

MONSTERLAB

AI Integration Strategy.

How a 4–6 person studio ships a prestige body-horror game for web and mobile — and why the lab metaphor and the tech stack are, finally, the same object.

PARTNER BRIEF · v1.0 · JUNE 2026

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— EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The lab is the model.

MonsterLab is a body-horror prestige game for web and mobile. AI is not a feature bolted onto a traditional game design — it is the engine the original 1996–1999 design always implied. A Victorian generative lab that stitches parts into one-of-one creatures is, mechanically and metaphorically, a diffusion-and-language-model pipeline. We use this on both sides of the screen.

The pitch in one paragraph

A 4–6 person studio delivers a 50+ hour prestige-feeling game with infinite player-specific content, voice-acted nightly story chapters, and a finite hand-curated part library — on a \$1.5M–\$3M budget — because AI collapses the cost curves that historically made this scope impossible at this team size. The fiction is the cover story: every weird, asymmetric, generated thing the model produces is in character. The lab being the lab.

The line we hold

AI does not touch the story spine, the visual direction, the tone calls, or the canon. Those are human-authored, full stop. The lab generates within a curated frame, the way a director shapes what a camera sees. The body-horror prestige audience is allergic to “AI slop” — we earn their trust by being explicit and disciplined about where the line is.

— 01 · THE NARRATIVE-TECHNICAL RHYME

Why AI belongs in MonsterLab specifically.

The reason AI belongs in MonsterLab — and not as a generic 2026 buzzword — is that the original design IP, registered in 1996 and documented through 1999, is already a generative system on paper:

- A laboratory that produces creatures from interchangeable parts
- A book of formulas that an oracle character consults
- Asymmetric, never-quite-the-same monsters
- A scientist who has lost control of his own outputs

Every one of these maps cleanly onto a 2026 ML pipeline. We are not bolting “AI” onto a game design. We are finally building the game the 1996 design described, because the technology to do it now exists.

“This narrative cover is the single biggest defensive moat against the AI-game backlash. When a stitch produces a misshapen limb, that is the lab failing — in character.”

— 02 · PLAYER-FACING AI

What shows up in the game.

2.1 Generative stitching (the core loop)

What the player experiences. The player drags parts onto a marble slab. Sutures animate. The creature renders, alive, on the table. Asymmetric, sutured, one-of-one. No other player has ever seen this creature.

How it works. A fine-tuned diffusion image model (SDXL Lightning class, custom LoRA on the Burton roster + 2026 art direction) takes assembled parts as a structured prompt and renders the final creature. Lightweight enough to run on-device on modern phones. Composition is constrained by hand-authored part metadata so anatomy stays coherent. The model is not free-roaming — it samples within a tight latent neighborhood we curate.

Why it matters. This is the wow moment that makes MonsterLab impossible to clone with a 1999 design. On-device inference means zero server cost per stitch — what makes a free-to-play launch economically sane.

2.2 The Book of Monster Formulas (in-fiction oracle)

What the player experiences. An in-world book the player opens and asks anything in plain language. It answers in Dr. Stein's voice, in handwriting, referencing the specific parts on their shelf and the specific creatures they have lost.

How it works. A small fine-tuned language model (8–13B class, quantized). Corpus: the 1999 design doc, Burton's bios, the player's save state, and a hand-written style corpus in Stein's voice. RAG over the save file gives grounded memory of the player's specific runs.

Why it matters. The lore vehicle, tutorial, hint system, and emotional payoff collapsed into one diegetic UI. No HUD tooltips. The game explains itself in character.

2.3 Lab memory (permadeath with weight)

When a creature dies, the lab remembers. An obituary appears in Stein's handwriting. A sketch goes up on the wall. Weeks later, when a part with that creature's history is reused, the game references it: "this arm last belonged to the one you called Marrow. it remembers the cold." Permadeath without memory is churn. Permadeath with memory is grief.

2.4 Nightly chapters (the prestige cadence)

A new chapter drops every night, like a prestige TV series. 20-minute sittings. The skeleton — Dr. Von Gersdorf, the Book, the ten-level castle, Sleepytown — is hand-authored. The connective tissue is generated against the player's save. This is how a small studio ships prestige TV cadence without

an army of writers.

2.5 Voice — TTS-cast principals

One licensed actor per character records a base session under direction. We license their voice and likeness explicitly and on-the-record. A TTS model is conditioned on their session. Every generated line ships in their voice, with their contractual approval over usage scope. We pay per delivered line, but the talent is paid above scale for the licensing. The ethics are non-negotiable; the contract structure is part of the moat.

— 03 · PRODUCTION-FACING AI

How a small team ships this.

3.1 The team

Total: 4–6 FTE. Reference comparisons: Hades shipped at ~20 (Supergiant). Inscryption shipped with ~3. Cult of the Lamb shipped at ~12 (Massive Monster). Our scope sits between Inscryption and Cult of the Lamb; AI is what closes the headcount gap.

Creative Director (Michael A. Pace)	1 · Story, tone, canon, partner relationships
Art Director	1 · Visual direction, model curation, part library
Game Designer	1 · Loop, balance, parts metadata, system design
Technical Artist	0.5–1 · LoRA training, on-device inference, pipeline
Engineer	1–2 · Web/mobile client, save layer, narrative engine
Producer / Ops	0.5 · Production, QA orchestration, partner-side

3.2 The art pipeline

A finite hand-authored part library for ~50 creatures with Burton-DNA coherence traditionally takes a 6-person art team 18 months. We don't have that team or that timeline.

Art Director sketches a part. A fine-tuned image model (LoRA on the 1998 roster + the 2026 direction; already validated at proof-of-concept quality) generates 30+ variants. Art Director curates 4. Each curated variant gets a touch-up pass. The model never ships untouched work. Throughput multiplier ~10x, not the model doing the art alone.

3.3 Balance, QA, and playtest

Headless game clients run as autonomous playtesters overnight, executing millions of stitch-and-battle combinations. They surface dominant strategies, broken parts, dead parts, and difficulty drift across the ten-level castle. Designers see a daily digest, not a million logs.

3.4 Localization

The authored spine localizes professionally to an EN/JA/KO/zh-CN/ES/FR/DE/PT-BR launch tier. The generated connective tissue localizes through the same TTS-and-LM pipeline, prompted in target language, reviewed by a native-speaking culture editor per language. Every line ships in the licensed actor's voice (cross-lingual TTS handles the language transfer; the actor approves their character

model output).

3.5 Code velocity

Standard 2026 baseline — Claude / Cursor / equivalent for all engineering work. Worth saying out loud in the budget because it is what makes 1–2 engineers credible. Not differentiating; expected.

— 04 · THE LINE

What AI does, and does not, do.

Partners will ask. Audiences will ask. The answer is the same every time.

DOMAIN	HUMAN-AUTHORED	AI-ASSISTED
Story spine, canon, lore	Human	—
Visual direction, art style	Human	—
Tone, voice, dialogue style	Human	—
Hand-sketched part designs	Human	—
Curated final art assets	Human	—
Part metadata, balance authoring	Human	—
Music, score	Human	—
Marketing, trailer, store listing	Human	—
Part-variant generation (curated)	—	AI
In-fiction creature rendering	—	AI
In-fiction oracle dialogue	—	AI
Variable nightly chapter dialogue	—	AI
TTS performance (under license)	—	AI
QA, balance, playtest sweeps	—	AI
Localization of variable content	—	AI

We do not generate music with AI. We do not generate trailers or marketing copy with AI. We do not use AI-generated voices without explicit, paid, on-the-record actor licensing. We do not ship a stitched creature image whose style has not been signed off by a human (the individual instance is generated; the latent neighborhood it samples from is curated).

— 05 · RISKS AND MITIGATIONS

How we handle the hard parts.

"AI game" backlash from prestige audience	Be explicit about the line. Lead marketing with hand-craft. Show the human team, by name, in every press piece. Invite suspicious audiences to inspect the pipeline.
Voice actor IP / consent disputes	Per-character licensing contracts with named talent, above-scale compensation, per-line royalty structure, explicit usage scope, kill switch on actor request. No talent-replacement workflows.
Training data provenance	The Burton-trained model uses only Burton's own original artwork — he owns it, he's our collaborator since the 1990s, provenance is clean. Variant models are licensed or original. We produce a training-data manifest for any partner.
On-device inference performance	Mid-tier iPhone / mid-tier Android targets. Stitch render time budget is 3–6 seconds (framed in-fiction as the creature waking up). Cloud fallback for older devices, behind a feature flag.
Model drift across updates	Versioned, frozen production checkpoints. Any model swap is a content patch with QA gates. Players' previously-rendered creatures are cached; re-rendering on model change is opt-in.
Generated content disrespecting canon	Hard guardrails: the LM cannot introduce new named characters, locations, or lore beats. It can only recombine and inflect within authored canon. Violations are tested in QA sweeps.
Social saturation of stitched monsters	A feature, not a bug — every player generating shareable one-of-one creatures is organic marketing. The pipeline is built for sharability.

— 06 · BUDGET SNAPSHOT

Indicative ranges, 18–24 month build.

Soft-launch on web. iOS/Android follow shortly. Steam/console is a year-two conversation.

Team (4–6 FTE × 18–24 months)	\$1.2M – \$2.1M
Voice talent (3–5 principals, licensed)	\$150K – \$400K
ML infra (training, on-device opt, eval)	\$80K – \$200K
Music & sound design (contract)	\$80K – \$150K
Localization (launch tier)	\$40K – \$90K
Marketing, PR, festivals, soft-launch	\$100K – \$250K
Contingency (15%)	included above
Total	\$1.5M – \$3.0M

For reference: traditional production of a game with this scope and quality bar typically runs \$5M–\$15M with a team of 15–25. The AI pipeline is what closes that gap without compromising the prestige tone.

— 07 · WHAT WE NEED FROM A PARTNER

A single, aligned relationship.

Publishing or co-development

Single partner relationship, not a syndicate. Track record with mature-tone indie IP (reference comps: Inscryption, Cult of the Lamb, Mouthwashing, Hades).

Web-first conviction

The launch is browser-native. Mobile follows immediately. Steam/console is a year-two conversation.

Tone alignment

The partner has to genuinely want body-horror prestige, not negotiate it down toward “spooky cute.”

AI-pipeline trust

The partner has to be willing to defend the pipeline publicly, with us, against the inevitable backlash beat. We have the answers; they have to repeat them.

— 08 · WHAT'S READY TODAY

The receipts are public.

- The 30-year IP, fully documented, indexable archive live at monsterlab-archives.pplx.app
- The original 13-character roster hand-sketched by Dan Burton, recovered and re-presented
- The 1999 SEGA Dreamcast design document, 18 pages, full canon
- The 2026 reinvention pitch page, live at monsterlab-2026.pplx.app
- Validated proof-of-concept key art in the body-horror prestige direction
- This document
- A creative director with thirty years on the IP and a registered domain since 1996

“What we need a partner for: the build.”

CONTACT

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