

UNWINNABLE MONTHLY

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JOURNEY TO SPLASH MOUNTAIN • DEAD GAMES

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Monthly

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This machine kills fascists.



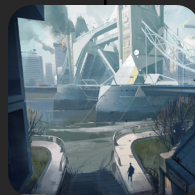
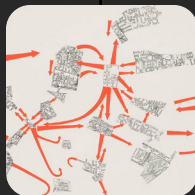
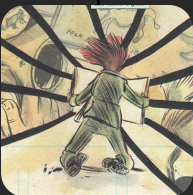
SHORTFORM

a brief introduction to the issue *LETTER FROM THE EDITOR* | DAVID SHIMOMURA
 selections of noteworthy hip hop *THE BEAT BOX* | NOAH SPRINGER
 what's left when we've moved on *PAST PRESENCE* | EMILY PRICE
 fictional companions and goth concerns *THIS MORTAL COYLE* | DEIRDRE COYLE
 we are what we're afraid of *HERE BE MONSTERS* | EMMA KOSTOPOLUS
 interfacing in the millennium *MIND PALACES* | MADDI CHILTON
 where videogames meet real life *COLLISION DETECTION* | BEN SAILER
 analyzing the digital and analog feedback loop *INTERLINKED* | PHOENIX SIMMS
 ridiculing and revering everything *ROOKIE OF THE YEAR* | MATT MARRONE
 wide but shallow *CASTING DEEP METEO* | LEVI RUBECK
 architecture and games *FORMS IN LIGHT* | JUSTIN REEVE
 a monthly soapbox *HERE'S THE THING* | ROB RICH

LONGFORM

a meeting of zombies and *A RIDE THROUGH THE*
 velociraptors in Disneyland *OBJECTIVE FIELD OF PASSION*
 | BRADEN TIMSS
 turns out Dirty Bomb was about *LIFELONG FRIENDS ARE MADE*
 the friends made along the way *IN DEAD AND DYING GAMES*
 | BRIAN LEE-MOUNGER HENDERSHOT
 presented by Exalted Funeral *FUNERAL RITES: KOSMOSAURS* |

CONTRIBUTORS



Dear Reader,
Welcome to February!

If you've been following us online you've seen Deirdre Coyle's Valentine's Day buyers guide, for you last-last minute shoppers I hope it has served you well!

This month's cover feature (cover by Nick Tofani) is Braden Timss on the special kind of surrealism that is a modded theme park. Our second feature this month is Brian Hendershot on a world on its last legs, *Dirty Bomb*.

This month also marks the start of our new feature series sponsored by tabletop RPG publisher and distributor Exalted Funeral – first up is Phillip Russell's chat with *Kosmosaurs* designer Diogo Nogueira.

As for our regular columnists, let's start with . . . Maddi Chilton on Eve Babitz. For those of you who haven't read it please find Deirdre Coyle's suggestions on how to make Valentine's Day Halloween. Emma Kostopolus tries to fix the USG Ishimura. Matt Marrone had a robot write his column. Phoenix Simms goes onto a small chain of islands. Emily Price hangs out with some *Normal People*. Justin Reeve looks back at the architecture of 2022. Rob Rich reflects on *Persona*. Levi Rubeck is still at PAX Unplugged. Ben Sailer embraces *Groundhog Day* by playing *Deathloop*. And Noah Springer reflects on 1993.

Stay safe, wear a mask and climate change is real and causing more extreme weather!

See you all in a few weeks in Exploits!

David Shimomura
Chicago, Illinois
February 12, 2023



1993 was a big year for me. I turned seven in March, moved to Germany in September, and (if my memory holds) was really into this t-shirt that had three moons on it. It turns out, 1993 was also a big year for a few young men from Staten Island who would, unbeknownst to me, drop one of the most important hip hop albums of all time while I was busy doing German shit: *Enter the Wu Tang (36 Chambers)*. Now, thirty years later, this album is one of my most played records and still on regular rotation for me when the mood strikes. But, even now, when I press play, I still wonder what it is about this specific album that would appeal to someone like me, a white kid born in white-bread Normal, IL to a couple of classics professors. How did the RZA, the GZA, Ol' Dirty Bastard, Inspectah Deck, Raekwon the Chef, U-God, Ghostface Killah, Masta Killa and Method Man cook up something that had such wide appeal? Why did this album become my entrance into hip hop?

I don't really remember exactly when I first heard *36 Chambers*, but I suspect it was in 2005. One of my best friends from high school had developed a deep affection for the Wu-Tang Clan and pulled me along for the ride. Soon, anytime we were partying, "Up from the 36 CHAMBERS" would start echoing across the room and heads would start bopping. He even ended up spray-painting the Wu-Tang eagle onto the hood of his 1990 Acura Legend. The fact that there is no photographic evidence of that car is a true tragedy.

Fundamentally, I think the Wu-Tang Clan offered something that we midwestern kids hadn't gotten from the land where Nelly dominated the charts. Nothing against Nelly (*Country Grammar* holds up) but discovering Wu-Tang felt like I was diving into a whole new world. Like the gangsta raps of 50 Cent and Dr. Dre, Wu-Tang offered a glimpse into the violence of the inner city, but it also offered an exercise in worldbuilding that wasn't accessible through the radio. By bringing in the various samples from 1970s kung-fu movies, RZA created a sonic space that existed beyond just the violence of the lyrics. Instead, the Wu-Tang Clan became warriors, roaming the streets of Shaolin, entering into battle with unknown forces. This was hardcore hip hop with a samurai flare and a visual iconography to match. From the masks to the golden eagle, the Wu-Tang aesthetic has become legendary.

All of these elements are baked into *36 Chambers*, begging a new listener to dig in deeper to what it all means. Once I was hooked on Wu-Tang, I needed to dive into the biographies of the characters, and because of the business structure of the group, there seems to be a limitless amount of new mythology to explore. RZA essentially reinvented how groups signed with labels, allowing all of the Wu-Tang members to pursue additional label relationships individually. This meant that after the success of *36 Chambers*, Method Man could sign with Def Jam, Ghostface with Sony, and GZA with Geffen, release their own material, and then reform like Voltron for the next Wu album. As soon as I started listening to the Wu-Tang Clan, I didn't have just the group discography to dig into – I also had dozens of solo albums to explore, including RZA's projects as Bobby Digital, Ghostface's impressive solo career (and amazing collaborations with Adrian Younge), and, most recently, Inspectah Deck's work as Czarface.

All of this lore took on the tone of comic books – and like the best comic books, it balanced the violence with comedy. U-God might be talking about Shameek getting murdered on the street one second and the next, Method Man is joking about the most vicious ways to torture someone. Their sense of humor translates into some of their more insane music videos as well, especially “[Gravel Pit](#)” off their third studio album, *The W*. The members even

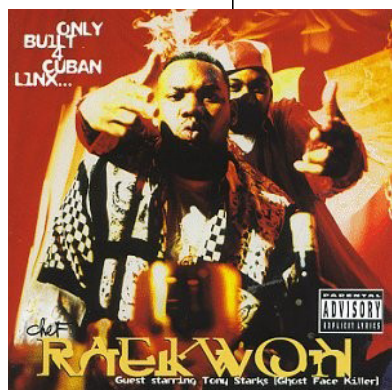


adopted comic book names, with Method Man calling himself Johnny Blaze and Ghostface dubbing himself Tony Starks/Ironman.

This style of storytelling and worldbuilding would go on to influence innumerable rappers, including MF DOOM, Earl Sweatshirt (and Odd Future at large) and Kendrick Lamar, but that hasn't even begun to address the musical appeal of Wu-Tang. RZA's production is, of course, legendary at this point and a major highlight for not only the Wu-Tang Clan's albums, but many of the solo albums as well (notably *Liquid Swords*, *Only Built 4 Cuban Linx...* and *Ironman*).

The entire roster of Wu-Tang members are all impeccable lyricists as well, but Ghostface Killah is a notable standout, not only delivering some of the most consequential lines but also having (perhaps) the best solo discography from the group. In terms of flow, Method Man is (in my opinion) one of the best of all time, delivering some of the smoothest verses ever across the board. And none of this starts to touch on the greatness that is ODB, the wildcard of the crew who brought a tremendous energy and vitality to every verse he was on that was often infused with humor and, frankly, some level of insanity. The diversity of the styles from all of the Wu-Tang members means that no matter what you are listening for in your hip hop – conscious raps, party music, gangsta shit – Wu-Tang has something of it for you.

2023 marks the 30th anniversary of *Enter the Wu Tang* (36 Chambers) and something like the 18th anniversary of me listening to it. Putting it on again, I still can't help but get hyped. Someone may say that it sounds dated, sounds like it's a product of the 90s, but I would gently tell that person: "it's ok to be wrong." Wu-Tang's debut is a sharp, stark, bombastic statement of intention. 🍷





Being So Normal

We don't have a theme this February, but it's the month of love. (It's also the worst month, as [this video](#) confirms.) I'm firmly on the pro-Valentine's Day team – I think it's fun! -- but I also think I'll always prefer the aspects of the holiday that highlight both the transcendent and the tragic parts of love. Wine at brunch, anti-Valentine's day parties, even (from the vantage point of my apartment, where I'll be cooking a nice dinner and eating chocolate) the traffic jam of bookings and cancellations that starts, per my friend in Philly, in *early January* – these things make Valentine's interesting. They acknowledge that everyone has a different relationship to love, even compared to yourself at a different point in life. It also happens in this bleak month, which I personally find perfect – because how do you celebrate love when it's this bad outside, and at the same time how can you not?

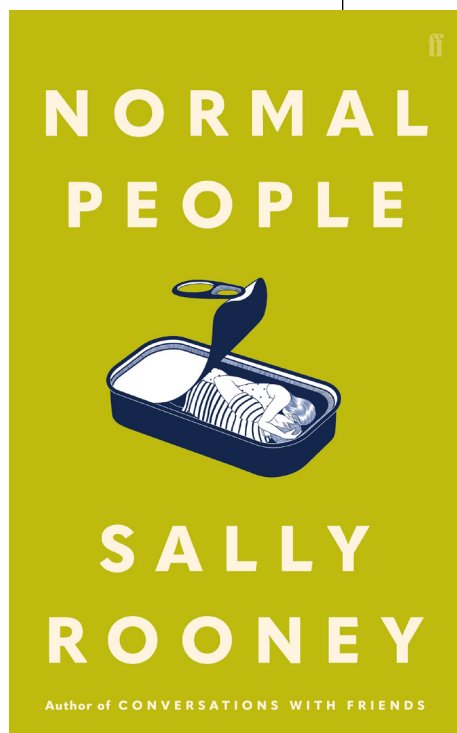
I'm convinced that *Normal People* is the perfect show for this holiday. I am an on again-off again Sally Rooney fan who has only read one of her books, *Beautiful World Where Are You?*, whose ending honestly put me off of starting her others. Luckily for me though, both her previous books have been adapted as BBC/Hulu series, and after watching *Conversations with Friends* last spring and loving it, I recently went back to try *Normal People*.

If you don't know, *Normal People* is Sally Rooney's second book. It follows Connell and Marianne, who meet in high school because Connell's mother cleans Marianne's house. They start off a decade-ish friendship that is sometimes a relationship marked by absolutely horrendous communication, some emails, and a lot of things remaining unsaid.

I've said before that Sally Rooney books are just about making up four characters and putting them in a room with each other in different combinations. Other people ([Rooney included](#)) have mentioned that they are basically [Victorian novels in millennial form](#), *Middlemarch* if Dorothea and Lydgate had cell phones and email. On a more fundamental level, Rooney's work is great at capturing an audience both through a particular drama flavor and through small details. If you told me it was designed to be marketed to people who did humanities in college and have copyediting jobs, I'd believe you.

This marketability aligns both with Rooney's capacity for understanding digital correspondence and the internet, and the Instagramification of her novels, especially *Normal People*. The cover graces the timelines of countless influencers and the halfway-read piles of almost everyone my age that I know. At the same time, Gloria Fisk [notes that](#) *Normal People* is a novel where love does not conform to easily sellable happy endings, but to other equally marketable clichés: "Obstructing every love story by processes that sully the purity of [youth], capitalism exposes its duplicitousness." More directly, "The problem with capitalism for Sally Rooney is that it makes white people snobby, and snobbiness is a terrible obstacle to love."

The draw of *Normal People* as a phenomenon is all about desire. And I don't mean the desire that comes from falling in love: like *The Chair* for academe or *Girls* for Greenpoint in 2012, *Normal People* paints a particular life. We may not want to be Marianne, but we want to be in the space and time she's in – or, at least, I want to. This is obvious when the main friend group eats strawberries with cream in an Italian villa, but equally present when they drink white wine at 1 p.m. and chat about their readings for class in a living room that is way, way too nice to belong to college students, or when they dance in a rural club to a remix that came out in 2016. In *BWWAY* there's a nostalgia for three, maybe five years previous to the novel's release that I feel the same way about. Tony Tulathimutte wrote about this in [his review](#) of the book for the *Nation*, taking the position that "the protagonists' desire to embrace



tradition is tempered only slightly by the awareness that this position is at odds with their politics.” He locates their desire decades, even centuries back, before the modern world made love and everything else horrible; I see the book cycling that nostalgia back to us again, a process by which the disaffected protagonists’ four lives become desirable to us not just because of their content, but because of their time.



I wrote about [millennial art and nostalgia](#) last summer, and at the time I said that certain narratives are obsessed with the “Gen Z experience,” the TikTok/bubble tea/failed situationship vocabulary you can use to describe a middle class, city-adjacent, particularly online group of younger people without even seeing or talking to them. Sally Rooney’s work doesn’t feel like this, because by all accounts she’s an insider into the things she is writing about: college education, Marxist background, recession adolescence. For me, at least, this feels more authentic than the alternative. And yet it touches on the same sense of frictionlessness I’ve complained about before in fiction about particular generations: we know Alice and Eileen have jobs, but we hear very little about them unless it’s to discuss how they feel about having relatively bourgeois jobs in comparison to Felix, who works at a warehouse.

Why do we love what we love? Why do I like *Normal People* (the show) so much? Partially because it’s seamless – it’s prestige TV – but not so much so that it feels fake. It’s like looking at a picture from behind a clear sheet of plastic, where every so often the wind shifts the plastic and you find something unsettling or even annoying behind it. In this adaptation, that’s Marianne’s dismissiveness toward Connell’s restaurant job, or Connell’s consistent

unwillingness to date Marianne in public. These are ugly parts of a “decade long love story” and without them the whole thing would fall apart.

Part of the reason I like it, of course, is that it’s marketed to me. I feel a connection, especially, to the tv adaptations. Rooney’s characters in *Normal People* are all English majors. The church where they hold Marianne’s father’s anniversary mass felt familiar. More broadly, I’m a white woman who graduated college in the late 20-teens and I like Marxism and a good love story.

One of my favorite things about the TV adaptation is the soundtrack, which I think is key to its nostalgia. It is a mix of 80s synthpop (also true of *Conversations with Friends*), instrumentals and Carly Rae Jepsen, mixed in with songs from 2012-2017 (CVURCHES, Billie Marten) and 2020 Selena Gomez which is nostalgia by proxy. The costume direction also contributes to this; Marianne’s collared sleeveless shirts are the most 2012 thing I can think of (I owned one of these the summer before I left for college). Connell’s timeless neck chain grows up from under a sporty turtlenecked jacket to mostly accompanying tees and jeans, but other male characters don the sweaters and skinny jeans look, or the boho-esque flowy skirts and handkerchiefs on your head thing that was going on when I graduated high school.

Is *Normal People* a period piece, then? I think it is. But even putting all the setting-building aside, because *Normal People* is about college students, it presents an unforclosed sense of possibility that has become rarer to openly express since about 2016, and certainly in the last few years. The end of *Normal People* is when Marianne’s recognition that Connell is a good person turns into her realizing, crucially, that she deserves to have such a person in her life. Of course (spoilers!!!) this comes at the same time as she has to let him move to New York and end their relationship, in the book presumably forever: “what they have now they can never have back again.” That’s about love and being 21, sure, but it’s also about desiring a world that’s passed, and that we can’t have back – even though the new one is bright and infinitely full of possibility. Is there such a thing as nostalgia for believing that that’s true? 🇺





Get Her What She Really Wants for Valentine's Day and Avoid the Wrath of the Ancient Ones

As we all know, every year on the fourteenth of February, ancient beings arise from the deep to rend flesh from the bones of those who did not gift an appropriate offering to their beloved.

But don't be frightened, gentle reader. I am here to help you through this dark period. I am here to help you get your girl, or your beloved, what she really wants for Valentine's Day.

I may refer to your beloved as "girl," but I understand that your beloved may not be a girl. Your beloved may be a swamp mist, a creature from outside time, a "man," a flock of sparrows circling your window at night. For the purposes of this guide, your beloved is "girl." For the purposes of this guide, I am your beloved.

It makes no difference to the ancient ones. It will not change their punishments should you fail.

Wax Lover's Eye Wall Hanging

Your beloved craves eye contact. When you are not looking upon your beloved, what can she gaze into other than the abyss from which the ancient ones will ultimately rise? Gift your beloved a wax mold of an eye – if not a mold of your own eye, a mold of a generic eye. Let your beloved imagine it is you she sees, should she choose to turn from the abyss.

Haunted Doll

Get your beloved a **haunted doll**. Beloveds love haunted dolls. When your beloved wakes in the night and you are not there, she will instead see the face of her new companion, the haunted doll with the succulent growing from her crown, and she will feel relieved. Even if the ancient ones take you, your beloved will not be alone.

Mink Heart Wet Specimen

It might inconvenience your beloved if you ripped out your own heart and gave it to her, because then you would be dead, and she would have to locate a new beloved before the next fourteenth of February. **In lieu of your own heart, give her an ethically sourced mink's.**

Judith Slaying Holofernes Yoga Mat

Does your beloved enjoy quieting her mind while strengthening her muscles? Does she enjoy contorting her body into shapes the mortal eye was not meant to see? Get your beloved **a yoga mat that will remind her, fondly, of the ancient ones' punishments.**

Anatomical Heart Lamp

Get your beloved **a luminescent heart** (again, not yours) so that it may shine light into the darkness of her own heart.

Field Hatchet

Your beloved might need this to protect you when the ancient ones come. **Don't you want to feel protected by your beloved?** Of course, if you give your beloved an appropriate offering, you will not need protection from the ancient ones. Unless . . . ?



Farnese Sarcophagus With Revelers Gathering Grapes

Beloveds love maenads. **Beloveds love sarcophagi**. Do not worry that your beloved will prepare this sarcophagus for you; it is merely a replica to remind your beloved of all who have gone before.

Comparison Skulls

Your beloved has trophies of past lovers in her chambers. You may experience jealousy, but you cannot blame her for using sentimentality as a shield against the rising dark. If you give your beloved **this charming set of rabbit, rock dove, pond slider turtle and black-spined toad skulls**, they will fit nicely with her other trophies.

It is not your beloved's fault that these others failed her; your beloved did what she could to guide them, after all. In the end, only the ancient ones may decide what offerings are acceptable.

Not that your beloved is a mere vessel between you and the forces of darkness. Surely, you see your beloved as more than as a symbol. Surely, your beloved sees you as more than a sacrifice.



Cobra Vertebrae Bracelets

Many beloveds enjoy receiving jewels and adornments on the fourteenth of February. What better way to recognize your beloved's venomous kiss than with a **bracelet of cobra vertebrae**? When the ancient ones come, she may wear it like a talisman of your devotion. Perhaps, then, the ancient ones

will see that unlike her former loves, you understand her deepest nature and love her all the same.

Seat of Death Grim Reaper Throne Chair

Whatever happens on the fourteenth of February, your beloved will be tired by day's end. **Give her a place to rest.** If you are feeling optimistic, consider a matching set.

Rest assured, there is a reason your beloved has chosen you. Your beloved believes that you love her enough to risk the wrath of the ancient ones. Your beloved believes you can withstand their glories. Your beloved believes that you truly see her, and that in seeing her, you will be able to prepare a suitable offering. Your beloved does not believe that you will fail. I do not believe that you will fail your beloved. 🕒





Dead Space's Unsettling Colonialism

Dead Space is one of my favorite games of all time. It was actually my introduction to the genre of horror games; I became a teenager during the PS3/Xbox 360 console generation and prior to that, my parents had kept a tight handle on the sorts of games I had been allowed to play. So, while other people can point to *Resident Evil* or *Silent Hill* (both titans, which I played and enjoyed later as an adult) as the start of their horror game fixation, the genesis of my love is and always will be with Isaac Clarke on the *Ishimura*. So, this most recent remake gladdens me, because I think the franchise is very deserving of the change to be revisited with state-of-the-art technology. But if you've been reading this column, like, at all, you know that the praise must always be coupled with loving criticism.

The column last month discussed the legacy of horror videogames in relation to Lovecraftian and cosmic horror, and how this means that the game is often working unintentionally with themes with pretty untenable origins in racism and xenophobia. But that's not the only place from which horror games draw inspiration. Space-based horror in particular, since it also leans necessarily into the territory of science fiction, bears a lot of similarity to the genre of "weird fiction," which mostly exists today in the form of old-school pulpy sci-fi paperbacks. These stories, like Edgar Rice Burroughs' *The Mars Chronicles*, generally involve a white human man being transplanted into some exotic locale – a lost civilization inside a jungle, the deepest parts of the

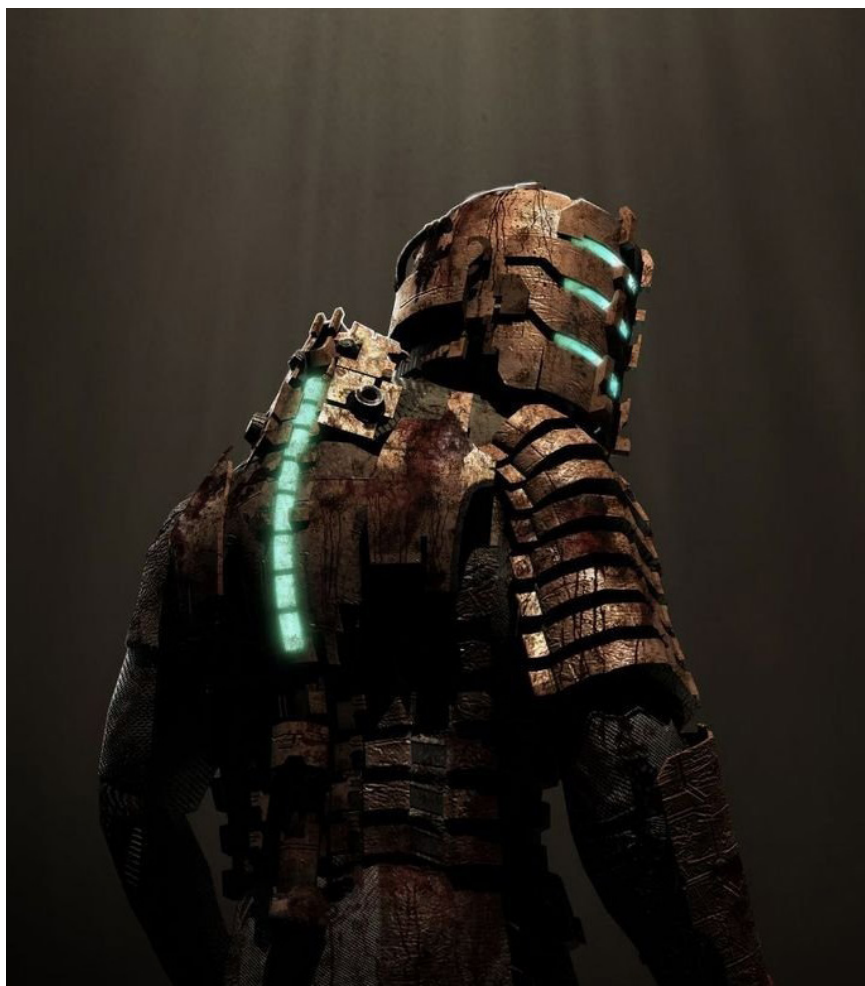
ocean, or an alien planet – and having to wreck shop on the locals after he realizes that they are brutal, warlike and generally primitive or otherwise unenlightened. The natives/aliens are always somehow inferior (despite probably being technologically superior to humanity), and generally are also depicted as objectively evil, thus necessitating our (white, male, straight) human hero swooping in to conquer and lead them all as a benevolent god-king. The xenophobia, as the youth say, jumps out.



What this means is that most instances of weird fiction are hypermasculine power fantasies, which *then* means that they tend to pair really well with the mechanical and narrative sensibilities of videogames, a medium that has evolved in a lot of ways to serve said power fantasies. This is an interesting contrast with the modus operandi of horror games, which is to subvert this dynamic and place the player in a position of relative powerlessness. *Dead Space*, as a timely example, walks this line particularly well. The central conceit of *Dead Space* is a very typical one of this sort of settler-colonial narrative: white guys, meddling where they ought not (in this case, mining an alien planet), uncover an artifact that resurrects a type of alien lifeform, called the Necromorph. True to their names, the Necromorphs kill people, then “corrupt” the dead human tissue and reanimate it, turning normal people into extra-limbed horrors with zero cognitive capacity. This idea, that alien life is necessarily not only malicious, but intends to corrupt and destroy the “purity” of humanity, dates all the way back once more to Lovecraft (remember the fish-people from last month?) but is also a really famous trope of Ridley Scott’s *Alien* franchise (and the game *Alien: Isolation*). So while the aliens do spend a fair amount of time kicking Isaac’s ass to keep the power dynamic of a horror game intact, he is not only narratively but in

a lot of ways morally bound to triumph, to preserve the sanctity of humanity and destroy the inherently awful Other.

Please note that this is not actually a “the Necromorphs aren’t so bad after all” argument – they definitely kill people and then walk around in their mangled corpses, so like, yeah they’re bad. What I’m commenting on here is that sci-fi, and thus games that rely on sci-fi themes, have a bad habit of painting humanity as the apex of morality and intellectualism in a galaxy of schmucks, con men and villains, and this lends itself easily to arguments about exceptionalism and supremacy for particular groups of people. Horror games just take the ideas of a lot of other sci-fi games (like *Mass Effect*, another thing I’ve written about for this publication) to their logical conclusion – not only is man the greatest and the best, but he deserves to dominate other forms of life, because he is the smartest and the most moral. When the man at the helm of this galactic conquest always conveniently happens to be white, the implications become even more obvious. 🍷





Almost All About Eve

There's a part in Eve Babitz's *Slow Days, Fast Company* where Eve, upon gatecrashing a social gathering by prominently necking with a friend's glamorous Italian girlfriend, is confronted by her on-again-off-again partner, Shawn:

"Maybe you really like women better," he suggested. "Maybe that's been it all along"

"But what does one *do* with women?" I said, imagining at once exactly what one would do. "It was probably just the Santa Ana," I said.

"You never kissed *me* like that," he replied.

She then goes on to muse about the senseless existence of the heterosexual paradigm:

[...] It's a wonder that women have anything to do with men at all, and no surprise that they have devised all kinds of schemes to bind women to them, like not giving them any money. If you had your choice of sleeping with a beautiful soft creature or a large hard one, which would you pick?

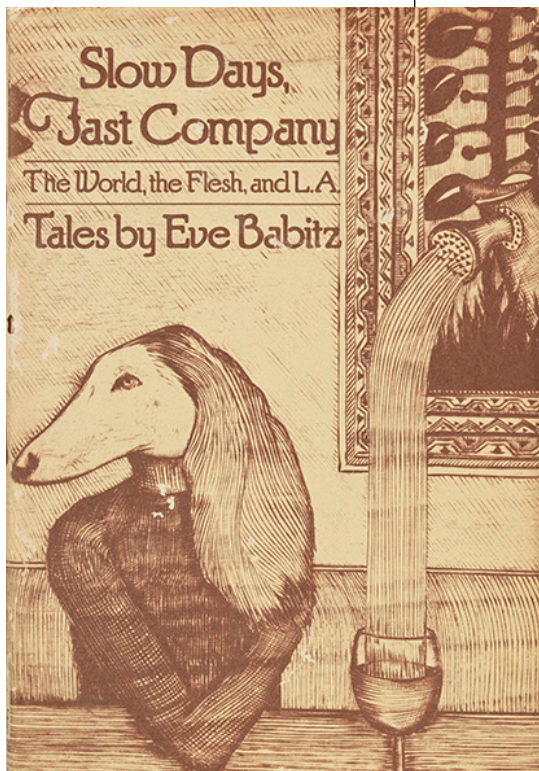
Her memoirs (and fictionalized-nonfiction, as every "novel" she wrote was more or less based on her own life) are littered with such remarks, in which

she weighs the love of men and the love of women against each other in frankly honest terms before sighing, shrugging her shoulders, and going out to glamorously liaison with one or the other. She was flagrantly, cheerfully, and simply bisexual. Imagine my surprise then, upon reading the as yet sole book about her life, *Hollywood's Eve* by Lili Anolik, that her biographer did not seem to have noticed this.

Anolik isn't the only one. Since Eve's "revival" in the twenty-teens she's been venerated as a sexy, self-aware, liberated woman who slipped between the cracks, famous more for sleeping with Jim Morrison and playing chess nude with Marcel Duchamp than for her incisive, clever writing. The frankness with which she talked about sex and seduction has turned her into a hip, relevant name in an era of increased social awareness and mainstream feminism.

Biography is an imperfect art, of course, and there's a lot to respect about Anolik's attempt. She's certainly not embarrassed by her personal investment in her subject. Her research on Eve's personal history was able to match fictionalized characters with real names with impressive accuracy. The biography itself is a stylistic commitment remarkable in its bravery; it verges on memoir, refusing to separate Anolik the author from Anolik the woman, whose obsessive pursuit of Eve bordered on violating. Eve also blurred the lines between reality and fiction; Anolik's forthrightness feels in the spirit of Eve's compulsively honest writing style.

But when there's such commitment and research invested in a project, it becomes perplexing how fundamental aspects of a subject's life can slip through the cracks in such a way. Eve had many affairs with women, which she talked about candidly. Similarly, many of the male partners that she felt closest to were also bisexual – she refers to Shawn, her sometimes-partner through *Slow Days, Fast Company*, as “[lumping] all love together,” quite similarly to her response to Anolik's anguished protest of, “But Eve, you're straight!": “Darling, I love everybody.” It's telling that she runs to Shawn after her frustrating

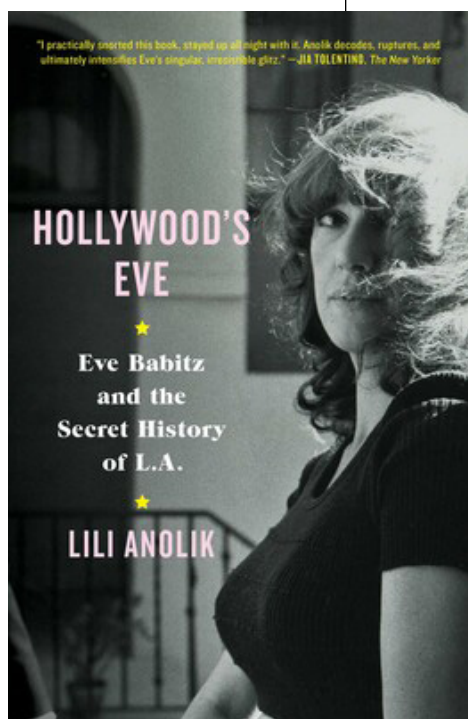


experience with Day, a woman she was interested in, and William, a longtime friend she emphatically wasn't interested in – after a drunken hookup between the three of them, Day took up with William, not Eve. She goes to his apartment the next morning and mourns: “How could she, Shawn, have gone with William when *I* wanted her?”

Anolik spends the duration of her biography attempting to model herself on Eve's confessional style. She instead more closely resembles Day, the beautiful, blind object of affection who comes close enough to Eve to touch but still misses the point, and sends her, reeling and furious, back to a person who understands her. The fact that, in her cast of the story, she *is* Eve makes the difference even more pronounced.

This is what is crushing about the heterosexual reimaging of Eve. She is deified by legions of trendy heterosexuals without any regard for the truth of her experience: that she was bisexual and writing about a particular and underrepresented facet of the queer experience, that of the chameleon. She was a different creature to the men she spent time with and the women; she was a different creature to straight people, whose games she was very good at playing, and other queer people, with whom she sensed a kind of preternatural kinship that she could not always even name. This is the paradox of bisexuality: it's Eve's earnest embrace of the fun and games of heterosexual showmanship that makes it feel so slippery to claim her as a queer elder, as if the fact that she appears to be something she's not makes it true. But who better to embody that contradiction than Eve, who earnestly wrote about how Los Angeles “doesn't like news, [it] likes artifice.” It never seemed to bother her to be taken at face value.

Why, then, does it bother me? The concept of bisexual erasure has been beaten into the ground; some inherited guilt of our proximity to heterosexuality seems to curse us into being concerned, above all, about *perception*, about how people see us and interpret us. It's fascinating that Eve can seem so distanced from and so close to that topic all at once. Her writing is deeply personal, intimately concerned with her relationships with people; though she freely



called herself “selfish” and “shallow,” her connections with the people around her were key to her life, her source of energy and of joy. She wrote about them to share them with people. To flatten these relationships – or, to be less accusatory, to not understand the depth of them – seems cruel. Eve may not have cared about how she was seen, but she clearly cared about how she saw the people around her. She had a palpable, physical joy at the time she spent with her friends and lovers, with people she met only a few times and with people she spent great expanses of her life with. Read any of her work and her love sinks through the story.

Anolik begins by describing her biography of Eve as “a love story”. Perhaps this is why it feels blinding to realize, mere pages from the end, that her understanding of Eve’s love is so limited. She mimics Eve’s expansive definition of love without comprehending it. It’s especially alienating because I, as the reader, felt like she was missing something obvious that I had no trouble understanding – but that, again, is the queer condition, that elemental perception of our existence that connects us and excludes others, that sent Eve running back to Shawn after her horror at the fundamental disconnect between her and William and Day. Eve’s deft navigation of the trappings of heterosexuality could trick the untrained eye, but it never changed her at her core.

Of course, there’s no end to this. I don’t claim to be any less biased than Anolik. Biography is never truly nonfiction. An author claims, to whatever extent, to have stepped back from their subject, and succeeds at that claim or doesn’t. The reader then either takes their word as truth, or doubts the author’s research or intentions or skill and consequently disbelieves. Anolik’s biography is not a failure because of her personal blind spots, it is simply an incomplete work. In much the same way as every translation is a betrayal, every biography is a portrait, capturing the likeness of a person but not their true face. Eve painted her self-portrait through her fiction, Anolik’s portrait of her muse through her memoir-biography – and as I read them I begin to paint as well, a picture that looks something like Eve, yes, but also something like me. 🍷



Learning to Love Roguelikes with Deathloop

Arkane Studios' *Prey* and *Dishonored 2* are my two favorite games from the PlayStation 4/Xbox One era. I love immersive simulators perhaps more than any other genre and their approach to the form is second to none. After Microsoft acquired the French developer as part of their deal with Bethesda, I almost bought an Xbox Series X instead of a PlayStation 5 (though their upcoming Xbox exclusive *Redfall* does look tempting).

I'm certain to enjoy a good narrative first-person adventure. These games click with what I enjoy from the medium: choice, exploration and narrative. Yet some of my other favorite games are ones that pushed me to appreciate genres that I didn't quite get before. For example, *The Legend of Zelda: Breath of the Wild* and *Horizon: Zero Dawn* taught me how to love open world design. On the opposite end of the spectrum, *Outlast* showed I could endure (and enjoy) tense terror and gore.

Until recently, roguelikes fell firmly in the "not for me" category that open world and horror titles once occupied. While I love side-scrolling adventures (and as much as I realize my opinions on the game could be considered blasphemous to some), I learned this when I couldn't get into *Dead Cells*. I wanted to see what would come next without repeating the same segments in a grinding sort of timelapse. It's excellent at what it's trying to be, but what it's trying to be never held my attention for long.

As an immersive sim from one of my favorite developers, *Deathloop* should be a sure bet for my gaming dollar. But as an immersive sim with roguelike mechanics? That's an interesting proposition but one that I assumed would be *Dead Cells* all over again for me personally; a critically acclaimed game that I should like but don't. So, when I saw it show up on PlayStation Plus, it felt like it was daring me to give it a chance. Since the cash stakes were low, that's exactly what I did, and it rewarded my curiosity by destroying my expectations.

Deathloop is deceptively intricate. Without diving too deep into details, the game takes place on the island of Blackreef where time resets every day at midnight. In its opening scene, protagonist Colt Vahn wakes up on the beach, unsure of who he is or where he's at. His mission is to escape its endless cycle by killing a series of seven scientists and cultists controlling the island. The order and means of doing so is left up to the player.



On paper, *Deathloop's* time loop-based progression structure sounded disappointing in the previews I had read. Relative to *Prey's* sprawling space station Talos 1 or *Dishonored 2's* oceanside city Karnaca, Blackreef seemed comparatively constrained. Having players backtrack around a confined space felt like padding for length and I assumed they had to have cut corners to ship within the PlayStation 5 launch window. How would the Arkane approach to narrative design and exploration fit in a game where you play through the same day in an endless rotation until you complete your goals?

Unsure of what I was about to play, I pressed onward anyway, thinking I'd last about an hour before losing interest. From the beginning though, the game's movement and retro-futurist aesthetic felt like Arkane, keeping me hooked long enough to make it through the opening tutorial (which does an exceptional job explaining how the game's progression structure works).

Certain events trigger at specific times of day, impacting strategy in ways that most first-person shooters don't ask one to consider.

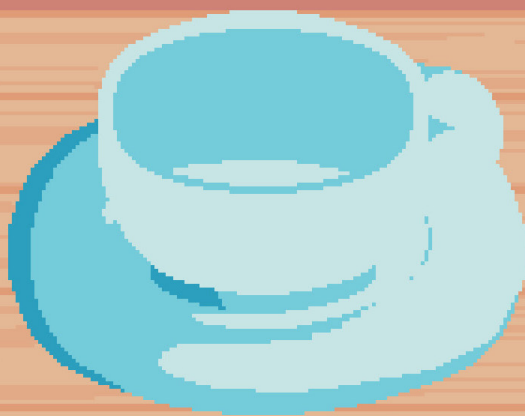
Before long, I could feel *Deathloop* getting its hooks into my mind. Instead of reflexively wanting to quit, I felt compelled to see what was next. Each time I played, I'd stay up a little later than usual, just to try one more run. It's been a while since a game has held my attention quite like *Deathloop* has, especially one I was skeptical about. It was so far, so good after that first hour then, and it didn't take much longer than that to realize that all of my assumptions about *Deathloop* were off base.

So, what made *Deathloop* click where *Dead Cells* didn't? My theory is that where *Dead Cells* rewards manual dexterity, *Deathloop* rewards curiosity (though to be fair, I never stuck with *Dead Cells* long enough to know if it really is more about precision platforming than exploration). Each run is an opportunity to get a new piece of information and put part of the plot's mystery together. There's always another note to gather, an audio log to uncover, or a unique angle to a puzzle to stumble upon. Without those strong narrative and investigative components, there wouldn't be enough to keep me compelled.

Instead of feeling limited by the size of its map, Blackreef also hides a surprising level of depth. As you dig deeper into its secrets, it reveals that there's much more to explore than what's on the surface. What looks limited at first soon proves to be anything but, and rather than feeling like a cheap trick to pad for length, *Deathloop*'s timeloop-based structure works by consistently revealing new things in familiar places.

Deathloop ultimately succeeds by bridging the gaps between two genres while challenging my assumptions about them both. The game is a technical achievement, one that required new hardware to innovate on old mechanics and play with them in interesting ways. Smart, substantive and subversive, it's everything I didn't know that I wanted it to be, and the things I thought would be off-putting are what make it tick. Repetition is a means of finding rhythm and finding new things within that rhythm. Not a circular means of spreading too little content across too large of ambitions.

Having learned to appreciate roguelikes, I'm thinking I'll give *Dead Cells* another shot. Maybe give it enough time to prove me wrong again. All I have to lose is tens of hours of my time, but what I stand to gain is probably worth at least that much. 🍷



What We Make From the Ruins

The *Archipelago* is a solarpunk visual novel that emphasizes world-building via tea-brewing and witnessing your local community's reaction to a major political event. It's also a title I believe will, someday, be part of a specific canon of pandemic game development. These games will be ones that people can point to or play when discussing the ongoing systemic themes exacerbated by the COVID-19 pandemic and how these themes encapsulate the late-Capitalist zeitgeist. A lot of these pandemic-themed (whether explicit or otherwise) games will likely be developed by AA or indie developers. I say this as there is *still* a reluctant attitude amongst AAA studios to fully address political issues head-on, the logic being that too-big-to-fail projects will be compromised by divisive stances or that (a tired refrain to be sure) politics don't have a place in entertainment media.

Kaelan Doyle-Myersough, the lead game narrative designer and artist of *The Archipelago* and a part H.Bomborguy's [The Brainmind Residency](#), is one of the former group of developers however. Such creators are not beholden to shareholders who want guaranteed profits and who are more interested in how game systems can illustrate political situations in unique ways. I reached out to Doyle-Myersough to discuss how their understated and eloquent game design was influenced by the pandemic and their world-building philosophy.

They were careful to state early in my interview with them that their game is not a reductive "metaphor" for the pandemic. But they had a caveat for that

statement: since it is a game that was partially developed during the initial lockdown of 2020, they acknowledged it was impossible to prevent some of that mindset filtering through into the game. “[We] are all dealing with this incredible collective trauma,” Doyle-Myersough explained, which resulted in major themes and attendant emotions of the pandemic, such as isolation, societal shifts and intergenerational conflicts making it into their game writing in an “intense way.” As a world-building researcher whose game came out of two phases of collaborative development, once before the pandemic and again mid-2021, Doyle-Myersough is uniquely-suited to perceiving and representing this emotional undertow.

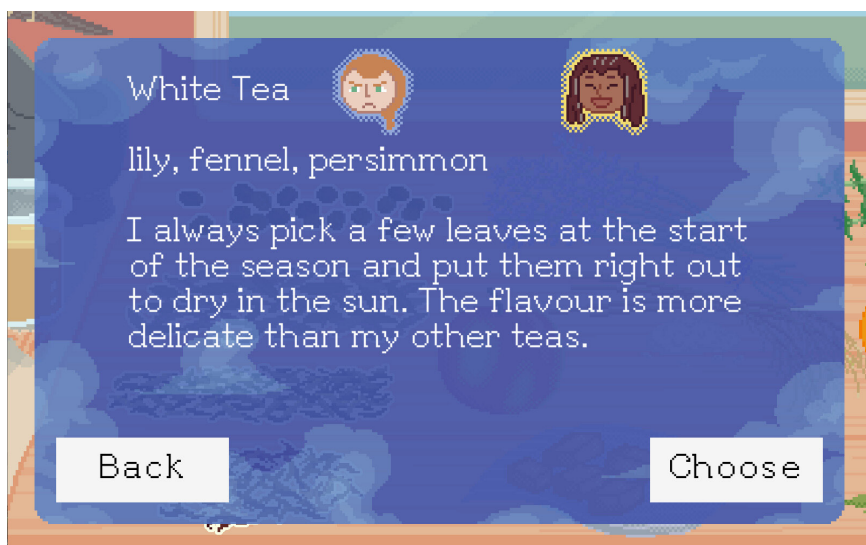


Unlike some larger developers that have created games within the same time frame yet hyper-focused on thriving in spite of the pandemic’s strains, Doyle-Myersough asserts that “[In] 20 years from now we’re [going to] understand all the games that came out around this time.” They followed this up with a half-joke that with hindsight we will be able to chart a sudden upward trend of games that show people alone in their rooms. Or games that include themes of feeling estranged from loved ones and exploring the effects of prolonged physical and psychological isolation from one’s broader community.

The Archipelago’s core mechanics of brewing tea and listening to your local community have resulted in comparisons to cozy hits like *Coffee Talk*. I suppose one might compare the two games’ retro pixel art style graphics and relaxing soundtracks as well, but *Coffee Talk* is more strictly urban neon in its palette and accompanied by ambient jazzhop, whereas *The Archipelago* swatches celestial hues and has a meditative acoustic music style. Doyle-Myersough mentioned

that they were careful to avoid playing *Coffee Talk* which was released during the development cycle of their game. But the two games are only similar in that they started off, as Doyle-Myersough put it “lo-fi chill vibes” as a guiding principle for the initial concept. They also wanted the listening function to be more about intrigue and perhaps even espionage.

Personally, having played *The Archipelago* with little foregrounding from Doyle-Myersough, the game that first came to mind for me in terms of its narrative style, especially with regard to its tea-brewing mechanic, was Sam Kabo Ashwell’s collaborative interactive fiction project [Scents & Semiosis](#) about generating memory and meaning by perusing the elements of an old perfume collection.



As the tea-maker, you choose from several different tea ingredients for a base note, mid note and top note to create unique blends of tea for three in-game days. Different characters show up depending on what your brew is, resulting in various conversations about the goings on of your island. Doyle-Myersough actually made a meticulous tea chart for this mechanic, to make sure there was a realistic balance between character’s tea preferences, what notes reflected a character’s personality and making sure there wasn’t one ingredient that every character was pre-disposed or opposed to.

Each of the ingredients gives you some precious world lore and is often tied to the broader community of Hemera in some way. Like caramel made from the butter of a goat owned by a senior who lives on the tea maker’s island, who can no longer make the trek down to the café. There’s a lot of aesthetic pleasure with the tea mechanic, even at the close of a day when the tea maker

uses what's left of the tea to mop the floors and leave the place smelling faintly of (in my case) "caramel and orange peel." This elegant touch integrates a player's individual choices and sensory memories of their play-through with the game's narrative, making it feel more personal.

During phase one of the development, Doyle-Myersough along with their co-creator and partner Andrew Tran (who handled the programming, sound and music for the game) and another friend of theirs used Doyle-Myersough's world-building tool "[One Hour World Builders](#)." From this collaborative card-based world-building session the group generated the game's setting of Hemera (an island in the sky cleverly named after the [Greek goddess of day](#)), the cataclysmic event called the Split by its inhabitants which broke the island apart and created huge gulfs between communities, and the institution of the Messengers who started off as a necessary service and gradually became more authoritarian. The lead designer also completed some concept art and mockups of the game at this point before putting development aside while moving to Chicago for the third year of their PHD in cinema and media studies.



The Archipelago evolved over time into a game that dealt with "how different generations would handle the dismantling of power structures or handle societal shifts" according to Doyle-Myersough. They added that this was also a surprising turn during the game narrative design process in mid-2021. Phase two of game development commenced when Doyle-Myersough applied alongside a friend to the highly publicized Brainmind Residency with the early prototype and was accepted, against their expectations. "At that point, I started to think about how I could continue to do the world-building . . . in

a way that could incorporate other people in the residency,” they recounted. They decided to share a post via their newsletter that explained the premise of the game and contained a link to a collaborative document using Miro, an online whiteboarding app.

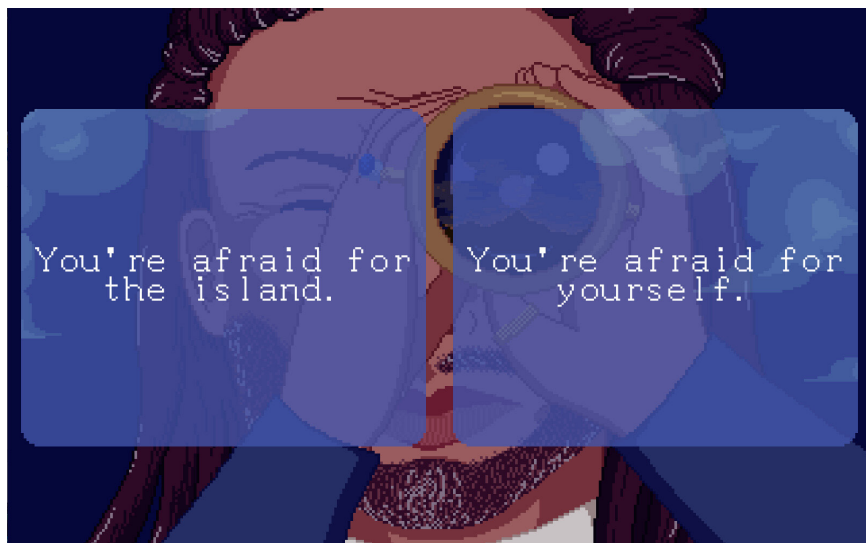
Essentially this document was a map of Hemera with sticky notes about questions and prompts. The anonymous collaborators could pick any note they wanted to develop and add it to whatever island they wanted. “It was super asynchronous” Doyle-Myersough said, “people just got the link and they could just do it. So, I don’t actually know entirely like who posted to it.” They didn’t follow up with anyone because they enjoyed the anonymity of that process and how it inspired “a very compelling feeling” of not knowing about everything that happened on the other islands. Much of that world-building didn’t explicitly make it into the final game, but is part of that world nonetheless.



During my several playthroughs of *The Archipelago* (the game takes place over three in-game days and takes approximately 20 minutes or so to complete), I noticed that the characters’ conversations would not only reflect this sense of not knowing the other islands’ people, emerging culture or current events but would hint at each character’s connections to other islands. Similar to Becky Chambers’ Monk & Robot series, which coincidentally also uses tea-making as a driver for its plot, Hemera’s world-building may be focused on one island but there is always more going on beyond the player’s periphery.

The game’s trailer asks the potential player to consider what they would do if “the world falls apart” and what they will make with the ruins of it. The

atomization of Hemera's world is both physical and psychological, which gets at the deep feelings of uncertainty and radical hope in the tangled underpinning of the pandemic. But it's also about highlighting how someone with a limited amount of agency, like the average player, can help during times of crisis. Doyle-Myersough emphasized that their game was part of a growing number of titles (like *Citizen Sleeper* and *My Life as a Teenage Exocolonist*) that pushback against having an overage of agency.



They strongly feel a lot of game designers think that “the best way to give people an overview of a world is to make your character [a] hero, or someone with a lot of agency like a politician or a police officer so that they can go experience all the different people and facets of the world,” but this risks taking a very privileged and objectified view of the world, where everything exists to provide the powerful player character with whatever they need. Javy Gwaltney’s story collection *Into the Doomed World* explored this type of overpowered hero figure, through a collective narrative, at length. “[There’s] also a lot of potential to make the world feel a lot more realized by showing one person doing only one little thing in it.”

As the tea maker you can observe your fellow islanders, listen to their worries and care for them. You’re not a neutral party, per se, but as with any friend you have “you can’t direct the course their life” with A or B choices. But you do get to choose who shows up and what conversations you overhear. In a way, your secondary role after being a caretaker for your island’s community is to provide a safe haven or relatively neutral forum for them. The cast is diverse, including characters from the older generation who remember life before the

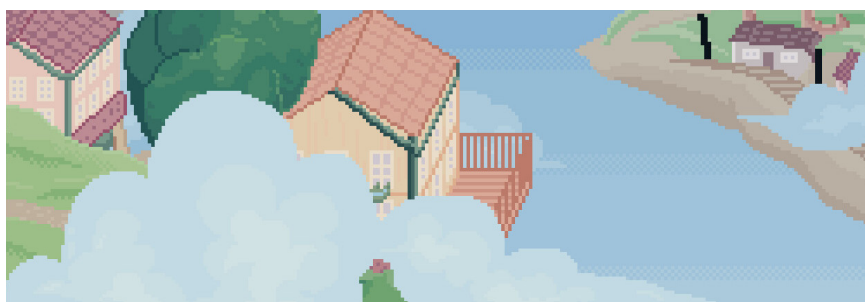
Split and the younger generation who only know the island as it is now. Your first major choice in fact is to decide whether your perspective is that of the older or younger generation. Outside of this choice, Doyle-Myersough leaves the rest of how the tea maker is characterized up to the player's head canon of them.

Some of the cast are of the privileged yet stratified Messenger class, others are engineers and scientists who range from wary, resentful, or intrigued by the Messenger institution. But they are also family members, friends, potential lovers, or respected elders of the community. What results from this is a lot of vibrant and intersectional dialogue about trauma, hope, and sudden change. Conversations in this game are political but get at the messiness of such conversations.

Some of my favorite conversations happen between Mal, one of the older islanders and an ex-airship captain who is perhaps the most resentful of the Messengers and his child Adelei, who's in their mid-twenties and is grappling with the trauma and grief of the older generations whilst trying to self-actualize. Their divergent histories and perspectives of life after the Split typify how when we have political conversations or arguments, it's never truly about the topic at hand.

What makes Doyle-Myersough excited about writing conversations that are both political and personal is that they are a way to show that people's emotions always influence the way that they think about political issues. "[That] may not make your political opinions good . . . but I don't think that rationality is always the only way to become involved in politics" they state. I agree. It's a very Western, patriarchal and classist notion that there's only one way to express and enact political beliefs.

We rarely are in a position to objectively know all the intricacies of a political issue that affects us, nor does it invalidate your opinions if you cannot communicate them in a stoic and detached manner. Though it wasn't their intention, I believe the most solarpunk thing about *The Archipelago* isn't just that it's set on self-sustaining islands making do with what's available after the fall of a more industrial civilization, it's the ethos of Hemera's inhabitants leaning into the messy yet cathartic process of radical societal change. 🍵





ChatBOTW

My son got a Switch for Christmas. With it came a copy of *The Legend of Zelda: Breath of the Wild*. Was the game more of a gift for his father than it was for him? Why keep score?

Actually, why *not* keep score? We *both* love the game. The problem is, I beat it easily. And me finding a videogame easy is, well, not exactly in the spirit of a Rookie of the Year column.

So how to write about it? With my deadline fast approaching and no good idea about how to ridicule myself this month, I decided to do what every middle schooler is doing these days, and ask ChatGPT to tackle it for me.

I made five attempts at an AI-generated Rookie of the Year before my sixth try turned up pure gold. Each ChatGPT column is summarized below.

ATTEMPT NO. 1

My prompt: “Write a column about *Breath of the Wild* in the humorous style of Unwinnable.com writer Matt Marrone.”

ChatGPT’s headline: “Breath of the Wild: A Game of Epic Proportions and Epic Blunders”

My favorite line: “And then there’s the freedom. Oh, the freedom. *Breath of the Wild* gives players a level of freedom that’s truly unparalleled, allowing you to explore and discover at your own pace. Want to go left? Go left! Want to go right? Go right! Want to jump off a cliff? Be my guest!”

Verdict: ChatGPT clearly understands my contempt for my reader here, but a column about me getting stuck in crevices or drowning in lakes is not solving my initial problem.

ATTEMPT NO. 2

My prompt: “Write a column about cooking in *Breath of the Wild* in the humorous style of Unwinnable.com writer Matt Marrone”

ChatGPT’s headline: “Cooking Up a Storm in *Breath of the Wild*: A Guide to (Occasionally) Delicious Disasters”

My favorite line: “For example, there was the time I tried to cook a simple fish dish and ended up with a flaming mess that nearly burned down the entire kitchen. Or the time I tried to make a hearty soup and ended up with a bubbling cauldron of . . . something unidentifiable. And then there was the time I tried to make a healing potion and ended up with a strange, glowing substance that made all my clothes fall off (true story).”

Verdict: My longtime reader might notice that this is practically the same column I wrote for Rookie of the Year No. 2, way back in [May of 2011](#). I feel seen. Also, maybe a little frightened.



ATTEMPT NO. 3

My prompt: “Write a column about *Breath of the Wild* being too easy in the humorous style of Unwinnable.com writer Matt Marrone”

ChatGPT’s headline: “*Breath of the Wild*: When a Game is Too Easy, Even for a Lazy Gamer Like Me”

My favorite line: “I barely even died. I mean, what’s the point of a game if you can’t die?”

Verdict: Whether that sentiment is true or not can be put up for debate, but it does seem to capture the Rookie of the Year ethos. Still, the column as a whole was a slog – definitely ChatGPT’s worst effort of the bunch. Next!

ATTEMPT NO. 4

My prompt: “Write a column about watching my son get lost in *Breath of the Wild* in the humorous style of Unwinnable.com writer Matt Marrone”

ChatGPT’s headline: “*Breath of the Wild*: When Your Son Gets Lost and You Can’t Help but Laugh”

My favorite line: “Trust me, it was hilarious. You see, my son has this tendency to wander off the beaten path, and before he knows it, he’s lost in a maze of hills and valleys, with no idea how to get back to where he was. And while he would usually get frustrated, I couldn’t help but laugh every time I watched him try to find his way back.”

Verdict: This is accurate. If I weren’t such a lazy gamer/columnist, I might have written something like this, except possibly more cruel. Come to think of it, perhaps I’ll write it next month.



ATTEMPT NO. 5

My prompt: “Write a column about using ChatGPT to write a column about *Breath of the Wild* in the humorous style of Unwinnable.com writer Matt Marrone”

ChatGPT’s headline: «*Breath of the Wild* Meets ChatGPT: A Match Made in Gaming Heaven (Or Maybe Just Purgatory)”

My favorite line: “Now, I know what you’re thinking. ‘Matt, why would you need a chatbot to write a column about a videogame?’ And to that I say, why not? I mean, why not let a machine do the work for me and see what kind of madness ensues?”

Verdict: Umm, yeah, exactly.

I almost stopped here, but I decided to try again, this time asking for something a bit more generic. The result: Bingo!

ATTEMPT NO. 6 (THE WINNING COLUMN)

My prompt: “Write a column for Unwinnable.com in the humorous style of Rookie of the Year columnist Matt Marrone”

ChatGPT’s headline: “The Art of Procrastination: A Guide for Gamers”

My favorite line: “So, without further ado, let’s dive into the world of procrastination and see what it takes to become a master of the craft.

Step 1: Choose the right game.

This is perhaps the most important step in the process. After all, you don’t want to choose a

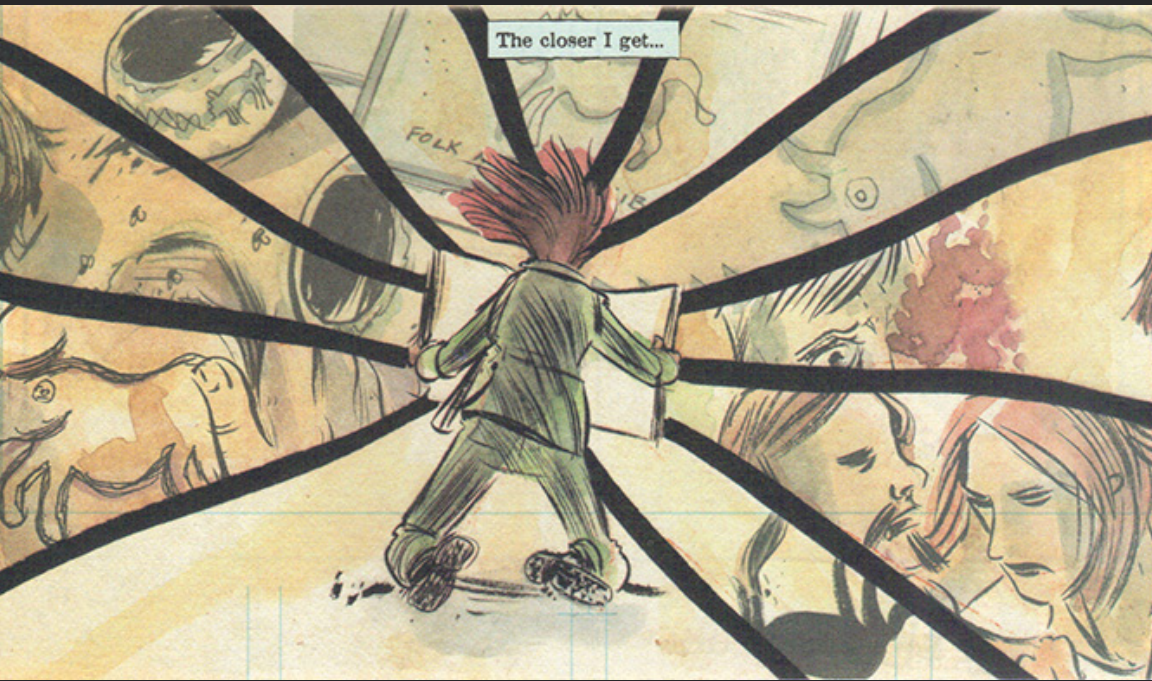
Load failed

There was an error generating a response

Verdict: I truly don’t know if this was an actual ChatGPT error (the servers were being slammed while I was on) or a clever way to end an AI column about procrastination. Either way, it’s perfect, and so now I’ve decided “*Load failed. There was an error generating a response*” is how I want the final Rookie of the Year column to end.

Take note, Dave and Stu: When the time comes, just tack those nine words onto the bottom of my column, and you’ve got a confrontation-free way to let me know, at long last, that I’ve been fired. My reader and I will understand. 🍷





Managing Minds and Blue Fascists at PAX Unplugged 2022

With masks on faces and water bottles in hand, we heaved our weary frames through another PAX Unplugged, quickly falling into old rhythms. But first, scorpion bowls.

That was the plan at least. Not for me, I do not partake, but as is so often the case we found that even the old haunts couldn't completely bulwark themselves against the tempests of the last few years, and scorpion bowls were the latest sacrifice. More superstitious souls might have taken this as a sign to step back, but we ate some damn good Chinese food and went home with every intention of an early night and an early morning.

But when was the last time you got four friends in a room with a full set of mostly working *Rock Band* instruments? One song became a three-set evening heavy on the '90s and sanded throats. A twinge of that old feeling fluttered about, and things felt alright.

The next morning was a little later than planned, but we played some games nonetheless.

Joyride

I am once again immediately confronted with the immense capacity for cutthroat chicanery from my friends. Rebellion Unplugged, a European games studio still early in their roster, brought their *Sniper Elite* board game along with their soon-to-be crowd-funded crash-em-up *Joyride*. The author is easily swayed by neon and expressive lines and they had an open seat so we sat down for a few rounds. *Joyride's* pushing a little harder into replicating momentum and g-forces, asking players to keep track of gears and switching between them while planning tricky turns. It doesn't help when on turn two you're bumped nose-first into a wall but that's what friends are for. I left a little muddy on the rules but that's probably the encore's fault, in the end I walked away hoping to have a few more rounds on the hexes for this one. Because the only thing more satisfying than railroading a friend around the board is blasting them with a rocket down the lane.

Fire Tower

Another booth making smart use of blinking lights and deceptive simplicity, we walked by this one a few times, lingering a little more on each pass until we finally decided to wait for an open table. The metaphor is a little shaky; each player commands a fire tower in the corner of a forested grid where a fire has broken out in the center. You're attempting to put the fire out in your area while spreading it towards your opponent, by changing playing cards to change the wind or build out fire-stops or just spread the flames anywhere but your little corner of the map. So, you are sort of fighting the fire, but mostly trying to make the fire worse for everyone else.

That's acceptable though, because the game is quite quick to jump into while maintaining a strategic gnarliness. The fire is always spreading so it's a war of attrition, getting cold-decked, putting together temporary alliances against whoever won last as you slam the captivating little fire gems down one after the other until you or your opponent just can't wiggle out of another mess. Reminded me of *Othello* a bit, or maybe *Go* if I knew what that one was all about. The board fills up square by square and you just hope to keep the chaos a little contained on your end. A big hit for our group that we scooped up and dropped even more time into later in the evening.



Mind MGMT

I got caught up in the hype on this one, slamming that Kickstarter a while ago and then like all such projects just trying to forget about it until the shipping notification came in. Then the *Vintage RPG* Discord started popping off about it and my heavy breathing intensified. Hauled it all the way to Philly and demanded we give it a go, and despite the intimidating number of components and intimidating (but ultimately useful) instruction booklet began to really crack open the astral plane.

You probably know about this one but just in case, *Mind MGMT* is based on a comic book series about a shadowy cabal that is using psychic agents to control the world. One player is out here recruiting for the cause, while the others are former members looking for revenge. The recruiter plays behind a screen with a little dry-erase version of the map, marking their position as they sneak around based on turn order, and the rest is playing hide-and-go-seek.

That's just the beginning though. From there it's about immortals, intelligent dolphins, a long-term game-altering SHIFT system of cards. Layers upon layers much like the various dimensions and astral planes that are all just out there waiting for the third eye to access and unlock. But first, writing numbers on little bubbles and sussing out a son of a gun. There's even an app if you want to try solo, I gotta give that a whirl.

Overlords of Infamy

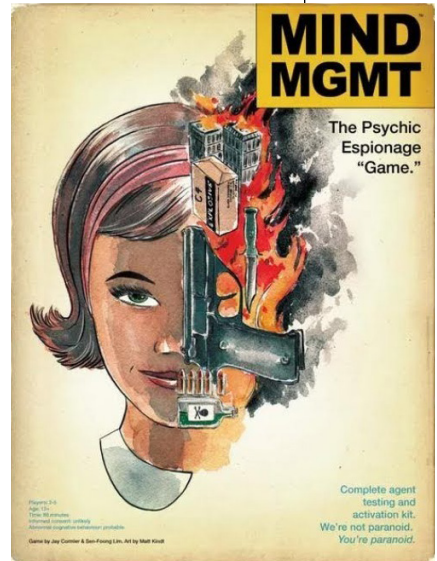
You're the villains, chewing up scenery and map-space to build out your little empire. Pushing around meeples, revealing hex tiles, fulfilling dastardly quests by scooping out resources. Once you start encroaching on another player you can really mess with their stuff. A more overworld-focused *Catan*-like take on the *Boss Monster* paradigm, and a little more satisfying to me.

Sniper Elite

I think I'm just a sucker for sneaking around.

Space Cats Fight Fascism

A fun little card game with a premise I can get behind. Good for the pub. Very funny to me that the fascists are blue. 🇺





Best Games Architecture of 2022

This might be getting a bit monotonous now that we're into our fourth annual roundup of the best architecture in games, but I feel as though it bears noting, so I'll just go ahead and point out that I hate lists, most notably when they're ordered in terms of something like best to worst. I find this kind of thinking to be overly reductive. I imagine however that you're not especially interested in my opinions on this particular matter, so let's just get down to business and talk about the top ten games of 2022 from an architectural perspective. I ordered these alphabetically in previous years, but I'm going to shake things up and order my list chronologically this time around.

Dying Light 2: Stay Human

I actually had a couple of misgivings about this otherwise good game, but at least when it comes to the architecture, *Dying Light 2: Stay Human* does a great job at depicting decay. I know that I say this a lot, but decay is a process rather than something that just happens. There's a whole natural cycle which occurs at various rates and speeds in a variety of different places, mostly depending on the construction materials in question, drywall as opposed to metal beams for example. When it comes to showing what would happen if people suddenly disappeared, this particular game is a tough one to beat.

Sifu

I've been to a lot of big cities, but Hong Kong is definitely one of my favorites. You can go from gleaming skyscrapers to rotting tenements within a couple of blocks. There have been a few games which have captured this feeling over the years, but the only recent one that comes to mind would have to be *Sifu*, basically a brawler. While I of course loved the combat, it was actually the architecture that stood out to me. When it comes to levels, you've got the Squats, Club, Museum, Tower and a kind of resort called the Sanctuary. I feel as though each one captures a different aspect of places like Hong Kong.



Horizon Forbidden West

What I love about *Horizon Forbidden West* is the almost archaeological approach to architecture. Take a look around the game world and you'll soon see how things have progressed to the point where it makes more sense to think less in terms of decay and more in terms of destruction. The player character, Aloy, is out there exploring vestiges, buildings which have been repeatedly transformed over time, truly a palimpsest of the past. I have to congratulate the environment artists and level designers for a job well done.

Elden Ring

Elden Ring surely creates a stronger sense of place than just about any other game to have been released this year. The game pulls this off in a variety of different ways, but one of the most effective is through the architecture. The question that really needs to be asked in this particular context is what gives the space importance or meaning. When it comes to *Elden Ring*, the obvious response would be some combination of doom and gloom, but I think the much better answer is mystery and dissimulation.

Ghostwire: Tokyo

I just love it when games depict real places, particularly when I've been to them before. *Ghostwire: Tokyo* is a wonderful recreation of the eponymous megacity and I have to admit that for a game about the supernatural, the level design manages to create a rather uncanny feeling of what I can only call *deja vu*. As I explore the streets of this virtual city, I get the feeling that I've somehow already had the experience, making the spirits in the game feel just a little bit less strange.

Hardspace: Shipbreaker

While there's a lot to love about *Hardspace: Shipbreaker*, I'm just going to extoll the architecture. You might be wondering what architecture I'm talking about, but at least in my personal opinion, spaceships can be considered in these terms. I mean, they consist of internal components which are assembled around a framework of metal beams, making them basically the same thing as buildings. *Hardspace: Shipbreaker* is all about exploring the inner workings of these marvelous machines and figuring out exactly how they're constructed.



Neon White

While the subject is generally considered in concrete terms, the most interesting games in my opinion take an abstract approach to architecture. *Neon White* does this to perfection, presenting the eponymous player character with a series of what are basically just elaborate playgrounds, places filled with all sorts of seemingly random stairs, ramps and platforms. The point is to make your way through each level in the shortest amount of time possible, something which requires a remarkable degree of wayfinding. This would be a real mess if the level design wasn't quite up to snuff, but when it comes to *Neon White*, traversing the game world is pure pleasure.

Stray

Architecture is all about experience. This of course means that with a change of perspective, a person will develop a very different impression about a place. What I liked most about *Stray* was how the game forces you to adopt a radically different point of view, making you quite literally see the game world through the eyes of another person, a cat in this particular case. The actual places are much the same as could be found in other games, but given that you're only a few feet tall, they seem incredibly different.

Grounded

Grounded really challenges you to think about architecture. The player character is shrunken down to such a degree that even insects are immense, meaning that you of course get a brand-new perspective on the various buildings in the game world, but this one being all about survival, you also have to consider what your needs are in terms of shelter. I don't know about you, but whenever I'm confronted with mechanics like these, I always wind up making some sort of intricate mansion filled with every conceivable contraption.

A Plague Tale: Requiem

I'm always taken aback at how little Medieval architecture can actually be found in games, but *A Plague Tale: Requiem* does a rather good job at making up for this little problem. I mean, the game is filled with all sorts of beautiful buildings, everything from stone castles with soaring parapets to wattle and daub farm houses with more pig pens than floor space. There's definitely something here for everyone regardless of whether you're interested in the lives of the wealthy and powerful or the mundane existence of poor peasants. I have to say that each and every one of the levels in *A Plague Tale: Requiem* should be a portfolio piece for their environment artists and level designers. 🏰





When We Love Something Bad

I know I've touched on the idea of [Content vs. Creator](#) already (wow, was that really over five years ago now?), and talked about how sometimes it's not possible to separate something from the person or persons who made it. But here I am, about to contradict myself by talking about why it's okay to still enjoy something that might occasionally make you grimace nowadays. Because here's the thing: Fondness for a piece of media with legitimately problematic elements is not the same as agreeing with or condoning those elements.

To be fair to 2017 Me, I did say that your own personal comfort level when it comes to these kinds of things is all that really matters. But that was more about when the people behind what we enjoy turn out to be awful. Sidenote: That wizard game is a notable exception because the awful person explicitly stated that she'll interpret sales as a show of support.

I feel like, when it comes to questionable content itself, it ultimately comes down to how you feel. Kind of like the notion that what we reflexively think is learned, but how we actually react or respond is a better indicator of who we are. Which brings me to *Persona 4* and *Persona 4 Golden*.

The recent re-release (particularly on the Switch, in my case) has made me realize that, somewhat surprisingly, this is my favorite videogame of all time. I used to say it was too difficult to narrow it down so I'd offer up a top 5 or top 10, but no, going back to it now drove it all home. For better or for worse, this game, its story and its characters mean so much to me that it's not even

a difficult decision for me to make. Which was a bit concerning, what with the way it mishandles (if we're using extremely generous wording) queer and transgender representation.

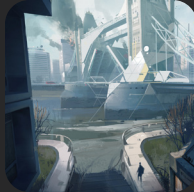
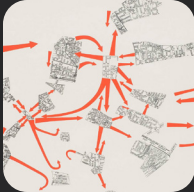
Back in 2008, and then again in 2012, a lot of the "jokes" surrounding Kanji's sexuality, Naoto's desire to appear masculine and even side character Hanako's weight didn't stick in my mind very much. To be honest it was kind of a shock when I started to see people (and friends) criticize the game for these elements because they never really registered with me at the time. Not that I thought these criticisms were wrong, mind, but I was ignorant to almost all of it.

Now Yosuke's homophobia, the handling of Naoto's inner struggle and the plethora of jabs the game takes at Hanako stand out way more to me. And yet, I still love this game. And I think that's okay. If anything, the fact that these moments make me uneasy and have burned themselves into my brain is a kind of comfort, precisely *because* they make me uncomfortable. It'd be much worse if I was fine with all of this shit.

Persona 4's mean-spirited (intentional or not) approach to certain subjects does cast a shadow over the game, but there are so many other parts of the complete package that mean the world to me that they don't ruin the experience. I can't overlook them, much less forgive them – miss me with those "of its time" excuses – but that's part of why my fondness for the game doesn't really bother me. I love it, I still go back and play it every so often and it's 100% fucked in very specific places. Being bothered by those elements is what helps me to understand that I'm not that kind of person and it's okay to love something with such flaws. 🍷



Features



A RIDE THROUGH THE OBJECTIVE FIELD OF PASSION



DISNEYLAND TO ALL WHO COME TO THIS HAPPY PLACE

Welcome

Disneyland is your land. Here age relives fond memories of the past . . . and here youth may savor the challenge and promise of the future.

Disneyland is dedicated to the ideals, the dreams, and the hard facts that have created America . . . with the hope that it will be a source of joy and inspiration to all the world.

July 17, 1955

(Official dedication plaque located at flag pole in Town Square on Main Street)

Your Personal Guide to Disneyland

There are five main areas in Disneyland, and several other important features which you can locate handily by referring to this map. Study the attached legend for a more enjoyable visit to this Magic Kingdom: 1. Main Entrance and Exit 2. Town Square 3. Main Street 4. The Plaza 5. Adventureland 6. Frontierland 7. Fantasyland 8. Tomorrowland.

NOTE ALSO THE FOLLOWING PERSONAL SERVICES WHICH MAY BE LOCATED ON THE MAP BY THE LETTERS INDICATED BELOW

- A Lost children** — A Headquarters for Lost Children and Parents is maintained at City Hall in Town Square. It is staffed by experienced attendants who maintain a special playground for the youngsters. If your child becomes lost, call directly at City Hall.
- First Aid** — A complete First Aid Station is located in the City Hall on Town Square. A doctor and registered nurses are always in attendance.
- Security** — Security Officers are stationed throughout Disneyland. The Headquarters is in the City Hall on Town Square.
- B Rest Rooms** — There are women's and men's rest rooms on Main St. as well as in Frontierland, Fantasyland, Adventureland and Tomorrowland. They are easily identified by signs.

Take home this map and color it after your visit to Disneyland.

By Braden Timms



In the opening cutscene we barrel down Harbor Boulevard moving south on a mission to crash the front gates of Disneyland. Our tails clip through the bottom of the van dragging on virtual asphalt the entire ride there. Just outside the exit to Splash Mountain, along the banks of the Rivers of America, a helicopter is set to touch down and deliver us from the dangers of Southern California's zombie hordes and mutants. It is for this reason that there are pistols resting in our talons and medkits stuck to our scaled hides. Such is the situation we find ourselves in the opening mission of the *Left4Dead 2* custom campaign, and virtual recreation of Disneyland theme park, titled *Journey to Splash Mountain*, by map-maker Dives.

This was the Summer of 2021 when three friends and I went wandering through Source engine custom maps every week, coated with as many mod-

el-swaps as the engine could put up with. Over the terrain of various virtual spaces we followed the flickering signs of our passion, one after the next, as drunks down alleyways and streets paying no heed to property law or any particular destination. I was in grad school then, playing games and studying theory with hopes of alighting upon ways that videogames continue, update or break with the political projects of 20th century avant-garde movements. What put it all together for me was seeing a friend of mine, appearing as a raptor from *Jurassic Park*, tossed through the bandstand at the center of Main Street USA, and then pummeled to death against the side of a police vehicle by a tank mutant roaring at us to leave his swamp, Scottish-like and re-skinned to appear as Shrek, while "All Star" by Smash Mouth played over my speakers.

It is in this collision of intellectual properties and images of martial law, cartoon ducks, Americana and the atomic family, that we rediscover the efficacy which creative appropriation and play afford the critique of the spectacle of modern capitalism, a critique articulated throughout the 1960s by the Situationist International. A simple observation lies at the heart of Situationist works, theoretical texts like *Society of the Spectacle* or their involvement in the student protests of May '68, which is that our subjective experience of time is affected by the construction and our use of the immediate environment in which we spend everyday life. It was, they noticed, through “the development of the urban milieu,” of modern cities like Paris, which saw its avenues widened in the 19th century to prevent rioters from erecting barricades, that power produces the alienated subject of “the capitalist training space” whose temporal perception is dominated

by a logic of production and corollary consumption. The transformation of the city, as such, can be understood as the object of a veritable Situationist science.

Across its fifteen years of activity, the SI tested its theories for charting “the objective field of passion” through which we experience the immediate environment we live in and applied their findings in the construction of momentary ambiances, or *situations*. This was the group’s radical solution for provoking the passive subject of capitalism into playful participation with forms of life which capitalism cannot endure and so must suppress. It was by expanding the field of play over the whole terrain of life, through the transformation of churches into haunted houses and lecture halls into barracks, that the Situationist International conducted its revolutionary project for the liberation of temporal experience. In [the movement’s foundational text](#), one of its key theorists Guy Debord perhaps said it





best: “something that changes our way of seeing the streets is more important than something that changes our way of seeing paintings.”

The theories of the Situationist International attain a contemporary application in the creation of mods and maps like *Journey to Splash Mountain*. In its remarkable fidelity paid to the real Disneyland, this set of five levels betray its creator’s technical skill and aptitude for apprehending the spatial ideology of the theme park as a level designer’s means to craft emotional experiences and control a player’s course of movement. What *Journey to Splash Mountain* critically underscores in its appropriation of what has been acknowledged by designers like Chris Totten as the theme park’s “experientially rich architecture” are the theoretical principles that the design of videogame levels and urban spaces have in common. Here we can appreciate the object of the Situationist critique of urbanism at work in both real and virtual space: “Architecture does actually exist . . . it is a production coated with ideology

but real . . . whereas urbanism is comparable to the display of publicity around [products] – pure spectacular ideology.”

Real architecture as level geometry. And level design as ideology. We came to understand this distinction at the roping queue outside of Temple of Doom. Though virtual, because it obstructed our movement, it was obviously made of real architecture. Yet, as was demonstrated when some of us chose to jump over the ropes while others instinctually navigated their raptors through the queue instead, the invisible ideology of space is something different from real architecture. It was in this sense we came to appreciate how the adventure over the ropes differs from the adventure through them.

Disneyland is such a place where one can fall backward from the future to the frontier days of the American westward expansion without the slightest struggle, physical or cognitive. The prevailing logic of movement here is smoothness. A ubiquity of modern amenities and places to spend money ward against feelings

of dissonance as guests navigate what popular culture scholar Shelton Waldrep calls the “nationless space,” where “borders are replaced with a temporal stage between the eventual capitalist takeover of the world and the pseudoreality of current late capitalism.” When, or wherever, one chooses for the setting of their day trip at Disneyland, it is as though the same adventure is taking place: a strolling journey over the paved avenues in the valleys beneath the painted mountains or under the green shade of canopies, always on the way to the next store, photo spot, show or ride queue. Unimpeded progress toward interchangeable destinations. In the canon of spatial narratives, adventure and quest fiction, the story of Disneyland is rather banal.

What this adventure is lacking, or perhaps obfuscating from consideration, is

the narrative element of its geography. Regarding historical novels, the author of *Atlas of the European Novel 1800-1900*, Franco Moretti, theorizes that “space does not become time just anywhere . . . but only in the proximity of the internal border.” This is perhaps true of the borderless terrain of Disneyland, where “it is not possible to ‘see’ a journey into the past” or a journey from generic Fantasy into generic Future. In Moretti’s novel method of literary analysis, geography “is the foundation of narrative form,” and “stylistic choices are determined by a specific geographic position,” and because of this, we should not mistake the impossibility of adventure at Disneyland for an absence of narrative. Rather, we should understand this absence as an appreciable characteristic of its style, the relief of its psychogeography, and per-





haps the moral of the story it tells as we pass through. It is the same moral identified by Raoul Vaneigem and Attila Koltányi that the urban terrain of capitalist space teaches us: “circulation is the organization of the isolation of all.”

But what counts as a narrative agent on the scale of geography when everything about Walt Disney’s theme park is decidedly, and proudly, unreal? Consider the contorted backstage areas disguised by facades and hollow but solid-seeming structures constitute an implicit geography in the story that guests experience and the geography of the surrounding city which not only includes the theme park but envelopes it. Construction of Disneyland began in 1954 after the purchase and clearing of 160 acres of orange groves in the Southern California city of Anaheim. When it was completed, the park comprised five lands themed off various fantasies, bounded by the anachronistic Disneyland Railroad. Beyond

that, where orange trees once stood, lie paved acres of parking spaces from which families would flow through turnstiles at the park’s entrance.

From there, guests would move down Main Street U.S.A. toward Fantasyland or Adventureland and Frontierland or Tomorrowland. Winding smoothly as garden tourists through one fantasy to the next. And, in the northwest corner, an artificial river carved out of the earth coursed with water that would eventually be dyed green with chalk to obscure the park infrastructure beneath its surface. Decades even after that, it purportedly plays host to a motley ecology of aquatic animals, never deliberately introduced. There were also park brochures offered for free to guests upon entry which encouraged children to “take home this map and color it after your visit,” rendering all this fantastic topography in black outlines on a background of white; making explicit the ideological limits of fan-

tasy at Disneyland where desire can be permitted to flow freely into contained spaces and activities like a child encouraged to fill in the outlines of the Rivers of America with whichever shades of green their box of crayons provide.

Disneyland transformed the mostly agrarian community of Anaheim, and was, in turn, physically shaped by its own influence as other entrepreneurs rushed to build hotels on the surrounding land that could not at the time be purchased by Walt Disney. On the corner of West Katella and South Harbor, a drama about the ownership of the Candy Cane Inn, built in the late 1950s, has become [the subject of disputed legend](#) because of the way it now intrudes upon the spatial narrative of Disneyland's sister theme park, California Adventure, shrinking the territory available to its Cars Land expansion. It is because physical space is finite, and the narrative of Disneyland tells a spatialized story, that a counternarrative which appropriates this geography, accepting it as its very premise, like Dives' *Journey to Splash Mountain* campaign, so

effectively highlights the ways that capitalist ideology circulates through the architecture of urban design.

Dives has organized the plot of this campaign according to an architectural principle, one which media theorist Henry Jenkins argues is concerned with “designing the geography of [an] imaginary world,” finding or creating within the space of Disneyland obstacles and affordances to aid in the construction of particular subjective experiences. Except, of course, the geography of this virtual space is based on the geography of an actual one.

Dives' creative act is a purely Situationist *détournement*, an action of turning against, of Disney's images and spaces. The story of this series of maps is an adventure born from a crisis posed by the agents of contemporary life – historical narratives, pandemics, competing brands, urban sprawl, and caustic irony, and actual imagination, manifested in a transformation of Disneyland's narrative geography. It cannot be said that *Journey to Splash Mountain* seizes the physical




terrain of the capitalist training ground, but it does accomplish something in its appropriation of the invisible terrain of its ideology nevertheless, creating a virtual space wherein Situationist styles of play can be tested and enjoyed.

The banal virtuality of theme park spaces seems to beg for just this kind of disintegration. *Journey to Splash Mountain* guides players beyond the spatial limits of the false adventure, highlighting a truer impression of the park's geography as hordes of zombies push survivors off the beaten track into the off-limits areas backstage, up onto the inaccessible second stories of New Orleans Square, sending them through busted shop windows, down into the sewer system beneath Main Street, forced to hold out or else die in a gunfight among Splash Mountain's singing animatronics.

Contrary to the real Disneyland, the prevailing logic of movement through these maps is anything but smooth; often it is unclear and requires players to screen the environment of all intuitive navigation routes, so as to see different possibilities for movement throughout the park. "What one wants to make of an architecture," Guy Debord wrote, "is a verdict fairly close to what one would

like to make of one's life," and I believe that Dives' adherence to extreme fidelity, but also their tendency to render these clearly legible environments incoherent, is an indication that *Journey to Splash Mountain* is a Situationist perspective on the actual Disneyland. Because of this, we can describe Dives' recreation of the architecture of Disneyland as an exercise in the construction of situations, wherein the park's spatial narrative, its ideology, is provoked into crisis through the intervention of a new narrative whose foundation is a geography where, at last, adventure can take place.

If the availability of mods invites not only new ways to play our favorite games, but also reveals new ways to see our actual world and what possible ways we may choose to play in it, as I have argued, then perhaps the increasing rarity with which modding tools are made available for new games could be said to have the opposite effect. Custom modifications are inspiring, so why shouldn't players be enabled to become inspired? From a Situationist perspective, there is no satisfying response to this question. For beneath the parking lots there are rows of orange groves waiting to be discovered! 





LIFELONG FRIENDS ARE MADE IN DEAD AND DYING GAMES

By Brian Lee-Mounger Hendershot





Dead videogames are like catnip for the terminally online like myself. Even a slight dip in a game's player count is enough to generate countless hours of hasty YouTube punditry, breathless news articles and misguided comparisons. Although these narratives are usually misguided, our terminal obsession with player counts touches on something that is somehow both overlooked and over-commodified.

Games die all the time, often by passing into cultural obscurity. Sometimes, developers and publishers choose to kill the game themselves by ending development and turning off servers. And just like a real death, the death of a game often feels capricious and unfair.

Although each death represents a tragic historical loss, the outcomes are not completely negative. Truly dead games – like the long-forgotten *Dirty Bomb* – create player-led communities that other games can only dream of. Developed by British developer Splash Damage, the objective-based game combines high-

intensity gunfights with match-altering character abilities and parkour.

Dirty Bomb lasted far longer than many of the other free-to-play multiplayer games (think *Loadout*, *Nosgoth*, *The Culling* or *Gigantic*) that dominated the zeitgeist of the early 2010s. Most of these games, including *Dirty Bomb*, suffered from poor balance, lackluster monetization, rampant hacking and changing consumer tastes. And most of them are dead in the truest sense: They are no longer playable by any legal means.

Except for *Dirty Bomb*.

Past the Point of Profitability

Unlike other developers, Splash Damage kept its [servers up](#) after ending development for the game in 2018. They even worked with a server host to provide [rentable servers](#), which is where the last few hundred remaining players can be found. For the game's oldest players, the last five years have been bittersweet. *Dirty Bomb* [barely broke 10,000 peak players](#), but what the com-

munity lacked in size, it made up for with passion and kinship.

Denis Kruljac was a prominent competitive player and rents one of the last remaining *Dirty Bomb* servers, which is usually empty. Like many longtime players, Kruljac met one of his closest friends through the game: Hannah Lehnen. The two friends used to stream *Dirty Bomb* to a small, but dedicated group of viewers.

“In [the] best cases, 20, 30 people [were] watching either of us,” Kruljac said. “And it was the 20, 30 people you cared about . . . I don’t want to have 1,000 people watching. I just want these 20 or 30 people and [to] chat with them. And you really made a community within a community. That was really, really nice. It was super perfect.”

Playing *Dirty Bomb* today is a different experience for Kruljac and Lehnen. It’s like going back to a favorite pub or coffee shop, except the owners have changed, the food isn’t half as good as you remember it, most

of your friends have moved on and, to make matters worse, some lout is sitting in your favorite chair. They can keep coming back, but it will never be the same.

“It was my first fast-paced shooter game that I ever played . . . my first online shooter where I got to meet people,” Lehnen said. “I used to love the game . . . But eventually, it became a bit of a shit-show because of what [the devs] did or didn’t do to the game. It was a lot of frustration and now it’s just a case of ‘I hate it, but I love it at the same time.’”

For others, particularly those who discovered *Dirty Bomb* after development ended, its popularity is irrelevant. The lack of monetization and unique gameplay keep players coming back. More importantly, the game has become a “social experience” for players like AsMoD3uS, one of the last remaining *Dirty Bomb* content creators. AsMoD3uS has put 1,600 hours into the game, most of them in the past few years.





“I am definitely one of many that met someone – two friends to be precise, one of which is not only a friend but someone really special that I will remember to the end of my life,” AsMoD3uS said. “I can only be grateful to the existence of the game, because it was the only thing that allowed me to find my only real friend.”

A Place Where Everybody Knows Your Name

Experiences like AsMoD3uS’ are common in *Dirty Bomb*. Since the player base is so small, the odds of running into a familiar face are high. Tight-knit communities like these are some of the closest digital equivalents to what sociologist Ray Oldenburg calls “third places,” a space separate from work and home. Third places, like gyms, public libraries and parks, play an important role in community-building and democracy by fostering repeated interactions with strangers.

Some scholars argue that games are not effective third spaces. The reasons can vary, but they largely boil down to the characteristics of videogames. Third places lack tension and above all else, allow strangers to easily and **routinely connect** with one other.

This might be the case for games like *Apex Legends*, *Dirty Bomb*’s closest equivalent, whose popularity and matchmaking make it much harder to form friendships through repeated chance encounters. However, it is not the case for smaller games like *Dirty Bomb*, where repeated interactions with strangers are both inescapable and part of the game’s appeal. Somewhat paradoxically, the smaller a game’s player base becomes, the more likely it is to become a third space.

“When you spend some time playing with the same people you can start noticing what their playstyle is, their favorite mercs and if they are a more vocal/talkative person, then you can even make

some idea of what kind of person they are, and their character is,” said AsMoD3uS. “Then you can get quite curious as [to] what they are up to and that’s how . . . [a] friendship can start in such a game.”

Making friends based on a common love of videogames is [hardly a revolutionary](#) insight. I myself share a deep love of videogames with my closest friends. What is less talked about is the impact that these friendships have outside games and their implications for an increasingly polarized and lonely world.

The connection between friendship and well-being outside videogames is well-documented. According to a [nearly 100-year study on human flourishing](#) by Harvard University, loneliness has a physical effect on the body. We become more sensitive to pain, sleep poorly, have poorer health outcomes and in general, are just more likely to die prematurely. These individual effects can play out on a societal level and at the extreme end

make us less likely to trust other people.

Loneliness is becoming increasingly common in wealthy, industrialized countries, especially among men. Political scientists like Robert D. Putnam argue that Americans trust each other less because they no longer participate in traditional civic organizations. For Putnam, the main cause of this phenomenon is the “individualizing” of leisure time through television and the internet.

But for Emmanuel Quevedo and Velvet, this “individualized” activity has led to a deep friendship. The two men met through *Dirty Bomb* and eventually struck up a friendship that Velvet describes as “soul-to-soul.” What started as a way to kill time blossomed into a friendship that is as real and meaningful as anything ever formed through a bowling league.

“Maybe it wasn’t the best day of our lives . . . [but] we could play a videogame and free our minds of it and just talk





about nonsense,” Velvet said. “Breaking up with a girlfriend or more seriously, losing a family member, can turn into a really nice conversation all of a sudden just by the interaction that you’re having in the videogame with the person you’re speaking with.”

According to Quevedo, a social butterfly and an avid gamer, it is easier to make friends in smaller games. “I love making friends online because you don’t really realize how connected you can get on something that people usually feel is how you disconnect from reality,” Quevedo said. “[In] big games, people are only focusing on playing, yet on smaller games, it’s like you’re walking into their home.”

It’s these sorts of friendships that kept *Dirty Bomb* alive nearly five years after development ceased. Multiple people reached out to me, unprompted and unquoted, to tell me how *Dirty Bomb* had changed their lives. They made lifelong friendships, got married or had kids be-

cause of a game that never broke a 63 on Metacritic. Splash Damage may have dropped the ball when it came to the game’s success, but they knocked it out of the park when they decided to keep the servers long past the point of profitability.

Gaming’s Biggest Tragedy

Sadly, *Dirty Bomb*’s life is measured in years, if not months. Its average player count dropped below 100 for the first time ever in September 2022. “It’s just sad really,” Lehnen said. “You got all these memories. You think about all the good times you had playing it . . . It’s just weird to think it’s not [going to be there] and you can’t hop on there anymore and play a few rounds. It’s just weird thinking about that.”

Perhaps the biggest tragedy of modern gaming is that community-run games like *Dirty Bomb* are becoming increasingly rare. Decisions to keep the servers

accessible like the one made by Splash Damage are even rarer. It's not that these communities don't exist. Many survival games and MMOs have small, vibrant subcommunities. But, these are the exception, not the rule. Most communities are now on Discord and finding a welcoming community there can feel like finding a needle in a haystack since most are, justifiably, closed off.

For people without a preexisting group of friends, playing a modern multiplayer game can be a fundamentally lonely experience. Gone are the days of community servers, lobby chats and even

forums – another digital third place. Instead, players are shuffled into matches with what feels like really advanced bots that occasionally gain enough sentience to hurl a personalized insult your way.

Games like *Dirty Bomb* are the third place missing in the lives of so many people, especially for those unsure of their place in the world. And while they might not have any value when it comes to quarterly earnings reports, the value they provide to players and the worlds they inhabit – real or otherwise – is immeasurable. 🍷





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**CAPTURING WONDER AND PLAY
IN KOSMOSAURS**

FEATURING DIOGO NOGUEIRA

by Phillip Russell

As I've gotten older, it's become increasingly hard to carve out time to play games, especially of the tabletop variety. There's a mess of rules to learn, stats to track and don't get me started on scheduling hangout times. What I know to be true, however, is when I do make the time for tabletop role-playing games, the stories I partake in and the fun I have with friends during those long hours into the night are so, so worth it.

Brazilian game designer Diogo Nogueira is keenly aware of how much of an obstacle the time and energy needed to start a TTRPG session can be for most people. He spends his time creating games that are easy to start up, breezy to play and quickly get players into the action with little need to spend hours learning the rules.



His most recent release, *Kosmosaurs*, harkens back to the classic aesthetics of pulp science fiction novels, but with a twist – dinosaurs! *Kosmosaurs* is a TTRPG about dinosaurs who protect the galaxy from evil forces. Players create their own dinosaur character, a Kosmo Ranger by trade, who is one of the galaxy's greatest protectors. Your *Kosmosaurs* go out on missions to a vast array of planets, spaceships, asteroids and more, fighting off mystical dinos, fascist broccoli people (yes, it's that amazing), undead pirates and whatever else you can dream up.

When I paged through the *Kosmosaurs* rule book, I immediately was brought back to my childhood. Leafing through books on dinosaurs, old school video-

games and more specifically, a long forgotten animated TV show called *Extreme Dinosaurs*. *Kosmosaurs* does a tremendous job of capturing your imagination, and allowing players to live out their fantasies without the baggage of complex rules. Reading through the rule book brought me back to simpler times, ones that are crystalized in spending hours with friends imaging worlds unlike our own.

Nogueira has an eye for making easily approachable titles that specifically allow players of all ages to join in on the fun. This was all by design. “I think of *Kosmosaurs* as a love letter to my childhood. I desire to create fast paced games with this retro feel that’s also super approachable to kids. So, my focus is on making the feeling, fast paced rules and tools easy for players to get the game going.”



In Brazil, Nogueira informs me, it’s very rare for people interested in playing TTRPGs to have the funds to buy multiple rules books and campaign guides that have become common in games like *Dungeons & Dragons*. Instead, most players buy the core rule book and never buy any additional material.

Nogueira’s games take inspiration from the smaller, indie titles he loved playing in his youth like *Whitehack*, *The Black Hack* and *Into the Odd*. He admired the zine-like quality of Old School Revival (OSR), which emphasized swift play sessions, and world building and narrative over mechanics.

Playing and reading these smaller OSR games gave Nogueira the courage to try making games himself. “Watching the zine culture emerge in the OSR community, and especially within the *Dungeon Crawl Classics* RPG crowd, inspired me to start contributing to them myself.” Nogueira went on to tell me that around the same time he started contributing to smaller OSR games, he also was reading *Steal Like an Artist* by Austin Kleon. “I realized ‘Hey, I bet I could do something like that too.’ So, I set a goal to make my first game in less than 64 pages. Digest size. I wrote at least 500 words a day and in less than a month I had my first game, *Sharp Swords & Sinister Spells*. I have tried to keep going since then.”




Something I loved in *Kosmosaurs* as someone who hasn't played a lot of TTRPGs outside of *Dungeons & Dragons* is its approachability. While playing most tabletop games, it's easy for me to get invested in rolling dice and trying to game the mechanics. What's a bit harder for me is to fully embody my character, thrust myself in the narrative and really play my character around their narrative implications as opposed to whatever I'm trying to min-max for.

In *Kosmosaurs*, Nogueira keeps things open and up to interpretation. When it comes to difficulty, however, he makes a point to push game masters to not make everything a dice roll. Instead of simply making everything a check, he suggests that use checks sparingly, for narrative-related moments. This keeps the game going along smoothly and also increases the tension of actually rolling a check.

“I need a game that allows me to keep the feel of the story I want, with a robust, flexible and unified system. I want to be able to apply the rules seamlessly, making judgments and rulings without needing to consult the rulebook. Rulebooks won’t cover all situations, but they should give you the tools to do so. Adding a few helpful tools like random tables and generators for players who need help and a single book can provide the ingredients for years and years of fun, with very little work.”

Tabletop roleplaying games are for everyone. We’re living in a time where more and more people are showing great enthusiasm for trying out tabletop games, but often are compelled away by the complexity of the most known franchises. I admire how Diogo Nogueira is approaching game design these days. In childhood, we were all dreamers; Nogueira is creating games that allow people to channel that childlike energy once more. There’s so much power in that.

* * *

*Check out more of Diogo’s work in print on [Exalted Funeral](#)
and in digital form on [itch.io](#). *



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Illustrations

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