red Candle Games, tells us. "Basically, GOG gave us the same explanation as they shared with others on Twitter: that the cancellation was related to the negative response they

received after announcing the plan to enlist *Devotion* on GOG."

This March, the studio finally found a way to release *Devotion*: by self-publishing the game on its own store, launched specifically for this purpose. It seems the clearest path forward in light of the numerous obstacles Red Candle has encountered, and might feel like it's been a long time coming, but Yang reveals the team had mulled over this decision for a while. "We did not think of self-publishing in the first place for many reasons," he explains. "For one, the game's exposure will be very limited without a large, established userbase each digital platform is known to have. In other words, we'll have poor visibility. It will be rather

difficult to get searched on when hosting our own website, hence it'll be hard to get picked up by new players, especially when both our studio and our games are not that well-known in foreign countries."

The other reason is more straightforward: the host of technical issues that come with launching an

online store. Resources have to be dedicated to sorting out backend issues, such as allowing international players to make purchases with their credit cards. "For this action alone, we have to figure out how to set up and configure the payment gateway, negotiate with banks regarding the required fees, and write code for the e-shop that complies with regulation," Yang says. "That's a lot of work for a small indie game developer."

A commonly repeated suggestion has been to release the game on Itch.io, an open platform which has been the darling of many indie developers since its launch

in 2013. Itch.io seemed like the next best alternative: it was, after all, one of the few platforms that allowed Hong Kong developers to publish protest games which were also prohibited from being listed on Steam. According to Yang, Itch.io has given Red Candle the green light to list *Devotion* on its site – but with its own online store being set up, the studio decided to stick with self-publication.

**It has been** an uneasy few years for developers across East Asia. Between Steam's reluctance to list the game, and GOG's sudden about-turn on the planned *Devotion* launch, there's been a growing sense of weariness and uncertainty around China's growing influence on the global videogame market.

In Red Candle's case, unexpected offers from western publishers came streaming in, but Yang seems more reticent about accepting these. "We feel truly grateful for the support we have. But considering what happened with GOG, and the uncertain risk lying behind publishing *Devotion*, we just didn't want to cause any potential trouble to others. That's also one of the reasons we decided to self-publish the game."

As for other developers who may find themselves in a similar situation, Yang can only suggest one thing: resilience. "From this experience, we learnt to always stay resilient. When one direction does not work out, try to look into other opportunities. For example, listen to what's discussed in your community and see what pops up." Yang and his team have faced their share of difficulties over the past two years, but he's happy with the current outcome, which might inform the studio's future as well as its present. "We see it as a transformation stage to open up new business possibilities." ■

"Always stay resilient. When one direction does not work out, try to look into other opportunities"

A horror game steeped in Taiwanese culture and folklore, *Devotion* received widespread critical acclaim when it was released in 2019



Red Candle Games' co-founders: Light Wang, Henry Wang, Coffee Yao, Doy Chiang, Finger Chen and Vincent Yang



Lucy Ming-Yan



The game is set in the 1980s, and is a sobering portrait of a Taiwanese family that was torn apart by religious fanaticism

## FULL STEAM AHEAD

Other stores are still an option for future Red Candle games



Red Candle is currently working on its third game, a 2D action platformer that looks worlds away from its first two horror titles (take a look at @redcandlegames on Twitter for a brief teaser video). It might be too late for *Devotion*, but the studio hasn't rejected the possibility of releasing future titles on digital storefronts such as Steam or GOG. "As a game company and developer, we never limit ourselves to certain types of selling channels," Yang says. "All we want is to share our works with a worldwide audience, and at the same time be successful financially so we may keep making new [games]."