ISSN 2572-5572

UNWINNABLE MONTHLY

Volume 5, Issue 11 - November 2018

NON-BINARY CYBERPUNK • A HISTORY OF FLASH GAMES

UNWINNABLE

Monthly

109

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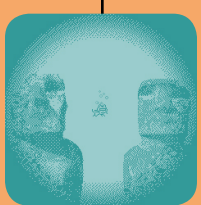


From the Desk of the Editor in Chief | Stu Horvath

Hi gang! Welcome to what is probably our longest issue of the year. It is jam packed, so let me get right to it.

Our cover story this month, by Liam Conlon, tackles the many ways in which cyberpunk as a genre can improve its inclusiveness. Eve Greenwood sums it up nicely on the cover, I think, and you can find more about them in the Artist Spotlight.

Our second feature is a massive, thoroughly entertaining, often sweet and always interesting history of Flash games by Phantom. Don't let the length daunt you.

In the columns, Alyse Stanley joins the regulars. She will be contributing a monthly look at the meme-verse. She leads off with Gritty, and it is *great*. Give her a warm welcome.

Amanda Hudgins' Self Insert also returns this month, taking a look at the enduring appeal of the Marvel Cinematic Universe's Darcy Lewis in fanfic.

There is a smog of zeitgeist hanging over some of our columns. Over in Backlog, Gavin Craig wrestles with a diminishing interest in videogames (I can relate, buddy). Sara Clemens echoes this while musing on vampires and the ethical consumption of games. Which Yussef Cole echoes in his pondering of how to write about ethically compromised games like *Red Dead Redemption 2*.

Taking another tack with *RDR2*, Jason McMaster examines the game's pacing and emergent beauty. Rob Rich steps up to try to redeem *Brutal Legend*'s reputation. Oh, and, speaking of heavy metal, Astrid Budgor's got some excellent new albums for you to check out.

Elsewhere, Megan Condis luxuriates in the gentle tone of the Japanese reality show *Terrace House*. Deirdre Coyle recalls the odd videogame hidden in her Encarta and gets witchy about it. Ben Sailer gets amped for the *Dance Dance Revolution* movie. Matt Marrone visits Prince's Paisley Park. Finally, I think far too hard and long about a recent encounter with the Mysterious Package Company.

In other news, we're close to launching the new official Unwinnable podcast, Unmissable. Sara Clemens and David Shimomura will be your hosts. While you wait on that, check out our other podcasts, Notorious Narratives and The Vintage RPG Podcast.

See you on December 1 in the new issue of Exploits!

Stu Horvath
Kearny, New Jersey
November 14, 2018

What Matters and What Lasts

It's a difficult thing to write about videogames when one doesn't play very many videogames.

I keep, in my rather nerdy fashion, tabs on such things. The trend has not been good in the past few years. I played, according to my spreadsheet, 63 games in 2015, 49 in 2016 and 42 in 2017. This year, on the other hand, I've played 12 games.

Not *God of War*, not *Spider-Man*. Neither *Fortnite* nor *Red Dead Redemption 2*. I own *Detroit: Become Human*, but I haven't loaded it up. I played a couple of sessions of *Monster Hunter: World*, but I sold it.

I have played both episodes of *The Walking Dead: The Final Season*, but it's impossible to talk about. As a media object, it's incomplete, and I have nothing to contribute to the discussion of TellTale's labor practices that Julie Muncy hasn't already said.

It's easy and not particularly useful to declare that games don't matter. I don't buy into the idea that critics are parasitic things, looking to latch on to (or tear down) "true" artists in the hope of significance by association. Art is not a magical thing produced by magical individuals in singular discrete units with no context but their own genius. The production of art matters, but so does its reception. If the job of the critic is to help define context, to help artist and audience speak to each other, then it's probably wise to err in favor of being on the side of the context and the audience. Even if it's not terribly useful to declare that games don't matter all that much, the fact remains that the nature of media criticism is to spend a lot of time with a lot of things that won't last very long.

I like to joke in conversations with my colleagues that I'm old, but that joke is less and less amusing, even to me. I don't remember where I first encountered the observation that videogame criticism seems to run in three-year cycles of new writers and publications starting and then finding the business unsustainable.

They say memory is the first to thing to go.

I am approaching the end of what feels like my second three-year tour. And I'm not playing very many videogames.

This is not meant to be a good-bye. I'm not planning to go anywhere. I am simply in search of something that lasts, and trying to figure out in this context — games and the people who read about them and write about them — what that could even look like.

In Scott McCloud's seminal book, *Understanding Comics*, there is a brief section on the aesthetic differences between American superhero comics and Japanese manga that I have always found particularly compelling. McCloud claims that, unlike their western counterparts, which are usually packed to the brim with constant, fast-paced action, Japanese comic books allow readers to indulge in "slow, cinematic" passages, devoting multiple panels to exploring environments and reflecting on emotional moments. As a result, they can sometimes feel a bit sluggish and unhurried to the reader who is used to new plot developments being introduced on every page if not in every panel. However, once a reader becomes accustomed to their more sensuous, fluid style, they often find themselves more than willing to dwell within the quiet spaces that develop on the page, savoring these moments that exist in the "in between."

I posit that *Terrace House*, the Japanese hit originally produced by Fuji Television and then later picked up by Netflix for distribution to an international audience, illustrates a similar set of design principles thereby differentiating American reality TV from its Japanese equivalent. At first the show sounds like a close cousin to MTV's *The Real World*. At the beginning of each episode, the hosts declare their mission: to follow the lives of three men and three women from all different walks of life who have been thrown together into a (beautifully appointed) house and must learn to get along with one another. However, at no point do any of the residents of *Terrace House* seem interested in ceasing to be polite and starting to get real, at least according to the standard set by shows like *The Bachelor* or *The Bad Girls Club*. Instead, each series feels similar to a marathon of *The Great British Bake-Off*, with drunken

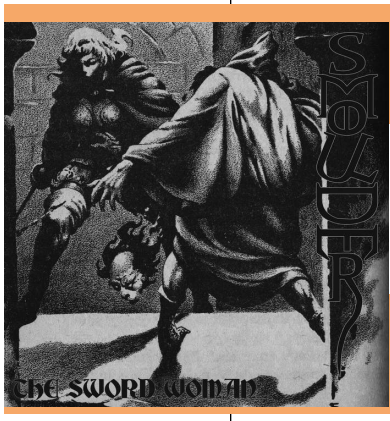
fights and sloppy make-out sessions replaced by gentle rebukes and tender moments of encouragement.

Another major difference is the lack of "confessionals," those cutaway scenes depicting cast members tucked into a closet and seeming to react "off the cuff" to the events on the screen (in truth, these confessionals are often shot long after the event in question took place and are sometimes cobbled together out of answers cast members give to a barrage of manipulative questions asked by producers trying to literally manufacture drama). Instead, each episode invites us to a living room set where a group of six hosts who have been watching alongside us share their thoughts on the last few scenes. These intermissions make the experience of binging the show alone feel similar to the way that it feels to get a group of fans together to alternately snark and squee about *The Bachelor* during the commercial breaks, mixing emotional reactions to the romantic foibles of the housemates with meta-commentary about where the season fits into the series' history. For example, when a cast member from previous seasons that were only available in Japan appears, they fill us in on her history in the franchise and excitedly speculate about how she will change the group dynamics in the house. They also sometimes reflect on what it means for the show to be distributed internationally on Netflix, occasionally musing about the assumptions that the new American audience is going to make about Japanese people generally based on the actions of a particularly immature cast member.

And while they sometimes revel in the gossipy deliciousness that their bird's eye view of the house provides (as when the hidden cameras reveal that two of the housemates who have been tentatively dating have very different ideas about their future potential), they are always on the contestants' side in the sense that they are seemingly sympathetic to the unique difficulties that being a reality TV star in the age of social media can present.

By American standards, *Terrace House* moves at a glacial pace and eschews the bombshell moments that characterize your *Real Housewives* and your *Jersey Shores*. But by providing respites from drama and letting the audience breathe in the comfort of the in between, the show cultivates a different relationship between the viewer and the gorgeous vistas and romantic fantasies that exist at the root of the genre. American reality TV, unfortunately, rarely gives us a chance to really look at those vistas, rarely allows us to sit with the feelings generated by the vicarious romance. And while that doesn't necessarily mean that *Terrace House* is inherently more "real" than these rival programs, it does mean that the reality it depicts is much more pleasant to inhabit.

Hello, and welcome to the November column! It's a fairly light month for me in metal terms; I've been listening to mostly K-pop lately, so you know the following stuff is good if it can tear me away from EXO.

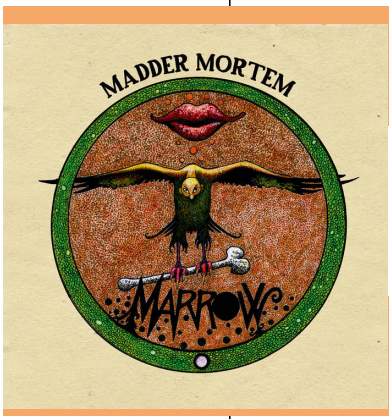


Smoulder – *The Sword Woman*
Toronto four-piece Smoulder play classic doom metal. Meat-and-potatoes stuff, accented with vocalist Sarah Ann's powerful clean singing and some rudimentary guitar harmonies. Taken as throwback trad-metal, it's earnest and avoids retro affectations – reminiscent of Pilgrim's *Misery Wizard*.

Hissing – *Permanent Destitution*
Permanent Destitution is a dissonant, elusive frenzy; Deathspell Omega as a caverncore band, all wheedling, whining upper-register riffs buzzing around over clangorous blast beats. The vocal approach is a bit like Portal, too, which should give you another handhold. When the band slows down there's a nice spongy thickness to the waves of distortion. This is relaxing, to me, actually. I would play this at a hot yoga class.

Brainoil – *Singularity to Extinction*
Swamp sludge, coated in grime and rust. This is a fantastic, hateful record in the vein of Buzzoven or Eyehategod . . . you know . . . when sludge *meant* something besides John Baizley cover art and "southern

rock influences." Anyway. *Singularity to Extinction* sounds incredible turned all the way up, absolutely nails the head-filling murk of the best sludge albums. It's still kind of warm here in Florida, because this state is hell, so this shit is essentially in season year-round.



Madder Mortem – *Marrow*

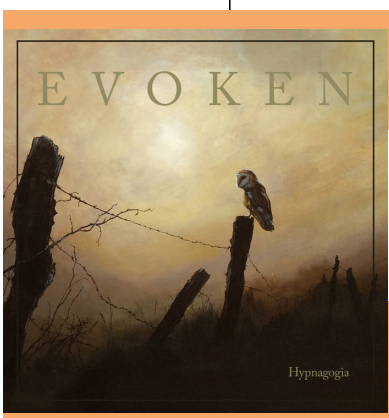
For about twenty years, Madder Mortem have been making the kind of music you'll recognize from bands like Opeth, Katatonia and more recently Leprous. Knotty, over-the-top progressive metal powered by Agnete Kirkevaag's soaring, stentorian voice. I'm not suggesting they don't get taken seriously because they have A Chick Singer, but I wouldn't argue with that assessment. *Marrow* comes off a bit like a harder version of Anathema's *The Optimist*; drenched in melody and unashamed of its own virtuosity. There's a lot of nu-metal in here, too, especially in the low-end guitar chording and syncopated riffing. It's a dense record – I haven't properly absorbed it yet, but there's enough here to chew on for weeks. Essential.

VOID – *Jettatura*

VOID play an extremely specific type of black metal that suggests the only record they have ever heard is *Dark Thrones and Black Flags*. If you don't like Darkthrone, you don't need to bother with this one (or this COLUMN!!!!). If you do – VOID are all about midtempo death-and-roll-y riffs with a slight necro sheen to the production.

Evoken – *Hypnagogia*

Massive funeral doom from the New Jersey vets on their sixth record in 20 years. Despondent strings and piano sit in a nimbus above an unforgivingly dense mire of death-doom. There are plenty of parallels to contemporary titans of the sound – My Dying Bride, Shape of Despair and Skepticism – but even in such a hyperspecific subgenre, *Hypnagogia* carves out territory for itself. Goth-rock guitars and soft orchestral pads give way to grinding, achingly slow doom passages, over which strings bloom like flowers over a grave. Morose, unyielding, but beautiful. A tremendous achievement which most people will find entirely unpleasant.



The Unsinkable Darcy Lewis

It's understandable if you don't know Darcy Lewis.

A side character in the Marvel Cinematic Universe, she's present in just the first two Thor movies, a young political science student, looking to get her last college credits by working an internship with astrophysicist Jane Foster. She's the person driving the van when the crew encounters Thor for the first time and she spends a great deal of that film running around yelling about her iPod being stolen by super secret organization SHIELD. Played by Kat Denning with wild, millennial abandon and open thirst for the titular hero, she probably only has about 30 minutes of screen time total across both movies. When the cinematic universe retired Jane Foster, Darcy Lewis was similarly put out into the cold.

There are over 14,900 pieces of fanfiction featuring Darcy Lewis on Archive of Our Own, one of the largest archives for derivative fiction. So why does Darcy Lewis persist?

The first answer is the easiest – Darcy Lewis is the easiest character to relate to in the entire MCU. In a world of heroes and super powered individuals, a woman like Darcy Lewis, an honest to God intern, becomes the abnormal, and the entry point for people trying to relate. Captain America is a golden god of muscle, patriotism and kindness – it's hard to see yourself in him. Darcy Lewis probably has $60k in student loans and just wants to graduate, and is probably hoping to not get a job as a barista at Starbucks for the rest of her life. Look at the way that's described in fics where she plays an integral role;

> *"But Darcy was a child of the modern age through and through, and half the time he was simply overwhelmed by her. She talked nineteen to the dozen, and didn't seem to require either breath or someone else to participate in the conversation. She worked the keyboard of her laptop like it was magic, fingers dancing across it and the odd language she worked in reflected back in her eyes as it whirled past on the screen, somehow unlocking doors in buildings half a world away with four keystrokes and a sly tilt to the corner of her mouth that let him know she'd done it again."* (Thunderstruck by Pollydoodles)

She sounds magical. Relatable. Human. In most pieces of fiction, she's written like this. A smart, savvy woman who knows what she wants and who can run with the big dogs even though she would never be like them. In walls of timber, I will burn you down by yanak324, the author describes her as such: "There is a whole lot of oddity around them and while Darcy is nowhere near average, she seems so blase about everything that it's easy to forget that she's the rarity around here – she's the human." Humanity, in all of the madness and world ending strife of the MCU. She's the human connection in the series, where even the humans are superpowered – (see Sam Wilson and his wings, or Pepper Potts and her explosive virus). She is, in a lot of ways, a functional self insert, the least offensive Mary Sue in popular media because instead of her being good at everything she's just normal.

Secondarily, Darcy Lewis fits cleanly into a very traditional auspice of fanfiction, domestic fic. Domestic fics are tied directly to their mundanity. It's less about the high stakes world of world ending blue sky lasers and more about two partners going out for a picnic, picking out a lovely set of drapes, sorting through interpersonal trauma with quiet decency and respect. Darcy Lewis, Queen Bee of mundanity, is precisely the perfect way to transport deeply fish out of water characters into a standard of domesticity. She's paired frequently with characters like Loki, but also with Heimdall, Bucky Barnes (the Winter Soldier) and three way relationships with Eddie Brock and the Venom symbiote. To each of these non-traditional relationships you have the balance of a girl frequently written as being Midwestern, a college girl who just wants all of the normal things in life, and happens to be brought into the screwball antics of the extended Marvel universe.

She's written into the universe in two major ways – one she's written as being related to a known character, mostly Tony Stark, or she's just a scientist wrangler for the Avengers. "Well, I mean, I'm not an Avenger, myself. More like Avenger support staff. Mostly, I just deal with Bruce, Tony and Jane,"

she explained in *Indominus No, Raptor Yes* by nobutsiriuslywhat. The second one has some variation – she's frequently called upon to be a kind of youth translator for our out of time WWII soldiers, a pop culture machine that sits them down on communal couches in the Avengers headquarters and makes them watch *Harry Potter* and *Ghostbusters*.

This is where the self-insert aspects of Darcy Lewis's character come into play. Like the way that *Ready Player One* is basically a kind of fanfiction where the author creates a future in which knowing about the cast of the *Breakfast Club* and how to play Atari games (all stuff he personally loves) will save the world. It isn't quite as world ending in Darcy Lewis fics – her knowledge of *Footloose* won't save the galaxy (that's more for the *Guardians of the Galaxy* movies) but it may help her land a date. Darcy Lewis is a tool, a connective tissue between the interests of the writers who write her (Tumblr, coffee, dressing like a human being and not a sex doll) and the characters they see on screen. Even at her most capable, an Asgardian human diplomat or mechanical engineer or hacker, she's still described in much the same way:

> *"Darcy Lewis was the most complicated person Tony knew. She dressed like a poet or a philosophy major, all soft shapes, thick scarves and multiple layers, but she talked a mile a minute and was as ruthless as a day-trader. She looked like a marshmallow, acted like a ball of fire, and had a solid core of steel right in the middle." (*Helping Hands from tisfan)

It's because of these traits that someone like Darcy Lewis has staying power in a fandom that would otherwise have eventually cast her aside. She's human, sarcastic, a bit silly, quick to say what's on her mind – she's the fandom in a role inside of a major motion picture franchise, and all of those traits combine together into a role that stands out.

It's not really a surprise that Darcy Lewis is such a used character in MCU fandom, it's more of a surprise that the Marvel franchise hasn't picked up on it. She may be the "Taser Queen" of AO3, but she has virtually no foothold in canon media. Aside from her maybe 30 minutes of screentime in the first two Thor movies, she's not present in any of the related properties – even in the big world ending nonsense of *Avengers: Infinity War*, she's not even a background character. Though the franchise has chosen to keep characters from Jane Fosters retinue – see Eric Selvig who was prominently featured in the first Avengers movie – Darcy Lewis is allowed to languish in obscurity, becoming a figure almost entirely created and polished in fandom alone.

We Are All Gritty

On the internet, content lifespans move at a dizzying pace. In the past month or so, we've seen the Philadelphia Flyers new mascot, the googly-eyed, rotund monster known as Gritty, start life as an embarrassing publicity stunt and grow into an obsession, then a movement and, finally, the beginnings of a cult. Recently, he also gained the official blessing of his home city, becoming the first Philadelphia mascot to be welcomed by a formal resolution from the city's council. The document's truly worth a read, in particular, because it sums up Gritty's bizarre trajectory into the public conscious perfectly:

"Gritty has been described as a 7-foot tall orange hellion, a fuzzy eldritch horror, a ghastly empty-eyed Muppet with a Delco beard, a cross of Snuffleupagus and Oscar the Grouch, a deranged orange lunatic, an acid trip of a mascot, a shaggy orange Wookiee-esque grotesquerie, a non-binary leftist icon, an orange menace, a raging id and an antihero. He has been characterized as huggable but also potentially insurrectionary, ridiculous, horrifying, unsettling and absurd."

To understand why the internet and, later, the far left co-opted the hairy cheese ball so quickly, you only have to look to his debut. There's something fantastically wacky and magical about his reveal: the completely serious, ESPN-esque animatic echoing on a sea of screens behind him as he makes his entrance, silhouetted by a blinding light show. And when he steps out, we finally see it. The jiggling, wide-eyed monstrosity that is Gritty. The walking equivalent of a big, wet trumpet blast.

Talented but feisty, his biography reads, loyal but mischievous. And he proved it in his first game, the Flyers vs. the Boston Bruins on September 24. During the game, he bounded around the ice, wildly shaking his belly and constantly slipping on the ice. Instead of shooting t-shirts into the crowd at intermission, he turned the cannon on those around him, firing with a crazed look in his eye (ok, maybe that's just how his face is). He'd continue this tomfoolery in later games, getting sent to the penalty box after body-slamming and kicking fans on the ice during intermission. By the end of the game, fans were already commenting about relatable his untargeted anger and boundless enthusiasm seemed, several tweeting about how "we are all Gritty."

Philadelphia fans originally responded with shock and disgust at Gritty's design, rolling their eyes at the NHL's obvious attempt to connect with a younger generation of fans. But as the rest of the world began to comment on how demented looking their new puppet mascot was, Philly surged with local pride and immediately pivoted inward to protect their new "national treasure."

Much of the internet moved with them. It helped that the bug-eyed fuzzball seemed born for memes. When the Pittsburgh Penguins responded to his reveal with a chiding "lol ok," the Flyers responded with "sleep with one eye open tonight bird" accompanied by the lidless face of Gritty staring at the camera. The Daily summed it up wonderfully: "Nothing – and I repeat, nothing – endears yourself to Philadelphians like threatening to kill a guy for trashing on your city." Adding fuel to the fire Gritty had already clearly started, the Flyers posted a picture of him after his initial game imitating Kim Kardashian's infamous champagne photo.

In her essay *From Tusk to Tail: Understanding the Animal Attraction to College Mascots*, communications professor Dr. Lisa Lyon Payne explains that mascots stoke "an emotional connection that overpowers our innate aversion to creepy or ugly," explaining Gritty's appeal to such a mass audience despite his appear-

ance. After all, the students at the University of California-Santa Cruz' mascot go crazy for a freaking banana slug; it's even won best mascot awards from ESPN and *Reader's Digest*.

Payne goes on to explain that most mascots represent "non-human aspirations of our winningest selves" with strong physical attributes that demand respect, likes lions and bulldogs, or embody our patriotic sensibilities like eagles. Which makes one wonder what the Philadelphia and the internet at large see in the orange beast; perhaps it's "[a]n overt lack of restraint and disregard for decorum," as Payne suggests, or maybe it's his crazed, directionless anger, something we wish we could act out as he does. Whatever it is, the internet sees a bit of themselves reflected in the blank stare of Gritty's eyes.

Furthermore, mascots with real-life animal connections are expected to behave like those animals, Payne explains. Robbed of these connotations and restrictions, Gritty can become anything you want him to be, and yet, he chooses to act like a hapless, slightly vindictive adult, something millennials especially can relate to as they struggle to metamorphosis into proper adults themselves. Finally, Payne says that loyalty to a tribe elevates the symbols representing that tribe, so that mascots, regardless of species, are not only humanized but treated like celebrities, explaining Gritty's cult-like status.

After his introduction, Gritty's subsequent adoption by the far left was swift and comprehensive, but many point to a tweet by socialist magazine *Jacobin* stating simply "Gritty is a worker" that lit the spark. It might have swiftly faded, though, if it weren't for a trip to Philadelphia by President Donald Trump coincidentally scheduled less than two weeks after Gritty's reveal.

What might have been a fleeting joke spread like wildfire among those protestors the president's presence, and soon signs began cropping up bearing Gritty's image with slogans like "This town only has room for one orange asshole" and "Gritty say 'G.T.F.O. of Philly!'" "Gritty hates Trump" chants could be heard from the marchers as well. Not long after, Antifa International posted about the mascot's new significance, anti-capitalist artwork began spreading and one fan particularly dedicated to the joke made the Fellow Worker Gritty Twitter account, which currently sits at nearly 10,000 followers.

As to why the far left fell in love with Gritty, psychology professor Dr. Craig Jackson points to his working-class name, nonverbal expressions, and amorphous features, which blend humor in his babyish eyes with hostility, a.k.a his shaggy hair and intimidating blank stare.

"So, his fun and humorous element might be responsible for his initial appeal, then some people may have identified with some of his other qualities and embellished them to fit their own identities," he said. "Similarity, perceived or actual, and repeated exposure tend to promote attraction as well, which would lead to even greater appeal among adopted groups." In short, we really are Gritty.

Similarly, Payne wrote that mascots "are elevated – even repulsive and ridiculous ones – and in doing, they bring out the best and worst in those they represent . . . We adore them and like to think they adore us in return . . ."

To me, it all seems obvious. We're in an utterly ridiculous time in the year of our lord 2018. Gritty, with his eyes askance, wobbly belly, and shock of orange hair embodies the crazy inner turmoil anyone left of center is experiencing right now, either 24/7 or whenever we dare to sneak a peek at the incessant minefield of daily news.

The alt-right had to make a concentrated effort to claim their mascot, using provocative and violent Photoshops to reclaim Pepe the Frog from "normie" culture and, in doing so, championing his role as an icon for bigotry. Meanwhile, Gritty seems to have fallen into his role quite literally. At the aforementioned resolution's signing, Councilmember At-Large Helen Gym summed up in a statement why everyone, especially the left, has adopted Gritty as their own, especially at this point in time:

"Gritty came into our lives when we most needed him, and while he may be a hideous monster, he is our hideous monster."

In 1995, CD-ROMs were the shit. My mom once tried to explain how they worked. I didn't get it, but I did understand that they allowed me to play games. Every Purple Moon game, *Freddi Fish*, *Where in the World is Carmen Sandiego?*, *Myst* and – wait for it – Microsoft Encarta '95.

One weekend, while researching ermines in Encarta's digital encyclopedia, I accidentally hit CTRL+Z and stumbled upon something . . . less encyclopedic. A jester stood on a castle drawbridge, beckoning me inside, while calligraphic text announced that I was entering "MindMaze."

I've never met anyone IRL who played Encarta MindMaze, but according to a Reddit thread and a few YouTube videos, the game *did* exist. MindMaze was trivia ensconced in fantasy: the player has been transported back in time to a medieval castle and must answer questions to defeat the labyrinth, break a curse and be returned to their own time.

Now, I was primarily interested in this because I liked castles and could be tricked into playing educational games if they had even the *slightest* whiff of magic. MindMaze's intro screen not only showed the beckoning jester but also a dragon peeking out of a window. Have I mentioned my youthful dragon obsession? Yes? Okay.

I may not have mentioned that at age seven I realized that I was a witch. As the veil thinned throughout October – and pop culture witches appeared more and more in store windows, my Twitter timeline and on Netflix – I've thought a lot about my personal relationship to witchcraft. I've been a practicing witch, with lapses in practice and in varying degrees of diligence, since the second grade, after writing in my Lisa Frank diary, "I'm a witch. I've decided." That same year, I wore a black-hatted, broomstick-toting witch costume to school on Halloween.

Over this past month, I've also thought a lot about these representations of the hag in popular culture – the green-skinned, warty witch – an image of which I'm personally very fond. On some levels, I relate to her. She's the crone aspect of the Triple Goddess, the waning moon, the wise woman. I'm not especially wise yet, but I hope to be, at some point. More immediately, I recognize her: she's Madam Mim from *The Sword in the Stone* and she's the witch in Encarta MindMaze.

As you travel Encarta's castle, a witch appears occasionally. The MindMaze Witch is the perfect specter: green pallor, black hair, long brown robes. Her hands curl, claw-like, above a cauldron bubbling over with green liquid. The fire pit on which the cauldron rests sits in the center of a rather nice carpet, with no ventilation to speak of. She says, "You're trying to break the curse on the castle, aren't you? So public spirited! Or maybe you're just hoping that once the curse is broken, I'll send you back to your own time! No! Hee hee. Couldn't be! . . . Oh, how did I get to be such a cynic?"

When you try to exit the room, a question appears. In one YouTube walkthrough, the banner reads, "Capital city of Denmark and of Copenhagen County, and a major seaport and commercial center." Not even a question mark. The player chooses "Copenhagen," trumpets sound and they advance to the next room.

When the player next encounters the Witch, she asks, "Do you see any witches around here? The last person who came in here screamed 'Witch!' at the top of his lungs. I looked around and I didn't see one, so I turned him into a frog. I didn't want to disappoint him, you know. Hee hee hee . . . Oh, don't look so scared! I'm just a sorceress who happens to be a hag. I'm the one who brought you here. So get cracking, already! Figure out this puzzle! I'm not getting any younger!"

So there you have it: the Witch took you, the player, from your own time and deposited you in a cursed castle to answer trivia questions. It makes sense, sort of – the medieval NPCs probably wouldn't know the answers to contemporary sports questions, or the most important figures in German early twentieth-century literature. But a late twentieth-century player would have a better chance of selecting Thomas Mann and continuing their slow creep through the castle.

Supposedly, at the end of the game you battle an evil sorcerer to break the curse. I wouldn't know, because I never got that far. It was 1995 – I didn't really want to learn world history or geography; I wanted to break curses and hang out with witches. I'm just a sorceress who happens to be a millennial.

When news broke about plans for a *Dance Dance Revolution* movie, one would be forgiven for responding with a resounding, "What the hell?" The long-running series, which involves stepping on buttons and directional arrows on a physical floor pad, has no defining characters and zero plot. That isn't stopping its directors from attempting to give it both, though. According to a report from *Variety*, it'll tell the story of "a world on the brink of destruction where the only hope is to unite through the universal language of dance." Sounds ridiculous, but perhaps no more so than *Battleship*, at least.

The power of dance isn't saving this garbage planet from anything (though maybe we should be open to suggestions). To its credit though, *Dance Dance Revolution* has helped more people make lasting positive lifestyle changes than any other gaming franchise. Ever since it hit the arcade scene in 1998 and was later ported to home consoles, it has captivated audiences with the power of something that loosely looks like dancing, and countless players credit the series for getting them in shape. This writer included.

And if there's any movie in any genre I want to see, this is it.

Hear me out on this one. In a world where *Tetris* of all things can get turned into a "sci-fi thriller," why not put *Dance Dance Revolution* on the big screen too? Its status as one of the most iconic pieces of interactive entertainment ever made isn't far behind that classic puzzle title. In fact, in the early 2000s, *Dance Dance Revolution* consistently made headlines for its effectiveness as a legitimate workout that wasn't boring. So, when considering its worth for a film adaptation, forget the fact that it has zero plot. What made the series one of the best-known IPs on Earth has more to do with getting people active.

The peak of *Dance Dance Revolution*'s popularity coincided with an extreme emotional low point in the middle of my high school years. When my family moved to an isolated U.S. Air Force base in the United Kingdom, I coped with crippling loneliness and depression by overeating junk food. Once my clothes stopped fitting, it became apparent that Coke and donuts were only making my situation worse. I had to do something to turn my situation around, or accept a bleak future of self-imposed misery.

So, instead of blaming unhappiness on circumstances beyond my control (and aside from being bored, those middle-class circumstances really were pretty good in hindsight), I committed to cutting crap out of my diet and getting into better shape. However, going to the gym was sort of boring. I wanted something different.

Remembering a school assignment where we summarized our thoughts on a newspaper article and I picked a piece about *Dance Dance Revolution* being used in high school gym classes, I felt like I had an idea. While there weren't any arcades in my area (save for a *Metal Slug 3* machine at the base laundromat, which I invested in heavily), the home version for the original PlayStation was just a few clicks away (military base housing was fitted with U.S. power outlets, so we ordered games online for our American consoles rather than buying their British counterparts). I had nothing to lose except an extreme amount of weight playing a videogame, so I pulled the trigger on the pricey package.

Taking a tangible step toward self-improvement helped me feel a little bit better by itself. When it arrived from GameStop (which took a few weeks being overseas), I unboxed it with almost more enthusiasm than the first-generation Xbox I'd gotten that Christmas (like I said, we were comfortably middle-class).

I played the game's workout mode daily, which included a timer and a calorie counter. After sticking with that routine for a few months without bothering to step on a scale, I was shocked once I checked my weight. Without realizing it, I'd dropped from 245 lbs. down to 220 lbs. I muttered an audible "holy

shit," struggling to wrap my head around what I'd accomplished. *Dance Dance Revolution* did more for me in a few months than the gym alone ever could.

Eventually, I got down to around 175 lbs., about as low as someone with my lanky 6'4" frame should go. Over 15 years later, I've managed to keep most of that weight off, too. While I still had some struggles with depression and anxiety over the ensuing years, I've since grown into a relatively well-adjusted adult who can check off all the boxes for success according to Western social norms. That might not sound like much, but there were plenty of times along the way where I wasn't sure I was going to make it. With that in mind, it isn't hyperbolic to say I wouldn't be who or where I am without this dancing game.

So, why make a movie about *Dance Dance Revolution*? Maybe a better question to ask is, "Why would they make a movie about any other game at all?" My experience isn't unique, and if that goddamned awful early 90's *Super Mario Bros.* movie (which I saw when I was six, and I'm still pissed about it) could get greenlit, why not tell a story about the peace-building power of dance?

Sure, it's probably a desperate cash grab attempt by floundering publisher Konami. And no, my hopes for it actually being good aren't high. But, provided it actually gets made (instead of joining the growing ranks of videogame movie adaptations that never get released after being announced), I'll be at the theater on day one. Hell, I'll probably go twice and get whatever expensive-ass limited-edition Blu-ray package comes out, too. That game means more to me than any other, to the extent that I owe it a literal lifetime of general well-being. Hell, if I could I'd finance this film myself, with zero regrets if it sucked.

If anything can bring *Dance Dance Revolution* back to the cultural forefront, then count me on board.

Let's Go Paisley

Not everything about Paisley Park is weird.

But when I toured it in September, on the day of its 31st anniversary, two things stood out as particularly odd – one that's pure Prince, and one that's not at all what a casual fan like me expected.

First the latter, something Prince devotees certainly already know: the outside of the late mad genius' legendary, 65,000-square-foot recording studio/nightclub/home looks exactly like any one of a million suburban corporate office complexes. If the exterior was used for, say, the Dunder Mifflin Paper Company, or Initech, all but America's biggest Prince fanatics wouldn't bat an eye.

Nothing gives it away. It's just a series of white squares, bordered by a thin line of black, that together resemble a bunch of boxes packed neatly together to form an otherwise nondescript building. The number 7801 is affixed to the top, in black, and the entrance simply features a white sticker that reads A1 on its glass front door.

I thought I'd GPSed to the wrong place. That is, until I went inside. And entered the atrium.

The atrium is the first stop on the tour, and, for reasons that will soon be obvious, the most, um, important. We're not allowed to take photos on the tour – in fact, our phones are locked in small bags that are re-opened for us as we leave the gift shop at the end – but this room is pretty burned into my memory. The floor is adorned with the Prince symbol that for a time became his name. There's a couch. There are more records on the walls. Under a large

skylight, the walls are painted with clouds and, on one side, a flight of doves soars up the wall toward the windows. There are real doves in a cage on the floor above, too, and they can be heard singing. There are small rooms and alcoves with costumes and other memorabilia in them and the hallway that leads to the recording studio, the next stop on the tour. In front of us are glass doors through which we can see a television and a kitchenette we're told Prince used often.

So what's so odd?

Above this room is a frosted box, hanging from the wall above our heads. In it we can see another purple Prince symbol. Though it's hard to make out, the tour guide tells us that behind the symbol is a replica of Paisley Park. A replica Prince had commissioned. To store his remains.

Yes, in the atrium of Paisley Park, in the very first stop, in fact, on the Paisley Park tour, we stand directly below what is left of Prince Rogers Nelson.

People tend to get emotional, the tour guide says, and she gives us a moment to reflect. There are those among us who do seem emotional; there's an older couple wearing Prince T-shirts who seems to feel the weight of the occasion, but particularly moved by the whole affair is a Japanese woman, who earlier had admitted she could barely tell the tour guide she was from Tokyo because she was so flustered.

As for me – and my dad, who'd agreed to come along for the ride after I described the place as being akin to Graceland – I felt more like smiling. Partly out of discomfort – it was a little bit of a shock to be told this, plus it was even creepier than the late great musician's mustache, which has always made my skin crawl – but partly because it just seemed so perfectly Prince.

The rest of the tour was great. My dad and I loved it. Highly recommend it, too. We saw Prince's studio, where he would record his vocals while sitting at the board serving as his own producer, and were played an unreleased track. The Purple Rain Room, in what used to be his basketball court (hello, Charlie Murphy!), has artifacts including his leather-bound copy of the movie script, and we were lead from there through hallways and other themed rooms into his warehouse-sized film studio, then to his nightclub, where he'd surprise guests by randomly appearing, and, at last, to the gift shop, where for $40 visitors can buy an umbrella that promises to turn every rain into . . . you get the idea.

My best hope was that Paisley Park would be a music fan's mecca. And I was right. It is.

I never expected, though he died there after all, for it to be a tomb. Which, like Prince, was extremely weird. And also uniquely awesome.

Writing About Games: Learning to Love the Compromise

In addition to a smattering of other activities, I spend a good chunk of my day thinking and writing about videogames. I do so partly because if I wasn't writing about games, I would definitely still be playing them. This is because, for the most part, I find games to be an entertaining and rewarding medium; and if I can find some deeper, often politically contextualized meaning beneath their liquid crystal surfaces, all the better.

Despite often writing from a progressive point of view, I don't consider the act of writing about games to be a form of activism, or even particularly progressive. If I wanted my writing to better serve activist outcomes, I would probably be covering protests or pitching to Jacobin and Politico. As much as I enjoy injecting politics and history into a field that can seem so intractably resistant to new or challenging perspectives, I don't find much appeal in spending that same energy on an audience who is already steeped in the stuff.

All this serves as an introduction to some of the naval-gazing consternation that has stricken me in the wake of the recent release of Rockstar's *Red Dead Redemption 2*. I spent virtually no time thinking about *RDR2* until, like many others, my attention was grabbed during the press-run a couple of weeks before its release, when Rockstar co-founder, Dan Houser, boasted in a Vulture

interview about employees working hundred hour weeks in order to get the game released on time. This open admittance of grotesquely unfair labor conditions is just another straw atop a pile of other notably "problematic" aspects of Rockstar's oeuvre in general, and their series of cowboy games in particular. After all, the first *Red Dead Redemption*'s "Dastardly" achievement, which awarded players for leaving a bound woman on train tracks, was used as a prime example in the Feminist Frequency video series about the games industry's awful track record in regards to gender equality, and rightly so. The game was also brought up repeatedly for its use of women as – often violently treated – props to tell its story. There's also Rockstar's puerile South Parkian politics, which infect everything they make and which reward violent hetero male fantasies and encourage detachment from context and consequence.

Issues like these, among others, kept me from playing *Grand Theft Auto V* when it came out. And I have no regrets at having missed out on the greasy quagmire surrounding that game. In *RDR2*'s case, however, I've taken the plunge and purchased the game, with hopes to eventually write about it. I find western narratives fascinating, foundational as they are to America's self-perception and modern myth-making, and any chance I have to explore this subject through the lens of games is one I tend to leap at.

Yet in parallel to my buying the game, ordering the disc and downloading all eighty gigabytes of its windswept plains, snowy valleys and extremely realistic animal skinnings, my social media timeline has been replete with examples of why the game is awful, why the workers who produced it were exploited, along with strong words from respected colleagues about why they won't even touch it. I've read Twitter accounts which point out that even as we writers spend time pointing to all the bloody guts and scrapings littering the floor of its production, we'll still inevitably marvel at the beautiful sausage produced by Rockstar's grisly machinery in the next breath. And some of us already have; which is why I'm so torn, why I've wound up asking myself what my own personal moral responsibility is when covering games like these.

The onus, I'm aware, is on my ability to justify my investment of time, money and attention, by writing a critique that will call attention to the aspects of the game that more mainstream critics tend to ignore: its historical context, the blind spots of that settler-colonialist frontier fantasy that any western, by necessity, must embrace. Then there are the questions to be brought up about Rockstar's culture of labor and crunch: how we as an audience tend to support it even as we make noise about its deleterious effects, how the products we enjoy are so disconnected from their means of production, and how that divide allows worker exploitation to continue unhindered.

But these are all angles intended to subvert the literal buy-in of purchasing a sixty dollar game so that I can write about it to a small, enthusiast audience online. One might even call them excuses. There is only so much compartmentalization you can do in separating a game from its production process and the worldview it espouses before you, as a writer, become morally compromised. Even as I ground the themes that go unchallenged elsewhere in real history and real political context, I'm still inevitably going to paint a picture of a polished product, and a magnificent feat accomplished. I'm still going to add words to the swirling conflagration that is the game's hype – a bonfire fanned originally by Rockstar, which critics, both those in stricken awe and those in sneering contempt, will propel forward. Am I supposed to let the flames to lick at my heels, as I attempt to wrestle some kind of original point out of a series and a company dedicated to rehashing ideas driven into the dry dirt by Hollywood fifty years ago? Or do I turn my back on it all?

It's a complicated question that doesn't promise to become less complicated any time soon. As I get older, as other aspects of my life expand in importance, wrestling with this complexity becomes much less appealing. As a result, it feels like my choices are to either stop writing about games or to keep doing so with the knowledge that maybe I'm not actually making anything better – and making my peace with that. There's also the more honest, third option of relinquishing the use of critical writing as an excuse to keep buying and drawing attention shitty mainstream games.

The truth, however, is that I still do like playing games of all quality levels, produced under all sorts of labor conditions and written with various amounts of political self-awareness. Despite all the swirling self-doubt I've laid out above, there remains a simple satisfaction in exploring a novel idea and dissecting the often unintended meaning behind a creative work. That pleasure, alongside the often heartwarming feedback I've received about my pieces, provides a little fuel to keep going, at least until the next morally compromising game finds its way into my library.

The Feels

1.

The first envelope arrived in the beginning of September.

The contents, a letter from a lawyer explained, had rested in a safety deposit box for many years and, for reasons unclear, had become attached to my wife Daisy's name. With the liquidation of the bank, the items within were sent along to our current address and included a number of letters, foreclosure documents, unfinished blueprints, notes, a ledger page from an orphanage and a mourning card, all connected to a piece of property in London and bearing dates from the late 1870s. One item was more compelling than the rest: a lock of brown hair, carefully tied with a bit of yellowed lace.

2.

A horror story, whatever the medium, is the one most likely to use its structure in an attempt to trick you into believing its realness.

It is a kind of contest between the storyteller and the listener. To see this at its most basic, just listen to any kid trying to convince their friends that they had seen a ghost – there is the story at its purest, but also the sideshow act of assurances and knowing looks intended to *sell* it. This is why so much horror literature is written in first person: to leverage the judicial, the weight of personal testimony.

Bram Stoker's *Dracula*, of course, takes this to another level, presenting itself as a series of letters and journal entries written by its own characters and supplemented by the occasional newspaper clipping. Found footage attempts a similar conceit in cinema. Nor does horror have to resort to such direct attempts at verisimilitude: the way Lovecraft weaves together references to real world authors and his own fictional tomes has left thousands of readers open to the possibility of discovering a copy of the Necronomicon on a dusty shelf in a rare book store.

3.

A second envelope arrived a few weeks later. More papers. This time, notes and correspondence from a doctor, dealing with his treatment of a young woman. His office seems to have been located in the house mentioned in the previous set of documents.

Something bad happened to him.

4.

In the 1980s, Infocom found great success as the publisher of text adventures, videogames that were essentially novels you interacted with by typing commands for the protagonist. A large part of the popularity of Infocom's games came from the props they included in the box to support the fiction, which, handily, doubled as copy protection. The *Zork* games included lore books and maps written in an in-universe style that detailed the underground empire you would journey through. Inside *The Lurking Horror*, Infocom's Lovecraftian horror game, you find a student ID card and student handbook for the setting's college, as well as a nightmarish little rubber nightcrawler.

The company called these props "feelies."

5.

At its heart, the *Call of Cthulhu* tabletop roleplaying game is a game about piecing together mysteries. Like any good mystery, this require clues. In the early days, player handouts were pages in the back of the book, suitable for photocopying, that reproduced newspaper clippings, excerpts from notebooks, scrawled drawings and even, in one notable case, a matchbox you could cut out and fold up.

In recent years, *Call of Cthulhu* handouts have become a bustling niche market, forever striving to create more realistic props to support the fiction. Just this year, the H.P. Lovecraft Historical Society produced a massive box of props for the *Masks of Nyarlathotep* campaign, including news clippings printed on newsprint, a matchbox containing real matches, passports, patient files, photographs, a Chinese scroll and MP3s of actors delivering key monologues from the game. A deluxe version includes reproductions of ancient artifacts like stone tablets and statues. There's even a set of cultist's robes.

6.

The contents of the third package included a poster for a stage magician's act, a gardening notebook and a good deal of dried lavender buds; more detritus from the lives of the residents of this apparently haunted London house. They seem to fare about as poorly as the doctor.

7.

The packages are from the Mysterious Package Company, which specializes in narrative "experiences" delivered by mail. I have long heard intriguing

things about the Weeping Book, a single mailing of a handwritten notebook that is so disturbing that the company claims it has inspired unwitting recipients to call the police about it.

The idea, of course, is to purchase an experience for a friend and have it arrive with no warning or explanation. When the Company got in touch about trying an experience, I had them send it to my wife so I could observe. I ordered Filigree in Shadow, a Victorian ghost story.

8.

I think the central idea of the Mysterious Package Company is genius. Plenty of other folks agree, apparently, as it has spawned several imitators, like the Hunt a Killer subscription box that haunts many an Instagram feed's advertisements. I have no way to be sure if it *is* genius, though, because I know services like this exist. If secrecy and surprise are an intrinsic part of this kind of experience, then no matter what you send me, even if you were to make up a totally original story and props, the illusion can't fool me. I am inoculated now.

Which begs the question: is the illusion the point?

On one hand, it seems the Mysterious Package Company thinks it is – even the process of buying an experience is shrouded in mystery, requiring a request for an invitation and dealings with a character referred to as the Curator. It is hard (but not impossible) to suss out the real people behind the company, which also indicates a certain delight in the smoke and mirrors game.

On the other hand, there are things within the experience that seem to hint that this is all for fun – the lawyer's letter at the start of this experience makes for a fairly flimsy premise. Given the otherwise high quality of the story and the props, I can't believe that this is anything other than intentional. Perhaps some unpleasant reactions to the Weeping Book prompted the Company to hedge away from providing experiences that too effectively blur the edge between fiction and reality.

9.

Daisy was almost immediately suspicious (you can blame that on the fact that she played my long-running *Masks of Nyarlathotep* campaign, or read it as a telling indictment of what it is like to live with me). She got hung up on why she was receiving the packages in a way that overshadowed their stories.

Something else. In striving to tell stories in a forensic way, through ostensibly real objects, connection to the narrative is kept at a distance in way that is not true of more conventional storytelling. The events related in Filigree in Shadow are remote in time, the haunted house an ocean away. I could see myself perhaps believing that these events happened, but I do not think they have the power to scare me the way a short story might, despite a short story's obvious artifice.

9a.

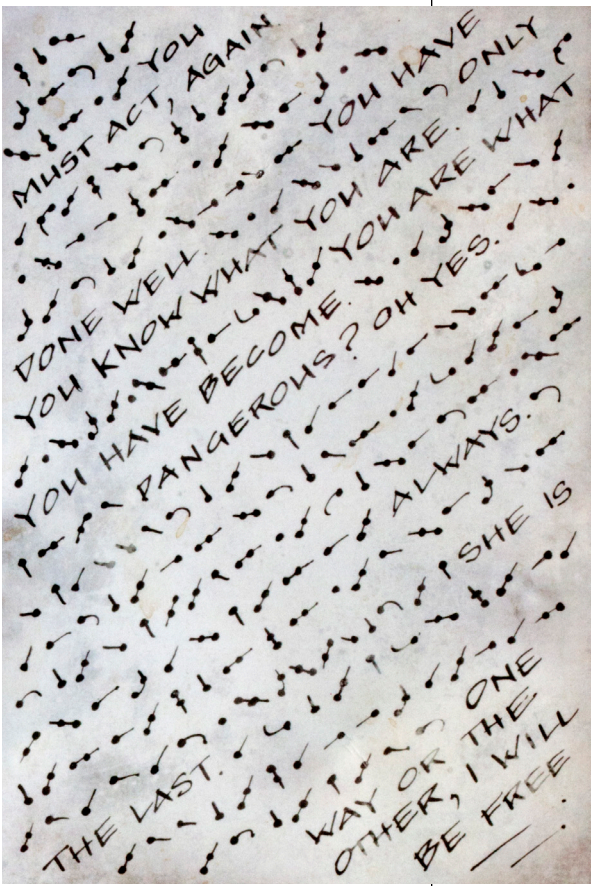
I desperately want to see a ghost, or have some other supernatural experience, which means I am paradoxically fortified with skepticism. No matter what the climax of Filigree in Shadow may be, if it doesn't involve my reflection actually climbing through my vanity mirror to attempt to murder me, I am going to be disappointed. For someone like me, the surface realism of the Mysterious Package is always going to be a promise impossible to deliver on.

10.

The climax of Filigree in Shadow, and all the Mysterious Packages, is an artifact. It arrived in a small wooden box. The content of that box was at war with itself.

The narrative bits were wonderful. The story was wrapped up definitively with more documents, the plot threads neatly tied (mostly), the mystery solved in ghoulishly Penny Dreadful fashion. There were, in fact, two artifacts: a murder weapon crusted with century old blood and a dreadful mask, an object of unnatural power within the context of the story that, in hand, is actually suitably unpleasant.

The other occupant of the box was a jigsaw puzzle.



11.

I can not speak to the other Mysterious Packages, but this one is both a story and a game. Littered through all the documents are little dot-and-line characters, an obvious code, referred to by several characters in the story. The final documents give the key for its decryption, and the scrawls, which often are replying to the clearly written words, become a sort of spooky presence throughout the whole story, creating a vibe akin to watching *The Sixth Sense* a second time knowing Bruce Willis is a ghost. It seems a bit preposterous that all this coded writing would be on all these documents, but the overall effect is good, the decoding was quite fun and it adds a time value to the entire experience.

The jigsaw puzzle takes the game portion of the experience to an extreme. The puzzle is of architectural drawings of the house – recall earlier that the initial package contained incomplete blueprints? The jigsaw puzzle fills them in. It is a preposterous jettisoning of the illusion the rest of the packages so painstakingly create.

And it is great. And *evil*. It is actually five discrete puzzles, all made in a similar visual motif and cut into pieces that often slide next to each other rather than interlock. I've never hated a jigsaw puzzle so actively as when I was cursing my way through this on. Daisy and I spent delirious hours working on it, well into

the night. It was a struggle, but a fun one that awoke a steely determination in both of us. It is hard to convey the sense of accomplishment I felt once it was done, even if the spookiest thing about it was the glaze in our eyes.

There is another coded message scrawled across the finished puzzles. It took me a couple weeks to get around to decoding it and, honestly, it didn't matter. The real climax of the story was finishing the puzzle.

12.

When people ask me why I enjoy horror, I usually respond by saying I like the way it makes me feel, an answer the questioner inevitably finds unsatisfying. The look on their face usually says, *Why on earth would I want to feel scared?*

The best fiction provokes an emotional response. Yet, owing to it being fiction, most of those responses are distant echoes of the real thing, simulacra. There are aspects of the fear reactions inspired by horror, though, tied up as they are with evolutionary survival impulses, that retains a glimmer of the genuine. The grief I feel at the death of a character can never match the loss of a loved one. Likewise, I have never been chased by a madman with a machete, but I am sure that the real thing would pump my adrenal gland more than any given slasher movie. Yet an unexplained noise, in a movie or in my own darkened house, sparks identical unease. In those subtle, quiet moments, the boundary between horror fiction and reality is so thin as to not be there at all.

13.

Props, handouts, feelies, whole narratives constructed out of documents, they all represent an attempt by the story to manifest into the real world. As

an aficionado of horror and a seeker after supernatural experience, I want the story to become incarnate, to darken the lens of perception, to reveal the secrets skeins lurking under the veil of every day reality.

And yet, no matter how enchanting the fictive artifact may be at first glance, reality eventually, inevitably, renders it inert. Mundanity is inescapable. Human hands have fashioned it and, in doing so, rob it of infinite powers it may have possessed had it remained in the realm of conjecture.

14.

We have a finished attic in my house and use it as a second living room. There's a mini-fridge up there and it is covered in magnets shaped like letters for our one-year-old son Jeremiah to play with. A few weeks ago, Daisy returned home from work and went up to unload her bag up there. A few moments later, she shouted down, "Are you fucking with me?"

The letter magnets usually spell out our names – Stu, Daisy and Jer (though my 'U' has long since gone missing). When I got upstairs, I saw most of the letters jumbled up. In the center, though, perfectly aligned: D-I-E. Seeing it, a chill ran down my spine, just the way a writer might describe in a horror story.

Obviously, Jeremiah rearranged the letters and by chance spelled out a threatening word. Obviously, there is no supernatural force at work. And yet, and yet, and yet . . . in a movie or in my own darkened house, it sparks an identical unease.

Sucking Blood from the Earth

I wanted to write this column on the new(ish) story mode added to Dontnod's *Vampyr* this past September but, to tell the truth, I've barely been able to find the motivation to play it. What I've seen I've liked – I've long been enthralled with vampires and I'm a particular sucker (heh) for the tortured and broody ones. A newly-vampiric doctor tormented between following his oath to do no harm and satiating his bloodlust offers a neat parallel to current worries regarding ethical consumption. I'm typing this on a sleek MacBook with my iPhone close at hand and what of it that the factory where they're made features suicide-prevention nets, I guess. I give money to Planned Parenthood and the ACLU. I deserve this Apple Watch.

I like to use stories to understand the world better. For a long time, scary stories were my favorite kind. When I was very small, I glommed onto the idea of Dracula as a positive adult male figure, a long-lost Transylvanian uncle who arranged visits to his castle after sunset and taught me how to transform into a wolf or a bat or mist (I was half vampire, naturally). The latter was my specialty, as it was far and away the most underrated of the Count's transformations and my recognition of that fact propelled my eventual mastering of it. Dinners were Christmas hams, whole loaves of bread and giant wheels of cheese – my childish idea of "old fashioned" food – with ice cream and Little Debbie Swiss Rolls for dessert. The Swiss Rolls were my contribution from the world of humans and their modern capitalism. The Count would only drink, of course.

The fantasy was a comforting escape for an imaginative only child and one I returned to often.

Rereading *Dracula* became an annual tradition, so I eventually picked up on the incredibly obvious sexual undercurrent and had all of my naïve and childish ideas turned to dust. I already hesitate to examine why I turned a murderous weirdo into a slightly edgy monster-dad who was inexplicably nice only to me, but I'm still retroactively embarrassed that it took me so long to realize exactly what all that bodily fluid and toothy penetration were really about. It taught me, though, that sometimes people look like and can even be one thing only to be revealed as something else farther down the road. Also, that, like my experience with Bram Stoker's story, new perspectives uncover new angles and layers to almost every situation.

I find it hard to play *Vampyr* or any other videogame these days. I even find it hard to read, a problem I used to blame on oversaturation due to my day job in the book publishing industry. However, even a month out from my resignation, I've only managed to eke my way through a single short and breezy novel. I'm not sure I'll get through *Dracula* this year.

TV and movies are the only way I regularly engage with pop culture lately. In a political climate where escape has become an almost necessary form of self-care, I find myself unable to make a break for the daydreams that sustained me when I was young, or to interact with any entertainment that requires more than passivity on my part. Anything with subtitles gets a hard pass.

The rare moments I do pursue a more active role in my amusements, I almost always turn to videogames that allow gameplay other than combat or even puzzles. I much prefer to talk through conflicts and share sweet character moments in *The Walking Dead* or *Mass Effect*. I'd rather ride my horse through the stunning digital vistas of *Red Dead Redemption* or *Breath of the Wild*. Unfortunately, after the recent mass layoffs at Telltale Games and Rockstar

head Dan Houser's inexplicable bragging about the ungodly amount of hours developers worked to bring *Red Dead Redemption*'s sequel to market, playing them leads straight to more questions about ethical consumption for my part. Then again, playing almost any videogame does.

Putting those concerns aside, as we all do to varying degrees, I appreciate Dontnod's addition of a Story Mode to their latest offering. I've had the game installed since launch but was reluctant to play after reports of tedious combat from friends and critics alike. Focusing on exploring interwar London and interacting with its rich cast of characters as the doomed Dr. Jonathan Reid is far more rewarding than taking on hordes of the undead. Reid's unrelenting high-stakes conflict between whether he'll friend or feed on the city's people is the game's best feature. A mechanic where he heals the sick in order to harvest a healthier food source once they're cured leads to heart-wrenching decision-making. Jonathan must truly care to be truly cruel. Seeing things from his perspective exposes odd angles and new layers to a hard situation, leading me to ponder one of life's more immense questions: what do good men do when monstrous times make monsters of us all? 🤴

No, Shut Up, Brutal Legend is Great

Brutal Legend was the sort of game that had my attention from the first reveal. I loved the concept, I loved the setup, I loved the visual style and once the playable demo was available, I loved that, too. And then it came out and everybody hated it. Mostly due to the latter half and its shift in focus towards large scale battles. Hoo-boy folks were not happy about that. Here's the thing, though: *Brutal Legend* was (and still is) great.

First I feel like I've got to talk about what it did right. Or at least right by me. The introduction, which I've played through several times thanks to that demo, still holds up pretty well. The jokes continue to make me chuckle; Eddie's mishap and subsequent relocation to a giant mountain of bones (and the first steps down from said mountain) are a solid setup for the story; the visual design is, as I've said, great – with cartoonishly exaggerated features for both the human and not-so-human creatures that all err on the side of "IT'S FUCKING HEAVY METAL!" and a particularly fond shout out to the all-chrome hellbeast/creator of existence that is Ormagoden having "hands" that are fused into the devil horns gesture. Hell, even Jack Black as Eddie Riggs does a great job of selling it.

It's also a fun world to explore, thanks to all the extremely weird (in a good way) visuals. Just about every single creature has at least some chrome on it, tons of heavy metal-esque landmarks are sprinkled throughout the landscapes, a giant spotlight rig in the sky points to current objectives, fucking *laser panthers* made of black chrome shoot lasers out of their eyes. God I love this game's style. And right up to the first major conflict against General Lionwhyte and his hair metal forces (and also his actual hair) it has the makings of a really cohesively themed and lovingly crafted open world adventure. Then it turns into a pseudo real-time strategy game.

This was what kicked up such a fuss back in the day (and maybe it still does, I don't know). *Brutal Legend* presents itself as one thing, then sort of turns into something entirely different. I do get why this would be off-putting to some but my thoughts on the issue are thus: 1) the awesome style is still there, 2) you can still explore and enjoy the really cool open world up to and after the final battle, 3) the RTS elements are actually pretty decent for what they are and what they set out to accomplish, and 4) shut up and stop being a goddamn baby about it. Honestly, being able to almost instantaneously switch between an aerial view to survey the battlefield or issue large sweeping commands, and being on ground level where you can both fight alongside the troops or even team up with them for special attack options, works.

I'd be lying if I said I wasn't a little disappointed when I initially realized that there weren't going to be any other more traditional boss fights like the Metal Queen – a giant, completely chrome spider – but the more I thought about it the more I started to realize that the battling armies approach made sense. Sure Eddie is a prophesied savior, etc, etc, but this is a world that's been oppressed by a monstrous regime. Of course the rabble should organize and fuck shit up on a grand scale.

As with literally every videogame that exists that isn't *Metroid: Zero Mission*, *Brutal Legend* is not perfect. But it definitely makes good on its heavy metal motif (they set out to make every still shot of the game look like an album cover and I gotta say I think they nailed it as well as anybody possibly could) and is still a fun time even almost a decade later. It's just that the stuff that makes it fun sort of switches gears in the second half. Yeah, that's kind of a shame but it's hardly a deal breaker, and I'd recommend that anybody who bowed out partway through or never started in the first place due to this revelation give it another chance.

The Slow, Understated Beauty of Red Dead Redemption 2

Before I started playing *Red Dead Redemption 2*, I made the decision to turn off as much of the HUD as possible and to not use fast travel. I did this because I feel world design in gaming is often overlooked because of the convenience of fast travel and I wanted to experience the game from the eyes of the people crafting the narrative. Horribly designed maps and worlds can be rendered playable, even desirable, by the ability to traverse them without issue. One of the more notable cases is *World of Warcraft* and flying mounts, which undid lots of fantastic world building by the original *WoW* team. In short, fast travel robs the game world of its charm and renders an open-world game nothing more than a series of events or a glorified theme park.

Rockstar Games has made customizing the HUD easy, so with a few settings changed, I no longer have GPS, a mini-map or game hints. Fast travel is a bit trickier, as the game forces you to fast travel during certain quest-based montages, but outside of these events it's easy to avoid. I attempted to ride a stagecoach once, as I believed the ride would be like the taxis in *GTAV*, but was disappointed when I was teleported to my destination. I haven't tried the

trains, but have to assume it's the same deal. That leaves horseback and foot travel as my only options.

As of this writing, I've put in around eighty to one hundred hours of play and am roughly two thirds of the way through the story. I don't intend this to be a review of *Red Dead Redemption 2*, but more of a discussion of pacing.

Arthur Morgan, the protagonist of the game, has a slow, somewhat smooth drawl to match his movements and demeanor. Though often compelled to run, Arthur rarely moves without a deliberate stride that lends weight to his actions. Contrast that with the lightning fast rage that some of his compatriots exhibit, and you have an allegory of the current field of games. In short, *Red Dead Redemption 2* is not afraid to take its time.

That said, the story and missions are certainly Rockstar, for better and worse: you do wildly bombastic things while gunning down thousands of people. As with all their games, some bits go wide while others hit the mark, but that's not what this is about. The pacing, regarding the story, is certainly not coincidental. Set in the year 1899, the century is turning, and things are quickly changing in America. The Industrial Revolution changed the world and the American West, though somewhat slow to adopt, was no exception. Arthur and his ilk are fossils of the last age – the growing pains of the fast-paced modern life – unable to keep up.

Without fast-travel, my gameplay must be somewhat planned. A trek across the map to visit an acquaintance or finish up some business can take a few in-

game days. Arthur needs to eat and sleep or his performance will deteriorate. This always make me think about my age. When I was in my twenties, and even part of my thirties, I could go for days with little sleep or food, but now unless I get a fair amount of sleep, I'm useless. In the game, Arthur regenerates slower and is overall slower to get back to normal. To plan for these eventualities, you can make camp to let Arthur cook game, craft stuff for the road and to rest. Walking the earth and existing with the world instead of just teleporting over it, when the design provides such an option, can transform an enjoyable experience into a memorable one.

The landscape, weather and map design often come together to create some stunning scenes. Riding your horse along a ridge as the sun rises and spotting the cook fire of a wanted man, unaware in the canyon below. Slowly clopping through the evening mist in the swamps, clinging to the elevated pathways to avoid gators. Trudging through the streets of a small town, looking for a bite to eat and maybe a room for the night. Sheltering in an abandoned house in the hills long enough to change into heavier clothing. Stalking a deer through snow-covered woods with bow and arrow, waiting for the perfect moment to strike. These moments, and many more, go farther to make *Red Dead Redemption 2* an interesting, living world than any of the writing or insane characters ever could.

The Rockstar character design, quest creation and writing are all, as usual, high quality, but when you take the time to enjoy the spaces in between via these little adventures across the map is where *Red Dead Redemption 2* absolutely shines. Of course, along these treks, you run into some wacky characters, or "strangers" as Rockstar calls them. They can range between the mundane and the, frankly, silly. Some of these encounters can pull you a bit out of the world, while others are nice additions. Luckily, the frequency of occurrence isn't quite as high as some of the more recent open-world games and are thus not as jarring.

I'm not through to the end of *Red Dead Redemption 2*, but I'm sure Arthur's fate is the same as our own: we die and the world moves on. Some of us will make a mark on history and might be remembered, for as long as that lasts, but most of us will be a yellowed name in the hereditary page of a dog-eared family Bible – the one cousin in the photo that no one can place with a name. So, like Arthur, do we look ahead or take our time enjoying the world as it is now? The only things that are truly ours are experiences and memories, and those can't last. This is the tragedy and beauty of life. We all get to choose.

How'd you get into art?

Honestly the main reason was that one of my best friends in middle school was the best artist of our class and, being incredibly competitive, I wanted to be better than her. I doodled all through middle and high school but it wasn't until I got to university that I realised art was something I wanted to take seriously and potentially turn into a career.

What inspires you?

It's probably cheesy, but my friends! I love watching them improve and make cool things, and that makes me want to make cool things, too! If I'm feeling a bit of art block, all I need to do is scroll through my feed and see what my friends are up to to get an inspiration boost. I'm also a big fan of animation smears and cartoons that stretch and squash characters; it's fun to take a feature of animation that you're not supposed to see and turn that into a static comic panel.

What are your influences?

When I was younger artists like Emmy Cicierega and Heather Campbell made me want to get good at drawing – I loved their shapes and expressions. When I first stumbled into webcomics, I found Evan Dahm's *Rice Boy* and Kory Bing's *Skin Deep* and realized that webcomics didn't have to be gag-a-day strips, but could be longform stories. That was *very* exciting to find out, since I've been a writer my whole life and the idea that I could combine my writing and my art and publish things myself online had never occurred to me before. Now some of my favorite artists and comic creators are Mad Rupert, Jonas Goonface and Spire Eaton – they all do such fun things with panels, layouts and expressions (yes, I'm obsessed with expressions), and I'm always excited to see what they do next!

What made you settle on making a super hero comic?

I've always loved stories about people with superpowers, but my favorite bits were never the action scenes or the

save-the-world stakes. I liked seeing the X-Men kick about chatting, or the kids in Sky High taking classes, or Spider-man getting takeout. I've been watching *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* with my flatmate and I'm absolutely loving it, but my favorite scene so far was Spike, a villain, sitting in an armchair in Buffy's living room having a polite conversation with her mum. I don't know what it is about the supernatural in mundane settings but it tickles me, so with *Inhibit* I wanted to try my own hand at the "what if superpowers were real" thing.

How do you go approach inclusivity in your art?

One of the main arguments against inclusivity or diversity that I see is that there's no "reason" for it, or that it doesn't make sense. But people of color or disabled or queer people don't need a "reason" to exist; their existence doesn't need to serve some narrative or visual purpose. Rarely does a character absolutely need to be white and cisgender. Taking care to include people not typically seen in mainstream media is such a small but important thing to do, especially for creators who aren't part of these communities. Plus I like drawing all kinds of people. I'm a staunch believer in avoiding drawing characters that look the same, where all that's different is the hair, and I try to be conscious of expanding that beyond the face.

What do you hope people take away from your art?

That you can make girls ugly. Emotions can be ugly things – crying can be ugly, laughing can be ugly – and artists shouldn't shy away from letting their girls look weird. It sounds like such a silly thing, but I see a lot of comics and animated movies where the guys are goofy and exaggerated but the girls are all petite and have soft expressions. Let girls be ugly! Draw gross expressions on your girls!

* * *

For more of Eve's work, check out their webcomic, Inhibit

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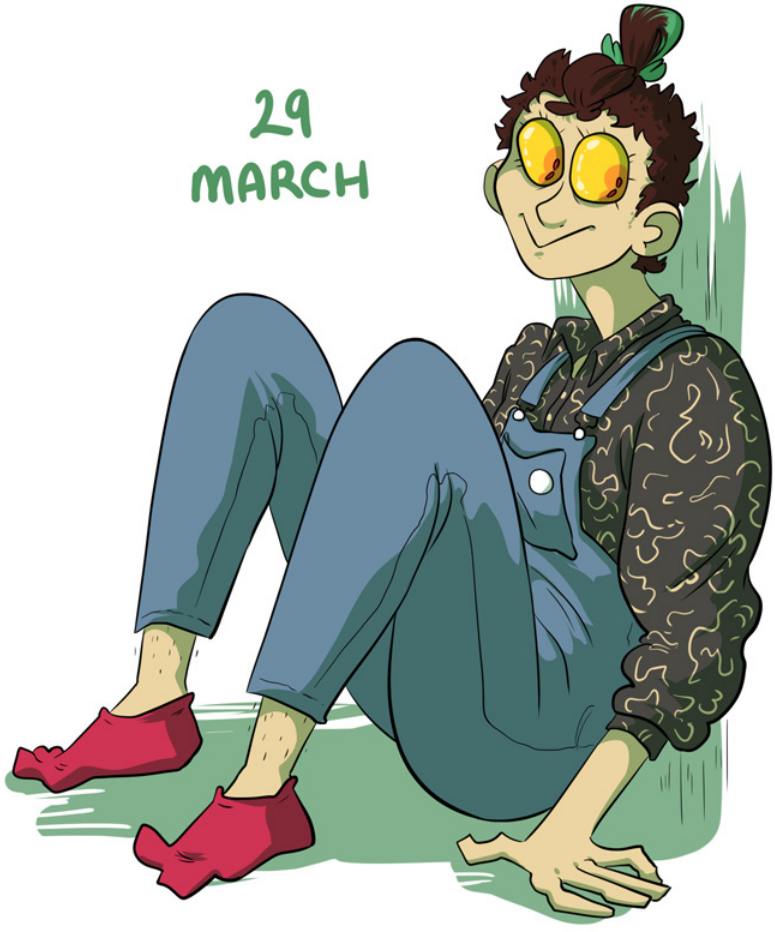

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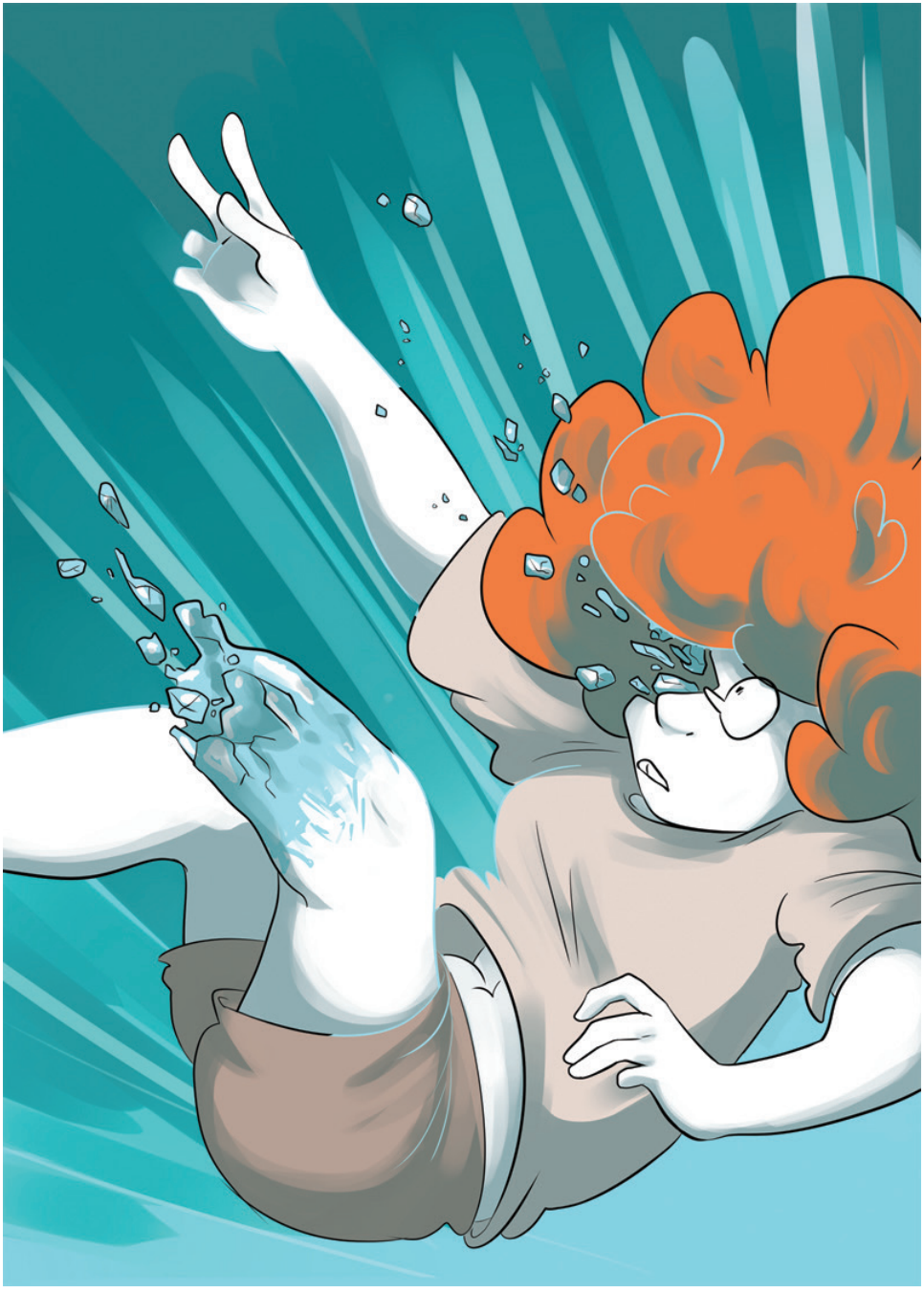

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CRACK THE NETWORK

Its called Cyberpunk not Cyberconformity

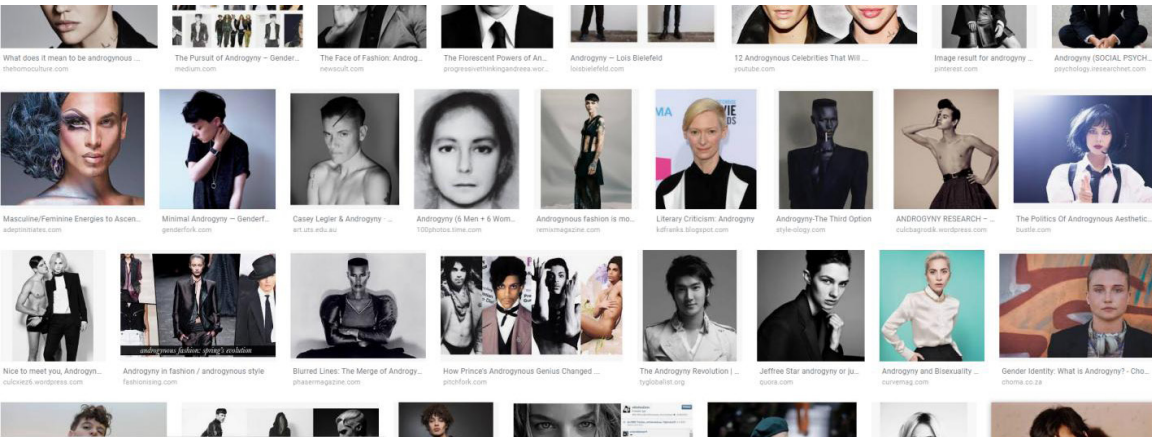
By Liam Conlon

When CD Projekt Red first announced *Cyberpunk 2077*, I was cautiously optimistic. By all accounts, the studio's *Witcher 3* was a genre-defining RPG that, if anything, was only held back by its adherence to the source material's conventional European Low Fantasy setting. But *Cyberpunk 2077* felt like it could be different. It's in the future! There could be people of all races! Genders! Body types!

And then they announced that they had no plans to include non-binary genders.

I know so many trans people who have found comfort in the cyberpunk genre. The trans girl who started coding after reading Case's ICE-breaking antics in *Neuromancer*. The transmasc who was inspired by *Akira*'s butch icon Chiyoko. My genderfluid friend who saw themself in Major Kusanagi from *Ghost in the Shell*'s ever-shifting consciousness and body. The list goes on. I sympathize with those disappointed by the *Cyberpunk 2077* news, but at the same time, I think it's necessary for us to desire more than just small kernels of representation. Characters who break with the gender binary are a welcome sight, but we should also recognize that for transgressing gender conformity, not all people are accepted equally.

The LGBTQIA community is no stranger to white supremacist tendencies and it's no different for non-binary, gender nonconforming and gendervariant people. Racism, colorism, fatphobia and ableism all stain queer communities, and there is a very specific set of features that are valued and read as desirable because of them. When you're marginalized on multiple axes of oppression, you can break the gender binary, but only so much before you're torn down or put in harm's way. Ashleigh Shackelford writes about how white supremacy denies her agency over her own non-binary identity, where her black fat femme self is read as "too strong, too big, too much,



too powerful." I know that as a thin and white non-binary person, I am given more room to transgress gender norms while still being accepted as agender.

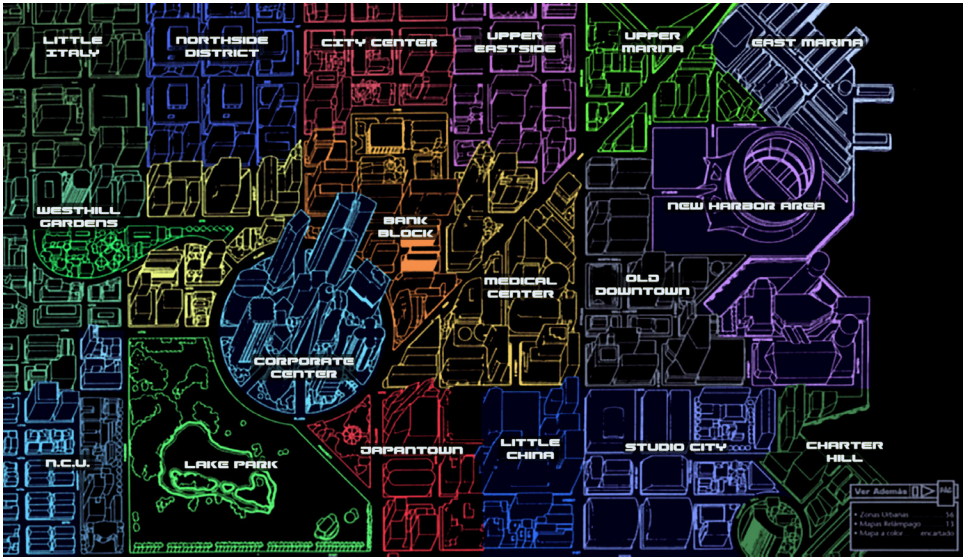
By no means is androgyny synonymous with being non-binary or vice-versa, but Google image results for "androgyny" is a telling snapshot of what is considered acceptable for going outside the bounds of "male" and "female." If you're having trouble picturing what is considered desirable, you don't need to look any further than celebrities like David Bowie or Tilda Swinton. Both gender-challenging icons; both thin, white, abled, conventionally attractive and, at the end of the day, they're cisgender. You're less threatening to the status quo when pearl-clutching bigots can go "Oh okay, phew, they're still a man/woman." Black, indigenous, disabled and fat non-binary people are often denied legitimacy and wholeness of their gender nonconformity.

To craft a story involving non-binary characters, cyberpunk needs to involve and focus on these members of the marginalized group, lest they simply reproduce a white, hegemonic representation of what "non-binary" can mean.

* * *

Turning back to *Cyberpunk 2077*, I tried to reconcile my desire for representation while avoiding these practices, and that meant I had to start at the beginning. Taking the assertion that *Cyberpunk 2077* is "inherently a political game" seriously, I had to consider the game's fraught setting. The fictional metropolis Night City sits right on the western coast of America, rendering complete the "sea-to-shining-sea" of white colonial ambition (until of course, Americans went on to colonize Hawaii).

Something like *Blade Runner*'s setting might look like it takes place in another world, but beyond all the rain and neon, it's dependent on, and extrapolates from, our status quo. The Tyrell Corporation is not unlike the Teslas and Googles of today. They are all companies dependent



on the United States as a creation of settler colonialism unaddressed. Cyberpunk stories like *Blade Runner* like to criticize capitalism and slavery but frequently leave out the fact that the nefarious corps and megacities littering near-future landscapes are the direct result of the accumulation of capital from native resources and land theft, as well as the enslavement of people of African descent for profit.

The massive stratification of wealth, the development of megacorporations and the intermingling of cultures through exploitation and displacement are all features of this kind of logical endpoint to a white-supremacist capitalist system. Kwame Nkrumah describes this American process:

> "Here is 'empire', the empire of finance capital, in fact if not in name, a vast sprawling network of inter-continental activity on a highly diversified scale that controls the lives of millions of people in the most widely separated parts of the world, manipulating whole industries and exploiting the labor and riches of nations for the greedy satisfaction of a few."

While the exact boundaries of Night City, the central location of *CP 2077*, are nebulous, its proximity to Monterey places it squarely within the territory of the Esselen. The Esselen are an indigenous group who prior to colonization subsided on fishing in the Greater Monterey Bay Area alongside other indigenous tribes like the Rumsen, Salinan and Chalon. Unfortunately due to Spanish settler violence, a lot of Esselen history has been forcibly repressed.

Deborah Miranda, a queer poet of Esselen and Chumash heritage, describes this Spanish settler campaign

in California. When European settlers invaded the continent, they brought with them their cisnormative and heteronormative biases – there were men; there were women; sexual relationships only happened between them. Spanish missionaries saw *joyas*, a group with a gender distinct from "male" and "female" in California indigenous peoples, as something that violated the Catholic faith and needed to be eliminated. Today, members of the Ohlone/Costanoan-Esselen Nation like Miranda fight for formal tribal recognition from the US government.

Miranda's poem, *The Zen of La Llorona*, laments this dual past and present erasure of Esselen culture while celebrating her own indigenous selfhood through her queerness. She writes, "Ceramic mugs, hearts, continents./ Outside, La Llorona's knife slices the indigo heart/ of silence. *Nonsense*, she howls. *There's always/ something left to lose*."

Mark Rifkin describes the thrust of Miranda's poetry as a fantasy that "can serve as a way of naming the relation between emotional life and engagement in the world." Her words represent "the effort to reconnect the internal landscape of indigenous selfhood to the still-existing external landscape that has been remapped through settler ideology and policy."

The cyberpunk world is intended to make people feel small, insignificant. As we crane our necks up towards the skyline, we're supposed to feel dwarfed by the crushing weight of corporations whose skyscrapers never seem to end. But the full weight of this kind of violence can't be realized without connecting it to indigenous survival under the American regime.

Nowhere is this more apparent than

in Paraguayan developer Gaby Aveiro-Ojeda's *1870: CYBERPUNK FOREVER*. Drawing on their Guaraní heritage, *1870* depicts a playspace that challenges colonial preconceptions and demands us to consider Aveiro-Ojeda's "internal landscape." We play as an unnamed wanderer escaping from certain doom. We leave The Hub, a cyberpunk metropolis crackling with sinister energy, in the dust as we're guided to by a cable in the ground to a remote village. What unfolds is a dialogue between the player-character and multiple villagers as we can choose to poke and prod at their beliefs and values. If we as players choose

to remain loyal to The Hub's conception of self realized in the player character's self-narrating AI core, demanding ownership over the villagers' culture, we are soon ejected.

The message is clear: settler ideology is antithetical to and has no place in the cyborg village. It is impossible to disconnect the violence of American colonialism from the sexual and gender oppression suffered by queer and two-spirit indigenous people. When we fight for non-binary representation in cyberpunk, we need to be real about that. But we also need to be real about and celebrate the countless trans, gendervariant and two-spirit people and their distinct tribal heritages.

* * *

In cyberpunk, you get people with cybernetic arms! Cool skull-grafted sunglasses! Beep-boop stuff of varying shapes and sizes! Cyberpunk stories often detail a world that isn't designed with poor and downtrodden people in mind – "the street finds its own use for things" – but this class analysis forgets that fat people are ostracized from society and its protections.

From the grimy streets of *Deus Ex* to the bright aspirational future of *Mass Effect*, fat characters are almost always an afterthought. Even when they are featured, they're usually demonized or cast as undesirable. For science fiction games with character creators, making a fat character is seldom an option. This creates a specific paradigm – no matter what kind of future is portrayed, fatness and, by extension, fat people, are not something that should exist there.

I remember watching the *Cyberpunk 2077* 48-minute gameplay reveal a few months ago and being pleasantly surprised when the narrator explained that we'll be able to choose our body type as part of the character creation process. Maybe that's a low bar.

The demo showed only binary genders available to choose from. The man is portrayed as tall and muscular, while the woman is short and lithe. The common denominator between them, besides their light skin is, of course, their lack of fat: the default state of the player-character is thin. I again come back to Shackelford's analysis of just how insidious this kind of stuff is.

It's gross to see a queer dating sim that banks on queerness as revolutionary and then omits black, brown, and especially fat characters. This same unchecked white supremacist, fatphobic lens is what she describes as denying her "womanhood . . . desirability and protection," as well as "humanity, gender conformity, sexual agency and autonomy." If transgressing the body is so important to cyberpunk fiction, it should do so without ignoring how fat people do so already. Instead of flattening non-binary bodies into some thin monolithic ideal, we should push for depth, complication, and vastness.

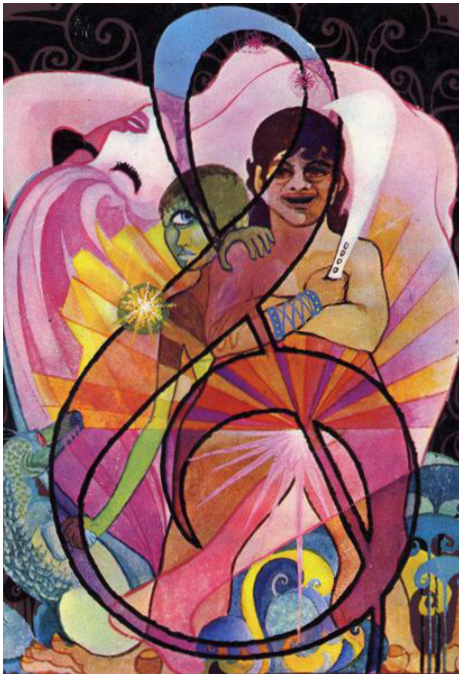
When talking about bodies and the kinds that society values, we can't help but talk about disabled people as well. That's not to say that all disabilities are physical, but cyberpunk loves to traffic in the images and aesthetics of physical disability while simultaneously removing the political context, labor and actual feelings of disabled people. When *Deus Ex: Human Revolution*'s Adam Jensen is grievously injured and his disabled body is augmented without his consent, he's placed in a position of great upheaval. The game could choose to explore this, letting us sit with Jensen's emotions and a world made unfamiliar, but it doesn't. We get everyone's favorite line, the matter is pretty much dropped and then his body is rendered into the canvas by which we exact our revenge by grafting increasingly deadly tools onto it.

People with physical disabilities might not be replacing their forearms with shrapnel launchers, but those who use mobility aids, prosthetics and undergo body augmentations exist today, and have existed for a long time. While disabled folks' relationships with tools they use to address their needs are intimate and personal, cyberpunk frequently portrays augmentation as vulgar, lacking physicality and diminishing of the human body.

The *Cyberpunk* tabletop roleplaying game echoes this point of view, with characters losing humanity and risking "cyberpsychosis" as they install more technology. There's certainly a conversation to be had about the costs of maintenance, frustration and sense of self when it comes to bodily augmentation, but it needs to be exactly that – a conversation, one that situates disabled people at the forefront.

In the *Cyberpunk 2077* demo, when V visits her ripperdoc, Victor, I remember being worried it would fall into these harmful tropes. What I got was the most tender scene in the whole demo. There's clearly a shared history and sense of trust between the two characters. It's warm and slow and it provides a much-needed respite from the deluge of "cunts" and "cocksuckers" thrown at you elsewhere in the footage.

There's a real sense of weight and process as Victor goes on to work on V's body and it's refreshingly not voyeuristic. Sure, yes, V's new augmentations do function as power-ups, letting her zoom in with a bionic eye and interface with weapons she holds, but they aren't presented as something without consequence. V must contend with side effects and perform proper maintenance through a medication. The scene leaves a positive impression and leaves open



the possibility for exploring V or other characters as disabled.

When I think about the possibility for disability studies in science fiction, I immediately turn to the works of Samuel Delany. Since the 1960s, Delany has upended conventions of the genre and brought voice to the "others" so often denied it: the queer, the black, the fat, the disabled, and more. In Delany's 1967 novel *The Einstein Intersection*, Lo Lobey, a black disabled gender nonconforming musician, goes on a quest to avenge his lover La Riza from Kid Death, invoking ancient heroic myths like Theseus and Orpheus. Lobey's disability and its status as a social construct becomes a key part of his struggle against the mythic structure of the society he lives in.

Much like Deborah Miranda's poetry creating "internal landscapes of indigenous existence," Delany's writing, in his own words, creates "unreal worlds, [in which] chords are sounded in total sympathy with the real," thus creating "a rich and complex dialogue with the reader's here and now." Whether it's in society at large or within queer in-groups, disabled and fat non-binary people are consistently denied agency and any reasoned exploration of *the body* in science fiction is incomplete until it centers their stories.

* * *

Queer and trans people have always had an intimate connection to the cyberpunk genre. It's in the way the majority of American teens identify as "not straight." It's in the way we seek body modification to align more closely with our internal selves. And it's in the way young queer and trans people disproportionately face homelessness and poverty. Any queer can tell you how strange it is when stories present only One (1) Gay, who never has any connection to queer community for comfort or safety. For our native, black, disabled and fat siblings, sisters and brothers, living in America is already a dystopia and has been for a long time. Having characters exist outside the gender binary in cyberpunk is central to realizing any sort of punk ethos, if being punk is about challenging what is given, what is safe.

As I sit writing this and looking back on my expectations and desires for *Cyberpunk 2077*, I realize this has been a

useful exercise. It's made me appreciate even more the developers who are putting in the work to create genre-defining cyberpunk games. Instead of expecting much from a company whose Twitter account tweeted a transphobic joke and then their store Twitter account coopting a hashtag about trans survival (not to mention having a studio-head who has called crunch a "necessary evil"), I'm happy to just stick with marginalized developers whose creations are already contending with issues like colonialism, capitalism, racism, and more.

I love Sukeban Games' *VA-11 HALL-A: Cyberpunk Bartender Action* because despite being set in a dystopia, it's a game about finding queer community and solidarity in a found family. Lachlan Cartland's *Ship of Theseus* is a short but poignant dress-up game that puts bodies, in all of their dimensions and abilities, front and center of a cyberpunk experience.

I'd like to make another mention of Gaby Aveiro-Ojeda's *1870* as it's really a work that anyone with a passing interest in cyberpunk owes themself to play. In Aveiro-Ojeda's own words, "Punk is the act of challenging systems that oppress us and prevent us from living a sustainable future. With the work that I make, I always strive to create something that envisions a sustainable future, or a work that visualizes a world that is free of or continually challenging colonialism." They've since gone on to create the artist collective Brujería at Werk, with the demo for their latest game, *Don't Wake the Night*, out now.

I hope people can understand why putting trans and non-binary characters in cyberpunk feels like such a natural fit to me and so many other enbies. I know for true non-binary representation to be realized, however, creators have to go beyond just surface-level representation. Do right by the beautiful kaleidoscopic gender variance of disabled, black, indigenous, fat people or don't do it at all. If your imagination only has room for a flattened, hegemonic understanding of being non-binary – pushing already existing members of our marginalized community out – it tells us more about your values than your story, no matter how good it is, ever could.

LASH OREVER

By Phantom

I don't really remember the internet.

I don't mean this word for word. As far as I can remember, the internet has always been there, either in the foreground or the background of my life, and I'm young enough that I can't for the life of me think back to a time when the internet, as a concept, seemed unfamiliar.

But that's my problem.

I spend a lot of time reading about the World Wide Web as it was remembered by people at ground zero, by people old enough now to have recognized it as the techno-psycho-epistemological frontier it was then, devouring stories like J.C. Herz's *Surfing on the Internet* and Leigh Alexander's *Breathing Machine*. And between the wide eyes and the gasps of fascination, I sometimes stop and wonder where I was when it happened, what I was doing when it hit.

Obviously, I'd missed most of it. I'd missed it by chance of birth. I'm not a '90s kid. It was before my time.

Even when I was online – and I *was* online, to be sure – I don't remember sinking much of that time spent into the kind of things that other people might look back on and smile at ten years after the fact. All I've got to my memory is a website, more or less complete, that never went online, a few hours logged watching speedruns on the fledgling YouTube and countless hours spent scraping every fansite, news site and miscellaneous database I could get my hands on for information about videogames, partly in hope that I might somehow understand how these games worked and why, and partly out of a resignation that I'd never have the games themselves (though mostly for fun, if we're being totally honest). The closest I ever came to foruming was a godawful Gaia Online account. The closest I ever came to an MMO was *Puzzle Pirates*.

But I did play Flash games. I played a lot of them, in fact.

The Flash games that flooded the internet ten-plus years ago were a world unto themselves. Until high school, all I had in the way of consoles was a Nintendo 64 and a Gameboy Advance; anything "current" or "retro" or "high-end" had to be found by bugging friends and peeking over the next seat on the school bus. I missed most of the moments people write about now as game-changers and childhood-definers. But I did play Flash games, and they were world enough for me.

Note: Though I talk primarily about Flash games in this essay, some of the games mentioned were actually made in Macromedia Shockwave, a format that predates Flash by a few years. Although these formats are distinct, the games made with them were technically similar and appeared in the same spaces, so I will use the catch-all term "Flash" to refer to all of them.

Flash games were...weird. Nobody seems to know when the first one appeared, but they were being seen not long after Flash was introduced in 1996. By the late '90s they were common and by the mid-'00s they were everywhere. On any

given afternoon, I might type in the address of a site like freewebarcade.com or mofunzone.com and pick from a cascading list of games arranged by name and category. Sites like these collected Flash games from all over the Web, in addition to the occasional original production, so the games featured might vary wildly in terms of style and content. In the space of that afternoon, I might jump to and from any of the following:

- A dress-up game based on an anime I'd never watched
- A game where your goal was to commit all seven deadly sins in over-the-top fashion
- A game about a cute cat climbing a staircase
- A Tails Doll fanfic platformer
- A game called "Spank the Monkey" (With, like, an actual monkey. That you had to hit. With a paddle shaped like a giant pixelated hand?)
- A game about a kitten and a puppy playing see-saw
- A game called "Oh My Head!" about shaving people's heads until they were bleeding.

Any one of those games might have an address at the bottom, and typing that address in would link me to a game's home site, with dozens of games by the same group or author, or even a completely different aggregation of games from other corners of the Web. The chain seemed to reach back into infinity.

Occasionally, you'd strike gold. The cat climbing game I mentioned earlier was called *Tower of Neko*, and it linked back to a site called Nekogames, which featured game after game starring the eponymous Neko, a sprite based on the Macintosh port of an old PC-98 program from the '80s. The games were largely small and straightforward – browser friendly at a time when "browser friendly" meant measuring game sizes by the kilobyte.

The hooks explained themselves. Here you'd open and close gates to guide your cats toward the exit and away from spikes. There you'd use the mouse to balance the cat on a tall stick while weaving through a multi-screen maze of spikes, or to blow a cat on a balloon around a single-screen maze of spikes (There were a lot of spikes in these games, generally speaking.) In fact, you seldom needed more than more than a mouse and a mouse button to play these games, and even then, sometimes just the button, sometimes any button.

While the creator of Nekogames, Yoshio Ishii, deserves credit for experimenting with pixel art before games like *Cave Story* brought it back in vogue, and while their games hold up nicely today, their approach to design was nothing unusual for its time. In large part, arcade games were the order of the day. Short, simple games rose to the top of weekly

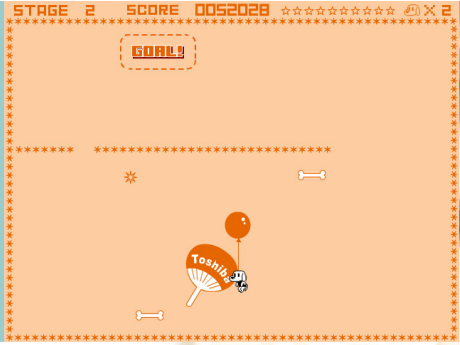
hotlists all over the web, and games that primarily used the mouse, like *Mouse Hunter* and *Moai no Su*, were common. Think mobile games today, but replace "touchscreen" with "mouse" and realize that this was years before iOS and the mobile game explosion. If you look closely enough, you can see the seeds of the mindset that would drive that explosion.

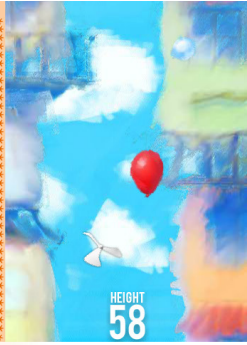
Granted, not everyone aimed for the top of the lists, because not everyone had to. Given the freedom to publish whatever they wanted, the range of games had a unique capacity for stylistic whiplash. These games could change subject on a dime – see the list above – but it often went deeper than that.

Close to the bottom of the Nekogames main page is a game called *NEKO-KAITEIISEKITANKEN*. I have no clue what this means, so we'll refer to it here by the name at the end of its URL, *Cat Cave*. I'm of the understanding that cats hate water, but this game cast Neko as a scuba diver and began by presenting you with an underwater trench. You dropped into the trench, which branched into a network of caves. Paths became more paths, flooded with the sound of deep water, darkening as you dove deeper, further, farther out of the light of the sun.

I found a clearing and shone my lamp, now the only light left, upon an impossible object, a pair of Moai at the bottom of the sea. I slipped through a crack in the wall and lost my way, drifting through the out-of-bounds. It was eerie, but it was also calm. I kept coming back.

The vast, empty quietness of *Cat Cave*'s world brings to mind similar games be-





Clockwise from top-left: Neko Balloon (2002), Tobby Balloon (2003), Balloon Fan (2018), High Delivery (2004), and Hot Air! (2005)

Balloons!

fore it, such as *Ico* and *Myst*, and its approach to atmosphere in pixelated 2D harkens back to *Prince of Persia* or *Metroid*. Now, I hadn't played *Ico* or *Myst* or *Prince of Persia*, and I had to borrow *Metroid* from a friend. But it didn't matter: many of the ideas popular offline had trickled down to Flash games.

In this way, I was given a chance to get acquainted with a wealth of mechanics and styles and concepts I would've had to shell over piles of money to trace through the games in which they originally appeared. I learned the ins and outs of fighting games from the likes of *Etherena Beta*, *Matrix Bullettime Fighting* and *PPGD: Battle in Megaville*. My first exposure to keyboard-and-mouse shooting was *Thing-Thing*. My initiation into the sandbox genre wasn't *Grand Theft Auto III*, but *God's Playing Field*. My understanding of Tower Defense begins and ends online.

But this isn't to say that the inner world of Flash was just a rehash of the outer world of consoles and big-box PC games. Though it was aware of this world, it was also a self-contained ecosystem with its own unique trends and genres, from the physics-defying "spritefight" scene to the ubiquity of stick-figure characters. And it was as likely to cannibalize itself as it was to draw from outside. You could make, for instance, a game like *NekoKiki-1Patu*, where you use the mouse to put out a winding dynamite fuse with a water gun, only to find that someone later had made a game with the exact same premise, only you play as a dog now, and this dog is named Tobby and also has their own site with their own games.

Another example: I mentioned a game earlier, *Neko Balloon*, in which you used the mouse as a fan to blow your avatar through a spiky maze, suspended by a balloon. One year later, yet another To-

bby game appeared, "Tobby Balloon," in which you used the mouse as a fan to blow your avatar through a spiky maze, suspended by a balloon. Nitrome made a game three years later called "Hot Air," in which you used the mouse as a fan to blow your avatar through a spiky maze, suspended by a balloon. The creators of these games didn't always communicate, but their ideas certainly got around; "use the pointer as a fan" is a common game template today, from console games like *Super Mario Galaxy* to other online games to various mobile apps.

Among the most extreme cases of this tendency is the fact that there was an entire genre of Flash games dedicated exclusively to escaping rooms – named, fittingly enough, "Room Escape Games."

The premise was simple; you were trapped in a room and had to get out. These were point-and-click games at heart; you'd search the room for helpful items to combine and cross-examine, clicking the edges of the screen to move from one part of the room to the next. Using an item in the right place would grant you access to another item, which you could use to collect another item, which would reveal a secret code, which would open a hatch revealing yet another item and so on.

These games were small and short and relatively easy to produce. I can't say if this is why they proliferated the way they did – and boy, did they ever! – but I wouldn't be surprised if it was. (The ones I played over a decade ago were, ironically, the most difficult to track down, though a site with similar games stretching back years is Mildescape.) In any case, they were being made all the time and everyone offered a different variation on the theme. The reasons for your entrapment ranged from the convoluted to the believable to the downright flimsy (sometimes no reason was given at all), the rooms from the spartan to the luxurious. Some were photorealistic, others abstracted, some outright surreal. And although the plots were minimal, the best rooms radiated a sense of personality (and good room escape games are *extremely* hard to find, with most of them today looking and sounding like *this*). I used to entertain myself by imagining what kind of people might've lived there based on the pictures they kept and the trinkets on their shelves, much as I used to tour the houses of new friends to glean something about their lives and interests growing up (an itch that would be scratched anew when games like *Gone Home* came out).

I remember the infinite amount of time you were given to look at and think about these spaces and the patience their difficulty demanded. For a whole world

Escape from the Boss's Room

of games remembered today as uptempo enthusiast action, it's striking to me just how relaxed these particular Flash games were.

And then I remember that there were games even more relaxed than these.

Enter Ferry Halim.

I found Ferry Halim a very long time ago, so long ago that I no longer remember how. By day, he made Flash games for the Cartoon Network website, standard-fare stuff starring their proprietary characters. By night, he ran his own site, Orisinal, showcasing Flash games made in his spare time dating all the way back to 2001 (There was an even older game, a slider puzzle titled *Winter Girl*, but it has since been removed.) The first game of his I ever played was *Chicken Wings* (". . . are Not for Flying!"), in which some stubborn little baby chicks have jumped out of a tree, trying to fly, while you – a bigger chick, a parental chick ostensibly – ran back and forth along the bottom of the screen trying to throw them umbrellas to break their slow, fluttering fall. It's effectively a vertical shooter; you had to charge up the height of your toss so that your umbrella connected with its target at the peak of its arc and you could easily picture an imaginary reticule projecting up from your Legal Guardian Chick as though you were aiming bombs in *Xevious*.

But these aren't bombs. These are umbrellas and this is a game about cute, blobby chicks in boots doing cute things to the tune of a music box. His other games, largely continued this trend,

Chicken Wings

combining an arcade design mentality with decidedly un-arcade subject matter.

Did I mention the one where you're a squirrel trying to find its way home?

Or the one where you're a tiny mouse floating down on a leaf, waking up your animal friends?

Or the one where your goal is to harmlessly scatter ladybugs?

Or the one where you are a pair of tiny mice working together to make the perfect cup of tea?

If the games industry of the early 2000s was playing tug o' war with nebulous ideas of edginess and maturity, Ferry Halim was too busy playing hug o' war to notice. Hosted along with the games was "Flowers," a page that allowed users to send a hand-selected and hand-arranged digital bouquet, complete with a friendly e-mail message. Also available

was "Raindrops," a photograph of an outdoor walkway overlaid with simulated rain and set to a lonely guitar.

Underneath the picture were these words:

> *I love the sound of the rain*
> *Unfortunately it's not easy to hear it anymore*
> *My apartment walls won't let me listen*
> *So I just wait..and wait*
> *And the rain would fall*
> *And I will step outside to listen*

Considering all of this, the most compelling example of Halim's M.O., and that of Flash games as a whole, is *High Delivery*. The premise should sound familiar: You play as a vase suspended, yet again, by a balloon. This balloon is propelled, yet again, by a fan, which is controlled, *yet again*, by the mouse. The beautiful thing about this vast soup of intermingling ideas is that designers could draw on them to do or say whatever they wanted. As it turns out, your delivery takes you up over city walls into the clouds and finally to heaven's gate. It was a flower delivery to the dead. The game was playing the harp and the song sounded not just sad, but a particularly mournful, regretful kind of sad, of someone who not only dreams of making the delivery but also knows in the end that it will only ever be a dream. It's a feeling that hasn't left me since, and has only resonated more deeply me over the years, as my oldest relatives began to pass away.

Games like these, like *Cat Cave*, snuck up on you. Sometimes they appeared at random, deep within the chain of games, links and sites, hours into a session, somewhere between *Tower Defense* and *Stickman Sam*. I'm not the only person this has happened to. Indeed, this essay was partly inspired by Javy Gwaltney's retrospective on Newgrounds, "Kick Out the Blams," which ends with him recounting his encounter with *Majesty of Colors*, a game about a reclusive tentacle monster misunderstood by the townsfolk on the mainland, which unexpectedly struck a chord with Gwaltney and the friend he played it with, themselves outcasts in the small Midwestern town where they lived at the time. And while doing research for this essay, a friend told me about a game she had played a long time ago, whose name she doesn't remember, in which, to quote:

> *"...you're a small little rectangle with a pink line for a head wandering through a series of empty biomes in search of a set of "keys" or power sources or whatever and you just walk and jump through all these places where people could've been but maybe never were but definitely aren't going to be anymore, except for you, and then you collect all the power sources to turn on the machine you've been bringing them all back to and the camera pulls back on the space station you've been in this whole time as you activate the*

escape pod and fire it directly into the sun."

She never found the game again. She probably never will.

Which brings me, finally, to the bad news. If you've been trying any of the links sprinkled liberally throughout this piece, you might have already noticed that some of them are difficult to run. Some of them, in fact, might not run at all. And there's no guarantee you'll be able to play any of them in the future, because Adobe is planning to end support for Flash in 2020, with browsers like Google Chrome and Mozilla Firefox already phasing it out. You might expect this to be front page news, given how rightfully incensed so many of us were about the shuttering away of EmuParadise's ROM collection . . . but would you, really? These games have largely been forgotten.

Nevertheless, it would be a shame if they disappeared forever. It's not just that some of the games are fun, but that even the bad games are worth keeping, because any one of those could be somebody's first game. A lot of people were making their first games for their first audiences here, and that's a slice of gaming's fossil record that shouldn't be left to erode away.

And speaking of a fossil record, I've already mentioned that the relaxed, cursor-heavy playstyle favored by early flash games predates and in many ways predicts the type of play that would explode in mobile gaming years later. Many of the developers I've mentioned, from Nitrome to Mofunzone to Halim himself, would end up releasing games on mobile, while some well-known designers, such as Bennett Foddy and Terry Cavanagh, started out in Flash. The flash and mobile spaces are so compatible that a player today could download a game like *Nanaca Crash* and not even realize that it was originally a Flash game, let alone that it comes from a long line of Flash launcher games dating back to *Pingu Throw* in 2004.

The true value of these games, however, is yet to be known. That can only

be known once we start examining them in earnest, and it will be unknowable if the games are all gone before we have the chance.

A few days ago, I checked back into Orisinal and opened up the guestbook. That's how you can tell this is an old site: it has a guestbook. People still sign it, too. Clicking back through 15 pages of the most recent entries, I was surprised to find that many of them were from long-time players, people who discovered the site over a decade ago, often as children, and never forgot.

The truth is that these games haven't been completely forgotten. If you know its name, a quick YouTube search will bring you to a playthrough of this or that old Flash game, its comments populated almost exclusively by people who were there when the game was new. Nostalgia typically makes me anxious, and I tend to shy away from it, but something about seeing these videos, about seeing these games for the first time in ages, gave me pause. It was the first time I'd become acutely aware that all of this was going to disappear someday, maybe someday soon. It was the first time I'd become aware of what that might mean. And it bothered me, because I knew there was nothing I could do about it.

I thought, briefly, about trying to archive them, but it was too big and expensive a task to undertake myself. Too much would be lost. There were just too many games.

Or so I thought. I'm happy to say that there are already efforts underway to salvage these games. Ben Latimore of the Archive Team has recently started a project called Flashpoint, which aims to collect Flash and Shockwave games from all over the Web and make them available for download in perpetuity from their own servers. Games can be submitted through their Discord, and anyone can contribute. I'm already there, naturally, and I wish them well.

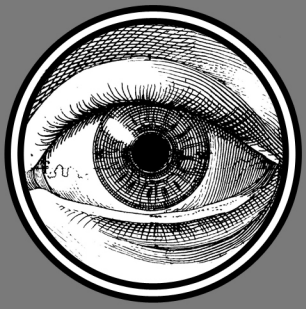
In the meantime, I decided the least I could do was spread the word, make sure that people knew what these were and knew they were worth keeping. Even a few people, if that was all I could manage. That would be enough. This is what led me to the guestbook, to the word processor and, finally, to you.

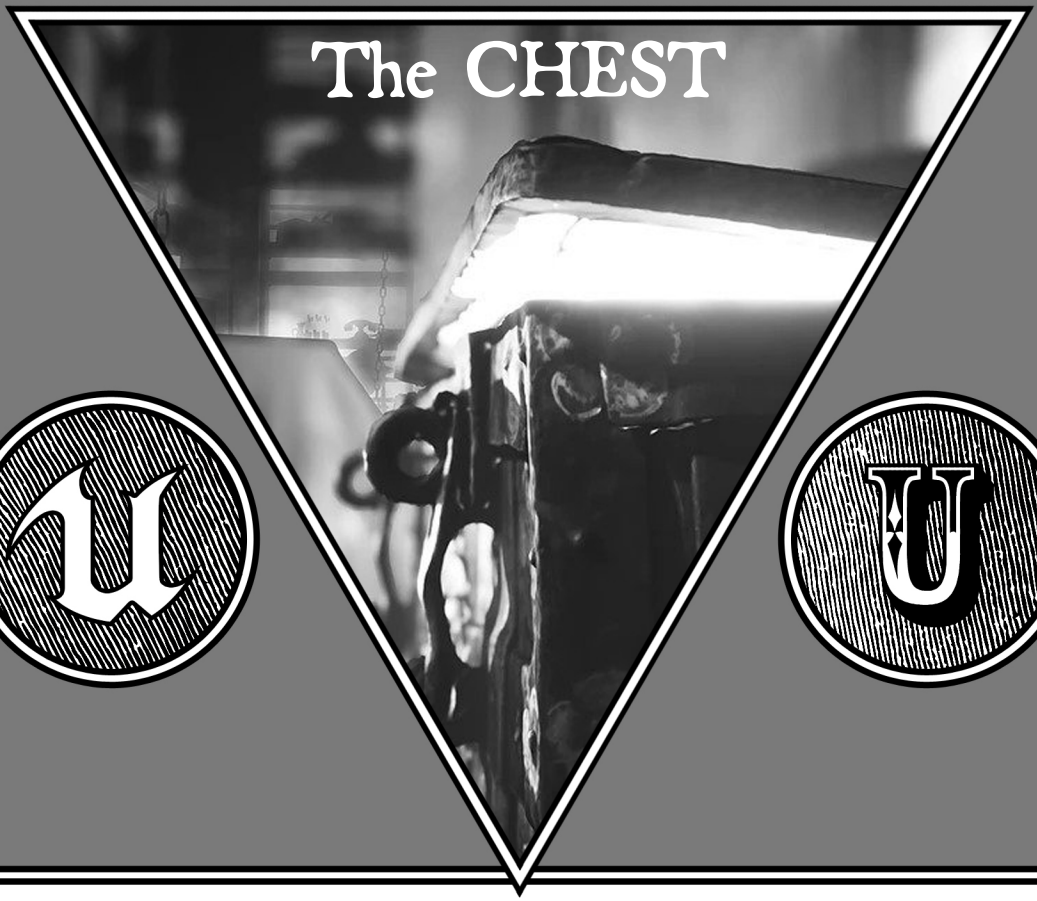
I signed the guestbook as Phantom.

"Flash Forever."

REVVING THE ENGINE

A SERIES PROFILING THE RECIPIENTS OF UNREAL DEV GRANTS





This series of articles is made possible through the generous sponsorship of Epic's Unreal Engine 4. Every month, we profile the recipient of an Unreal Dev Grant. While Epic puts us in touch with our subjects, they have no input or approval in the final story. Click here to learn more.

The ubiquity of Unreal Engine 4 speaks to its power and utility as an engine for videogames. But what of UE4 as an engine for creating animated films? Ferenc Vincze is a freelance animator and videographer is working with Unreal to do just that.

Vincze has taken a meandering path to animation – his degree is in agricultural engineering and he spent a while breeding horses in a German castle before starting his own studio, Rendered Frames. His upcoming animated feature, *The Chest*, tackles his homeland's history as well as supernatural forces.

Set against a backdrop of unrest following the 1956 Hungarian Revolution, a wide-spread armed uprising against Hungary's Soviet-backed government, *The Chest* sees an archaeologist opening an ancient chest containing the remains of witch as well as an angry, cursed soul set on mayhem. Two agents of the new, nervous government are dispatched to investigate these events that so obviously threaten the policy of radical materialism.

Vincze was kind enough to take time out of production to discuss the project and the use of Unreal Engine in its development.

What inspired *The Chest*? What made it a story you had to tell?

A long time ago, when I was a kid, I found an old chest in our attic. I was fainthearted and terrified to open it. But after, when I was brave enough to open it, I realized it was empty. I used to hide things inside it. Chests sometimes keeps secrets, you know.

I read stories by Edgar Allan Poe, H.P. Lovecraft, Franz Kafka and also a lot of Hungarian noir literature. On a lazy Sunday afternoon, while I sat on a train reading a crime story, an idea hit me like a lightning strike: combine my childhood memories with the crime genre. So I decided to write my own story based on my historical knowledge. The 1960's is my favorite decade from the last century: the most beautiful cars, shiny neon lights, cool fashion, the dawn of modern spy technologies.

I'm intrigued by the clear tension in *The Chest* between the political and the supernatural. How do you use the occult to explore the effects Hungarian communism?

The story itself is fictitious, but the historical background is real. People had to follow a materialistic ideology and dogmas which affected their everyday life. In the film, this changes with a series of unexplainable events. An entity with su-pernatural power escapes and that doesn't fit exactly with the ideol-ogy of materialism, the main pillar of the System. This is just ten

years after the cruel 1956 Hungarian Revolution and the regime fears it could happen again, so the government sends two special agents to handle the "problem." They find themselves in the middle of a conspiracy, which is out of control.

Why did you choose a black and white noir aesthetic for *The Chest*?

"Dreaming of colors in a black and white world" – This is my favorite sentence from the screenplay. It describes everything. With monochrome, you can create a very deep and dense atmosphere. If you watch the promo carefully, there are only night scenes in the film. I like the early expressionism in the cinematic art (for example: *The Andalusian Dog* from Buñuel and Dalí, *Nosferatu* from F.W. Murnau, etc.) I'm afraid this film in color will be just an average film. Also, black and white are opponents, like materialism and occultism.

Animations seems like fairly new territory for game engines. What is the process like, producing animation in Unreal?

I have a unique and simple method. I don' t use storyboard and concept art. There is a clear vision in my mind as to what I want to see on the screen. I just follow my instincts.

When I clearly know what I want, I begin to build up the actual scene in Unreal Engine.

I prefer to use scanned models, so I managed to get a high precision 3D scanner. In the autumn, I will visit numerous retro museums

to scan objects from the 1960s. Creating a scene is the most enjoyable part for me. I pay attention to the historical accuracy, so websites like Fortepan.hu or Retronom.hu helps me a lot to reconstruct actual scenes.

The character animations you see in the trailer are just only placeholder animations, please forget that. I am currently working on a whole new character animation workflow, thanks to my generous supporter, Reallusion. I think within a month I will be able to export full body motion capture with facial animations into the Unreal Engine Sequencer. That will be a huge improvement, it's a fairly new territory for me. I am really excited about this, maybe I will reveal a character showcase demo in the near future.

Are there any particular hurdles or benefits in an Unreal animation pipeline, compared to more traditional methods?

You caught me with this question. Until now I haven't found any hurdles. The only hurdle is your lack of creativity and imagination. Unreal is a great tool with endless possibilities, but everything depends on your skills, or the courage of your team. I could write an endless list of benefits compared to other methods, but the two most important in my case: modularity and effectiveness. Finally, I can forget the torturous rendering process! I also don't need to use a video compositing and editing program.

Why did you choose Unreal engine?

I tried several workflows before UE4. I bought several expensive animation software suites and plugins. I also rented render farms. It was a complete waste of money. About two years ago, when I first heard about Unreal Engine, I said to myself "It's free, I have nothing to lose, let's give it a try!" After few months of using it, I realized that as a solo creator, I can compete in quality (but not quantity) with most of the smaller studios.

I can tell you an excellent example. I visited the Annecy International Animated Film Festival and Market (MIFA) as a candidate with my project. The directors and the company representatives were surprised and amazed, because they thought this was a high budget film, but I told them this is a pretty frugal project of a single person.

At last, but not least, Unreal Engine has a wonderful community. I am proud to be a part of it

* * *

You can follow the development of The Chest *on the Rendered Frame website. You can also watch one of Vincze's shorts, "For the Innocents," on YouTube.*

Contributors

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Illustrations

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