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TALE OF TALES INTERVIEW

Tale of Tales is a Belgium-based artist duo—Auriea Harvey and Michaël Samyn—known for their earlier work with experimental and experiential games such as *The Path* and *The Graveyard*.

This is part of the interview series for my Handmade Pixels book.

The interview was conducted on January 11th, 2018.

Jesper: You've been Tale of Tales for how long now?

Auriea: Since 2003.

Michaël: Yes, officially since 2003.

Jesper: Is it correctly understood that Tale of Tales transcends "games?"

Auriea: Yes. When we first met, we formed a collaborative called Entropy8Zuper!. A few years later, when we decided to start making games, we changed our name. That name is just a rebranding of us together.

Michaël: When we started with video games in 2002, 2003, independent games didn't really exist. I remember clearly from the GDCs in London, slogans like "The time of the bedroom programmer is over". You needed at least a few million to make good game. That was the general tendency. We felt we needed to front as a company. Tale of Tales was our company name. For our first games, we talked to many publishers because we needed to have our game printed on a CD-ROM and distributed to stores. It was only after failing to do that, that we made a game distributed through the internet, *The Endless Forest*. The entire game is around 50 megabytes. It had to be small. It was only when broadband started that this idea of being an independent game studio became something that we could actually do.

Jesper: Do you feel that your early work has been vindicated, in that a lot of the game development environment caught up to the fact that you can do experimental productions and distribute them on the internet?

Michaël: The funny thing is, we came from art, and we made art on the web mostly. A big attraction of the computer as a medium for artistic creation was the fact that with the web, you had instant distribution. Being independent as an artist then was de facto. You could be independent because you didn't need galleries, museums.

Auriea: Or publishers.

Michaël: Or publishers. It was not, "Will I be an independent artist or some other kind of artist". Being an artist was being independent.

Auriea: When it came to video games, we wanted to put our stuff on a CD and have it on the PlayStation. When we found that we could publish it online, it felt natural. Why not? It's 50 megabytes. At the time, 50 megabytes was still a big download, but doable. And vindicated, maybe a little bit.

Jesper: In general, what do you see yourselves as doing? Are you artists? Is that the primary framing of what you do?

Auriea: That's the easiest way to put it, yeah.

Michaël: We're artists, we just have an artistic interest in design as such. But we consider ourselves artists. Everything that we do is just infiltrating other communities, or pretending to be something else. Or pretending even that this work of art is a video game.

Auriea: Intentionally or unintentionally. Sometimes pretending and sometimes not.
We have ideas, and then we do whatever we have to do to make that idea exist in the world, even if that means you have to create your own categories. The idea is the most important part. You think this thing should exist, so you figure out how you can make it. That's always been the way we do things. Having a video game business was no different than that.

Jesper: What communities do you see yourselves as part of?

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Auriea: So many. It wasn't the general gaming community for a long time, so we created our own communities when we needed to. When we saw that there was a need for a space for other people, we created notgames. There is the community of early net artists. We have the game development community, which embraced us for so long, embraced with one hand and rejected with the other. We feel a part that of even though we've walked away a bit. Then there's also the academic community, because I teach. We both taught. And, there's this whole side to us that is about research.

Michaël: In our artistic way?

Auriea: In our artistic way. There's a whole of community of archaeologists and researchers that I feel a part of, which is part of the reason we're in Rome.

Jesper: Do you see yourself as being part of an art community?

Auriea: Sort of. Not in a contemporary art sense though. We're definitely disconnected from that, although a lot of my friends are successful contemporary artists with gallery shows and whatnot.

We're not active in it. We go to openings. Our work is most related to new media work, or work involving computers. The more mainstream contemporary art scene we are not really part of.

Michaël: Maybe we can infiltrate that next.

Auriea: We can infiltrate that as well.

Jesper: Your Realtime Art Manifesto said, "We shouldn't be making modern art?"

Auriea: That was 2006. You don't want to be bound by ideas you had in 2006 for the rest of your life.

Michaël: The context of that was that we really appreciate craft in creation, and we saw a lot of craft video games; people learned skills and could actually make things. While in fine art, they often hired people to make the art.

We had a problem with that.

Auriea: It's always about collaboration for us.

Michaël: Especially when creating interactive art, to do it yourself and to experience the result immediately is just very inspiring. It connects you much closer to your material. We never made design documents, because they were always wrong. We had to just make things and then figure out what we were designing.

Jesper: I am curious about where it started. How did you come to video games? I read you talking about this early time with approaching Sony and so on, but can you recap that story briefly?

Auriea: How we came to video games? We were just playing games at the weekend. Every weekend we were renting a different video game. It turned out we liked playing games more than we liked watching movies then. We were like, "Ah, this is fun." We kept looking at it thinking, "Well, this is interactive, and this is art. Why don't we make video games?" We kept playing the games, and then asking questions about them that we didn't have answers for.

We were asking, "Well, why are they like this? Why are there only like five genres?" It seemed you could do anything with it. We were like, "Well, why don't we just go do the things that we're asking all these questions about and find out why that is," so we took two years. We went to Jan Van Eyck Academy in Maastricht. We got a research fellowship there researching game design. In those two years we made our first game prototype, started going to GDC, talking to game developers, figuring out how games were made and why they were the way they were.

What we found were more questions, of course. Then we tried to figure out how we could make games and market them. At first, we were just like, "What could possibly go wrong? How could it be difficult? Let's just do this. PlayStation game, go." It turned out to be much more complicated.

Jesper: What was fascinating about games at that time?

Auriea: We found moments in them that were just amazing and beautiful. Then there were frustrating elements involving their genre-boundness. It was like the random battles in RPGs. We're just like, "Well, you've got this amazing setting, fabulous." *Final Fantasy X* something had come out. The story's there, you've got all the elements to make something great, and then you do this stupid thing, like random battle. Why is that there? It was irritating us to the point where we were needed to know more, needed to figure this out and get to the bottom.

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Michaël: We were interested in the computer as a medium, and it seemed like games were the ultimate thing you could do with computers. We interested in creating immersive spaces, coming from the mid-'90s internet and the idea of cyberspace. Games suddenly gave the technology to actually create a world.

Auriea: *Doom 3* had come out too. There was this whole thing with graphics cards and 3d acceleration. It was the beginning of normal maps, and it was just completely fascinating. For computer geeks like us, we were sitting there, "Wow."

Jesper: I remember that, the normal mapping, and being amazed at how the heads were actually round.

Auriea: Exactly. Michaël was a big *Doom* fan from day one. I was into *Myst* back in the day. When we started playing games again, there were games like *Silent Hill 1*, which totally blew our minds. At first, we hated it, we had rented it twice, but I finally bought it because I just couldn't deal with the fact that I hadn't finished it. And the same for *Devil May Cry 1*. And then *Ico* came out.

Auriea: We were already making prototypes then. And *Black and White 1* we played for endless hours. And smaller things like *A Tale in the Desert*.

Jesper: We'll get to *Sunset* a little later, but how do see the history of this? Was there a change where it became easier to explain what you were doing? Did the appearance of festivals change anything for you? How do you see the history of the larger landscape of experimental and art games?

Michaël: There's been a change in what we do, of course too. We were always trying different things with each game. But in the context, there was a growing attention to what we did, and a growing appreciation. We saw so much potential in the medium, I think a lot of game developers maybe still dream for video games to become a more general medium that's accessible and appealing to the wider audience. We would always say, "We make games for people who don't play games," implying "yet".

We've been quite disappointed with exhibitions, where people would come and play our games, but we also wanted them to play them at home because that's what they were made for. That rarely happened. But simultaneously, the game audience became more …

Auriea: Open-minded.

Michaël: I guess open-minded, or it became it more diverse, or maybe it grew, and other people started paying attention. There was a place for our work after a while. All these things developed simultaneously. Later it became very difficult to be economically independent. *Sunset* was our attempt to finally say, "Okay, let's make something for these gamers already."

Jesper: Can I put in an interjection before we get to *Sunset*? What role did festivals play for you?

Michaël: It's weird to say, but for us as fans of the exploration of art, being able to travel, opportunities to go to different places, to have a reason to go there, and then on our free day go to the museum. That was very important for us. Next to feeling that we are appreciated within that community, that helps to stave off the cynicism.

Auriea: It did help to stave off the cynicism for a while. I'd say that friendship was a reason the festivals were important. And to present our ideas was very important for us.

Jesper: I was wondering one thing, while we're still in the history phase here. You said the audience changed a bit, but did you feel people got better at understanding what you were doing?

Auriea: Yes, retroactively.

Michaël: They did, but they sort of made it up. It's a very strange thing to observe. Basically, gamers are total nerds. They know almost nothing about anything except games, which they think they know everything about. Then they see the games that we or some other people make, and it's almost like they start realizing, "This is different. This is something else," and they start developing their own ideas about what it means to be moved by something aesthetically and artistically. It's like they invent art as if art didn't exist yet. They tried to understand what their experiences meant. The frustrating part for us was to have to say, "You don't need to invent that. There's all this stuff elsewhere. This is not unrelated."

Auriea: I think a lot of it comes because many people who play games are very young. We watched a lot of kids grow up over our careers since we've been involved with games for quite a long time. Some kids started playing our games when they were 10, and then we talked to them again when they were 21, and they graduated from school and they're cool people now. We've had kids who were annoying to us when they were younger, write us apology letters. Like, "I realized that I said this on YouTube to you a long time ago and I really shouldn't have." It's like, "Oh thanks. You grew up. That's great."

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A lot happened retroactively to our games. *The Path* was quite weird and controversial when it came out in 2009. But now it's seen as a timeless classic. "Oh, what a lovely game. I remember playing that when I was 14 and it's beautiful. I totally want to play it again." Whereas at the time it was controversial. Nobody remembers that. People don't remember that when *The Graveyard* came out it was strange and controversial, because now it's totally not.

Jesper: I really loved *The Graveyard* when it came out, yet I probably was a little skeptical towards *The Path* some years earlier. I was thinking lately that, at that time I still was trying to build game aesthetics. I still had this thing that I wanted to finish first. And then probably around that time, I started switching perspective. Now I'm much more of an experiment addict. I always want to see weirder and weirder stuff.

Auriea: It depends. We all evolve and change. Part of our process is that we accept that the whole thing is going to change all the time.

Jesper: I was just playing *The Path*, and I thought one thing that characterizes a lot of your work, is that there is an ambivalence or skepticism towards game structure. You also say this explicitly in one of your manifestos. Of course, in *The Path* the whole idea is that if you follow both the regular moral path and the path of game structure, then it's not very interesting. Everything comes from breaking out of that. Could you tell me a bit about this in general? What's the problem with games or game structure?

Michaël: That's very simple. It is related to what Auriea was saying about how we played games and what frustrated us. The problem is that we are both as players and as artists, very interested in those fictional experiences being in this world and meeting these characters and just feeling that presence. When there's a game structure, to me it feels like the game structure's put on top of that. Then when you start paying too much attention to that structure because you have to, because otherwise you're killed or you can't progress, and then you're mentally moved to that higher level of that abstract game structure and you're basically gaming for numbers, for winning.

If we create a virtual world, we don't want people to ascend to that systematic level and game the system. We want them to stay in that world with all its problems, and all its ambiguity, and all its strangeness because that's what we find interesting. This pure game play where you do certain things and you get rewarded and then you do other things is just not very interesting to us. It's distracting. As a player, I'm also always frustrated. You find yourself in something, "Oh, this is beautiful. Look at how that guy moves. That's really nice," and then there's a pit and you have to jump over it, and then it's over.

Jesper: That's interesting. But could we make a counterargument if we want to generalize about the art form that we call games? In that case, games may be about the tension between these sensory experiences and the overarching game structure. Wouldn't it be possible to make that argument, that a good game should deal with these tensions?

Michaël: I think some people could experience games like that, but I think it takes a very special talent to be able to do it. There is type of person who really enjoys the game layer and gets a kick out of that, almost like sports. When you hear about their experiences it almost sounds like religious or aesthetic experiences. Then there's the other gamer who completely ignores the game structure. When they talk about their experience, they talk about, "I was in this world and I met this character. I had this adventure," and then forget all the difficulties.

Jesper: Did you see *Cuphead*? It has this really attractive 1930's animated visual style that everybody immediately loves, but it's very hard.

Auriea: It's the *Dragon's Lair* principle. You always wanted to play it because it's a cartoon. You want to watch, but you can't. You die instantly.

Jesper: And all you do is memorize these silly joystick movements. You also seem to be going back and forth about the label *games*. At some points you describe what you're doing as games, and some points as notgames.

Auriea: We did that was because at the time everybody kept saying, "You're not making games. You're not making games." We said, "Okay, fine. It's Notgames." It was almost a Dadaist joke. Although, it was very serious, because around that label, a lot of people gathered, and we ended up with games like *Proteus*, *Dear Esther*, even *Amnesia*. A lot of good things came from all of that.

Michaël: Which was the purpose ultimately. Disregarding the name, the purpose was to be able to discuss the creativeness of video game technology for projects that were not necessarily games. We could've called it Not Necessarily Games.

If we're going to discuss language, our point has always been that we make video games, computer games. Those don't have to be games. That is just an unfortunate name for these things that you make. We live in Belgium, we speak Dutch, where the English word

game specifically means video games. In Dutch, they don't have two different words for game and play.

Jesper: What's the word, *spil*?

Michaël: Spel.

Auriea: We also looked at notgames because we had all these online pedants quoting the dictionary at us.

Jesper: That's the next question: What's the difference between making something and putting it out there as a game, versus using a different label? If I understand you correctly, it's also that if you label something *game*, people will tend to have a very narrow assumption about what it is. If you put on another label, people are more open?

Auriea: Then they ignore it. Then they don't care what it is.

Michaël: Yeah, much of the demand from the hardcore gamers to not call our work games was to give them a justification to ignore it.

Auriea: Then they didn't have to care.

Michaël: Just call your work interactive art so I don't have to look at it.

Auriea: Then we're like, "No, it's a game. Ha. Now you have to download it."

Michaël: As we said before, we did play a lot of video games so it's not like we were unaware of what they were, it's just that we didn't agree.
What we liked in video games, we put in there. What we didn't like, we didn't put in there. But the inspiration came from video games, it is not we wanted to make whatever and just stick the label game on it. We were very much aware of that context.

Auriea: We were just like, "But why not? It's just a computer. You can do whatever you want with it. Whether we call that a game or not, who cares?" Apparently, a lot of people cared. We didn't know that, that was all. We just didn't.

Michaël: Yeah, that we didn't know. We were very surprised how important this was for many people.

Jesper: Is there a parallel between this and the kind of people who will be deeply offended if they go to an art museum and see any art made after 1900? They'll be angry and say, "This is not art." Is there a similarity to the "this is not a game"-reaction?

Auriea: There is a similarity there. I've only come to think about it that way in maybe the past eight years.
It's almost the conceptual basis for what we were doing with games. There is a contradiction there that we never reconciled. It's kind of funny to think about.

Jesper: But it's also funny because you seem to be traditionalists, given that you're all about Little Red Riding Hood, vanitas, the cathedrals, the Old Testament.

Michaël: That was the amusing thing. It's amusing because we get to be avant-garde and rebellious by being ultra-bourgeois and conservative.

Auriea: Then we would always say, "Gamers are so conservative," because we were being conceptual, messing with things.

Michaël: Part of that also comes from our relationship with the actual contemporary fine art outside of video games, in which there still is this tradition of the avant-garde. For us, it seems like they've been doing the same thing for over 100 years. Novelty is basically what it's all about. They try to do something that shocks people or whatever. In a way, we are the true avant-garde-ists by rejecting that tradition.
Going back to older traditions. I don't know. It's kind of a typical modernist reaction to be conservative now.

Jesper: Sure.

Michaël: Thinking up older things and bringing them into the present is what we're trying to do.

Jesper: My notes say that you're breaking with game tradition by bringing in tradition.

Michaël: If only because the computer suddenly gives us a medium where this is possible again. For me the whole 20th Century was ruined by photography, but the computer suddenly makes it possible to create synthetic images out of thin air. You can just make whatever you want.

It's going back to Gothic and Renaissance styles for me, before they started using lenses and all those things.

Jesper: One thing that strikes me about experimental work, like some of yours or *Dear Esther* or *Proteus* to take the obvious examples, is they also point to bits in video games that people don't think of as definitional. As you say, video games have periods where you walk around and look at things. We don't think of these as defining video games even though they're characteristic of a lot of video games, even large military shooters, which often have both quiet sections and on-rails sections.

Auriea: The beginning of *Half-Life 2* is our go-to example of that. The intro to *Half-Life 2* where you start in City 17, you get off the subway, and you meet these two people who are huddled in a corner. That was so powerful for us. Then the game started and ruined everything. We're like, "Dammit. I just want this."

Michaël: That's a good point. That what we felt about video games. There are many things in them that we liked, and we wanted to make something with those elements, such as walking.

Jesper: I don't want to belabor the issue of gamers attacking you, but what are the points that people react against the most?

Auriea: I think the main criticism was that we couldn't make our games better, quality-wise. The problem we always had, even far back as *The Path*, was that they were comparing it to games like *Uncharted*. We're sitting there like, "We made this game for 300 grand, guys. It took us three years." We were a team all-told eight people, compared to *Uncharted*, which had huge teams. When Thatgamecompany was making games, we would also get lumped in with them. Again, we cannot compete. They're backed by Sony; they were far better trained in terms of making video games. We're sitting there like, "Well, at least we're flattered by the comparisons," but our games never got compared to games that were made in the same way.

It wasn't until *Dear Esther* came out, which was made by basically Dan [Pinchbeck] and a few other people, where we felt like, "Okay, finally, a game that we can be linked together with." Before 3D, I think fully realized 3D worlds as exploration environments became a thing, around 2008, 2009 when those games came out, before that we kept getting compared to things that were far more polished. But we were flattered by the categories we were put in, even if it wasn't fair.

We wanted to work out all the bugs too, it just wasn't possible with our resources.

Michaël: The odd thing, and maybe this is because the game community is an internet community, is that the criticism was often based on an evaluation of the people who made the game much more than the game. Maybe they didn't like what we made, but the fact that we did, and we were proud of it, and we would dare to say that, "What we made is better than Mario," that would really trigger them.

Auriea: Yes, they were triggered.

Jesper: Concerning the other kind of criticism, the positive one: I saw one review of *Bientot L'ete* which compares it to Shelley's poem *Ozymandias*. What kind of criticism do you think makes sense?

Auriea: It depends on the game. For *Bientot L'ete*, we didn't care what the criticism was, because it was so personal. That was a special case.

Michaël: On the other hand, it was also a tribute to Marguerite Duras, author and filmmaker. Any kind of criticism that referenced that was always fun for me, "Ah, you like her too." If they recognize that aspect of the work, I like that a lot.

Jesper: Does it make sense when people compare your work to classics in whatever form or medium?

Auriea: We enjoy it when our work is seen within a broader view of culture. If they bring in other media like books, or film, when talking about the game, then we usually appreciate that a lot more than just seeing it in terms of, "Oh, *Uncharted*, *Assassin's Creed*."

Jesper: Can I ask you about visual style? For a period of time it's been a cliché in Indie/experimental games that you emulate a visual style. You emulate pixels even though your actual pixels are smaller, you emulate paper, you emulate crayons. You haven't done that that much, you've been more in 3-D, which is unusual for experimental games. What are your thoughts on that?

Auriea: That was just very conscious. There is a pixelated mode in *Sunset* though. That's a joke. What did we call it, Indie mode?

Michaël: I think we called it Indie mode.

We generally hated that type of style because we felt like was very disingenuous. We're

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Auriea: computer geeks, so it felt disingenuous to us to emulate a pixelated style when you don't really need to. It also didn't appeal to me as art director. I really just wasn't interested in that at all. I was always more interested in high-fidelity games. In that sense, it was no mistake to compare us to an *Assassins Creed*, because we loved that. At the same time, we knew that we couldn't compete because it's basically just us. We had to develop a certain philosophy it – what can we do well?

Actually, we nailed it on our first game, *The Endless Forest*, which I still think looks great even though we made it in 2005. It was this principle: it doesn't have to look real; it has to feel real. I was thinking about the world holistically, about this entire experience with the sound, and the animation, and the action. I think there was a lot more accepted freedom to design a navigation scheme back then. We were able to really tailor how the game worked. I think we did also on *The Path*, the way you have to interact with the world. Even will all the bugs, I think it's aesthetically in keeping with the look of the world.

The navigation scheme was treated as an aesthetic element, and along with this bombastic soundtrack, and all of it going together was important for us. Even if the models are not perfect in *The Path*, you look at it and you still feel like these girls are doing these things, and everything still feels alive. That became incredibly important. I think we also perfected that on *Bientot L'ete*. That's, to me, is the most beautiful synthesis of our total idea, our aesthetic ideals. The way you close your eyes and you see this wireframe world; you open again and then the time of day has changed and so have the colors and everything.

Michaël: I think what we did was fairly typical for an artist to do: when you approach a technology, you try to figure out what it can do. Not what I can do with it, not a preconceived notion, but just look at it. Then dedicate yourself to bringing that out, that thing that you think it can do. A more traditional way of approaching game design, would be to decide on the look beforehand, or have a concept artist, and then try to emulate that in 3D.

We wanted our games to be beautiful, not just the preparatory sketches. We felt we needed to work in the medium. This is also why we have a preference for visual programming interfaces, preferably real-time so that we can also do the programming, all the changing of the numbers. It's not just abstract code, it's also aesthetics that happens. We're very fond of the computer as a living thing that can create life basically.

Jesper: At least some theorists feel it's wrong to say that a technology has a certain way of being, or that it does certain things. But as you say, when you make things, you do experience that a technology has a way of being, or that there are some things that the technology wants, and that it has a certain character that you want to discover.

Michaël: And sometimes you struggle with that because of course it's not just the hardware, there's also the software, and then there's the philosophy of the people who make the software. Often that doesn't align with your own philosophy. Then you have to make compromises. You can't just twist the tools so much to make something that is opposed to what the creator of the tool wanted. You have to find compromise and say, "Okay, well what can you do well?" If you only try to do things that the software can't really do very well, your work will be crappy too.

Jesper: But this is also interesting because I think many Indie developers like showing off that they did something that wasn't intended. Back when Unity didn't have a 2D mode, people had to figure out how to turn off the filtering and so on, so you could get the real pixelated look.

Auriea: We haven't thought about it that way.

Jesper: You're not show-offs in that sense.

Michaël: We're geeky, but not in technical programming. I think the way you described it sounds like a challenge they take up. Our challenges are elsewhere. We have to deal with how to turn off the default head bobbing in a game engine.

It's a simple example, but when you work with Unity or with Unreal under the hood you feel that they really want you to make a first person shooter. That's been the challenge. "Okay, but we're not going to make a first person shooter," so we work around it. But what elements can be used from a first person shooter?

Auriea: Our goal was always somewhere else also. It was never just about how it looked. It was more about how it felt, and how to get people in the same emotional space. What would it take to do that?

Auriea: Working on *Sunset* was so personal. It was a blur. We were working nearly every day for a year. It wasn't crunch exactly, it was just, "This is what it takes to get it done, so let's just chug through this." It was extremely asset heavy, let's put it that way.

Jesper: But are you over games now? I've seen you want to return to *The Endless Forest*?

Auriea: *The Endless Forest* never ends of course. We've always kept *The Endless Forest* alive because we're going to retire there one day. We want to have to remake it so that it can keep going.

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Michaël: We're talking generations of course. This game has been online for 12 years, so lots of people have stopped playing, new people come in. People grow old in *The Endless Forest*.

Jesper: But, are you over games? Do you see yourself coming back after your VR project?

Auriea: We'll continue with VR as long as it lasts. Who knows, but I don't see us coming back to games as such.

Michaël: Things keep changing for the worse I find. Not just the game community, but in general, the economics of independent distribution gets worse and worse.

Auriea: Us making downloadable software things could happen.

Michaël: I think what has mostly stopped is our desire to engage with the industry.
I think the technology is still interesting to us, and of course we've never agreed with the game format, so that's not a change. We will continue to make things that deviate from that. More so now because we don't have to be involved with the industry anymore, so that's liberating to us. But other than that, we might still make a Tale of Tales video game.

Auriea: It could happen.

Michaël: Just don't expect it to be distributed commercially because that's not going to happen.

Jesper: Okay, I think that's a good ending. Thanks a lot for taking the time.

Auriea: Thanks for thinking of us.

Michaël: Bye.

Jesper: Bye.