THE FRENZIED FLAME

DAVID SHIMOMURA EMILY PRICE MADDI CHILTON DR. EMMA KOSTOPOLUS PHOENIX SIMMS MATT MARRONE JAY CASTELLO LEVI RUBECK NOAH SPRINGER AUTUMN WRIGHT JUSTIN REEVE ROB RICH

This Machine Kills Fascists

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Presented by Exalted Funeral

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Dear Reader,

Welcome to Fall! I have no idea when it officially starts but this the last bulwark against Christmastime beginning in the middle of July.

First up, our features. Gerry Hart joins us on the chaos that consumes the world of *Elden Ring.* Next up, Mira Lazine on the chaos to come when AI powers even more of our lives.

For this month's Funeral Rites, brought to you by Exalted Funeral, Alyssa Wejebe takes on *Mystic Punks.*

As for our regular columnists, Jay Castello rolls for initiative (and alphabetical superiority). Maddi Chilton saw a movie that doesn't start with Barb or end with -heimer. Emma Kostopolus folks around. Yes, I'm recycling that one. Matt Marrone is welcomed to Miami. Noah talks about a disturbing movie that I do not recommend watching. Honestly, big content warning for some weird dead people sex stuff. Phoenix Simms shows us it is not easy being green. Emily Price taps away at the small screen. Justin Reeve considers the kind of rebuilding endemic to the Creed. Rob Rich tends to his herd. Levi Rubeck mentions so many bands I am hearing about for the first time. And Autumn Wright bids farewell to dinosaurs in high school.

I'm also happy to let you all know we'll be going strong through the month of October with our subscription drive. This year's theme is Vamps, Pyre and Otherwise. We've been hard at work on this one in the office and there's some amazing takes on the theme coming your way.

See you all in a few weeks in Exploits!

Eat the rich, support organized labor.

David Shimomura
Chicago, Illinois
September 6, 2023

OBJECT LESSONS #2: SMARTPHONE

This month I'm thinking about smartphones. Not smartphone games – I don't play any regularly, unless Duolingo counts – but how phones are represented in videogames on other platforms.

I wrote last year about the trend of games trying to be multimedia (in this case, being more like TV/movies) and how I think this has the potential to overlook what makes games special, their ability to react in a limited way to player choice. In that game, *We Are OFK,* characters communicate via texting; your (only) method of choice is choosing a response. In addition, the game uses texting language to qualify its characters' age and social class. I think it fails in this regard, as the characters don't come across super believable to me; but in any case, phones are the only way for players to change the game, and the main way for characters to contact and speak with each other. They're the crux around which the game is built and also your window into it.

There are probably countless games that represent cell phones that aren't of consequence to the player. Games about modern life basically have to represent smart phones in some way. But if the phone is functional, often it's for texting your friends, like in *OFK* or *Persona 5.* In *Dave the Diver,* it's where you order fishing equipment and look at achievements, while in *Neo Cab* it's your road map to pick up and drop off your customers. Personally, I probably use my real phone most as a map. *Breath of the Wild* did this by giving you a mini-Switch (tablet) with apps that operated like a phone camera, map, etc.; the *Witcher* series didn't give you a device, but it did have a (very helpful) Google Maps-ish function that showed you the direct path to your next objective. *Pikmin 4* does the same thing, but back on the phone (tablet).

But other uses of phones are underrepresented in games. Apart from tracking your location, a phone is also a diary, a game console, a list collection and a work assis-

tant. But game phones often confine themselves to representing two of those functions: texting and locating yourself in space.

Recently my boyfriend started tracking his steps on the rings app on his iPhone. On days we spend together, that means he's also tracking my steps. I've been surprised how weird this feels, like someone watching me exercise. I thought it was the first time I gave an app permission, on purpose, to enter my thoughts and make my phone more than a phone – in this case, a pedometer.

And then I played *Eliza,* which is based on a therapy simulator, and I remembered I actually did this before, in a phone app called CBT journal. The app asks you to pick one of five faces, from crying to happy, then rate your mood, then describe the problem you're facing and how you want to solve it. It's supposed to help you track your moods and see any cognitive distortions you have. No, I'm not using AI therapy – and I deleted the app last year, mostly because it was clear I was using it to give my problems more mental real estate, not try to solve them.

Eliza reminded me of CBT journal not because it's about digital therapy, but because there's an app on the main character Evelyn's phone that's for relaxation. It

first gives you a shot of lanterns that says in text "Think back to what brought you here".

The place of the smartphone in games is to be a window into the world of the person holding it. If I were a digital person, and somebody had my journal with the five faces, I shudder to think of what they'd say or do. This comes through in *Eliza,* because Evelyn has to look through other peoples' phones in "Transparency Mode." The first person you look at, an artist named Maya, is unhappy and wants to be creatively successful; all her emails are rejections and an uber cleaning bill. The information is mostly boring, but the experience of looking at it is surreal. The game positions this as a breach of personal privacy, though not everyone in the game sees it like that.

Then again, smartphones are used as literal windows. There's AR, which I remember using on my 3DS in 2011, and which has become part of apps like Replika. Then there's detection, where you can identify a type of tree, for example, by scanning it. I've talked to people about that particular app on walks several times, but never used it. I'm still not used to Google Image Search, either. The idea that technology can so cleanly scrape the real world doesn't go down smooth with me.
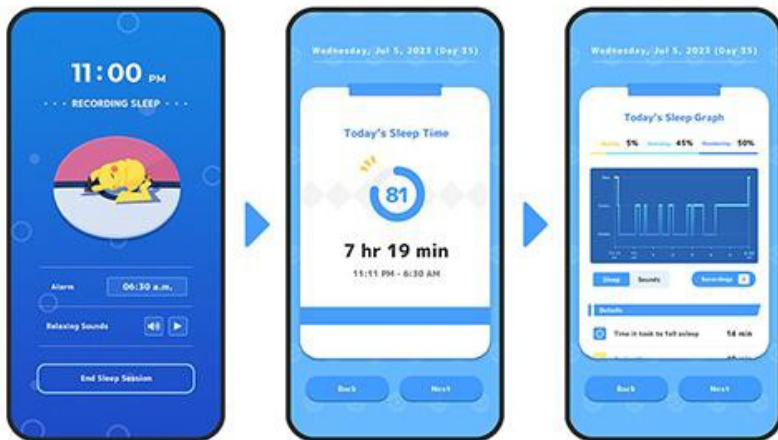
Aside from the scanning thing, games seem to prefer to keep their phones simple. How do you represent a technology that's had an earthquake's impact, that almost everyone owns and that has made our private lives public (though talking about that shift remains kind of annoying, at best)? Games seem to still be figuring that out. Phones are either a representation – pixels that show someone making a call or texting – or they're the mechanic through which you set up the game, ordering delivery or texting or whatever. You don't play the game through the phone; you use the phone to do other stuff than play the game.
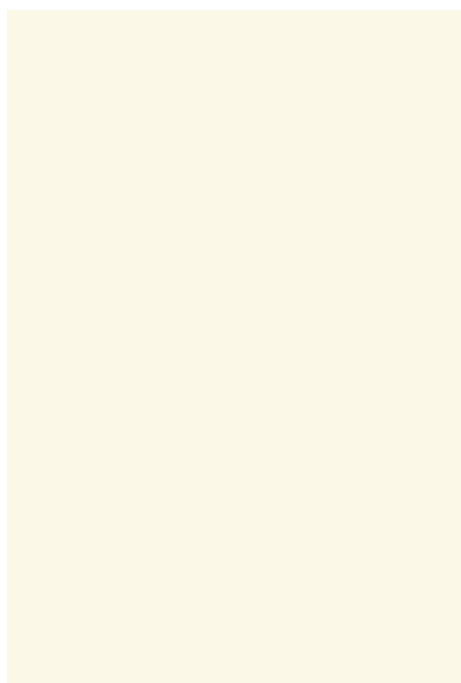
Maybe that's truest to life. As I wrote this article I 1) checked Bluesky, 2) sent several Whatsapp messages, 3) listened to a podcast series about delivery drivers, 4) checked my email, 5) paid my gas bill, and 6) checked out an e-book from the library. I probably did plenty more that I forgot about. My phone has become an extension of me, as much as I resent that.

Collectively, we're questioning how apps and AI affect our personalities and how we navigate the world. When I'm feeling paranoid, I think that the normalization of smartphones as interfaces in games is training us to accept them as the default mode of interaction with the world. *Pokemon Sleep* freaks me out. The activity rings, still, freak me out. But I'm not doing anything about it, even in my own situation.

Do I even want games to tell me to my face how much of my privacy and time I'm handing away? Are they even the right medium? I think I'd find that imagined, "phones are bad for you" game more odious than even the faux-Gen Z texting game. But what I'd like games to do isn't eliminate phones; just make them more noticeable, give them friction. Treat them like a tool you have to use, and make their limits and frustrations more noticeable. Right now, phones in games are fantasies of phones, almost ads for phones. I want them to be worse, push back more; I want them displayed in 3D. Give me a shitty phone. Let me figure it out. 👅

A SECRET THIRD THING

July 21st, 2023. *Barbie,* by Greta Gerwig. *Oppenheimer,* by Christopher Nolan. The moviegoing event of the summer. The meme of the year. A phenomenon, as we all know by now. But what's that? Far away, in the background? That quiet little noise?

The Venture Bros.: Radiant is the Blood of the Baboon Heart! Jackson Publick. Doc Hammer. The aforementioned secret third thing. More touching. More funny. More impactful. More powerful than ever before.

The Venture Bros. premiered in 2004. Seven seasons later, it finally gets its finale, or what amounts to one: one last beautiful episode, beginning to end a showcase of the best the series has to offer, exactly what happens when you give two huge nerds a series order on Adult Swim in the early aughts and let them spiral for twenty-ish years. It's not a swan song or a huge blowout; it's not the finale of *The Sopranos.* It's another little adventure, much in tune with the specials the show has already done, where the characters we know and love get to do their dance for slightly longer than

normal. There are a few tense moments, a few touching ones. A lot of gags. We learn something new, just a little bit more than we'd get on any ordinary day – in this one, to send us off, one of the biggest mysteries of the show ends up as a ten second after-

credits screen, an *Ohhhh shit!* before the screen goes black. And there they go! There they were. One of the most unlikely creations in television, a true and earnest passion project, a thing that never should have happened but did, God bless it.

Here's the thing: now, when the popular discourse turns to art, it asks what is *necessary.* Run your finger down a list of NYT Bestsellers and ten bucks says that, if not on the front cover then somewhere on the back, maybe in the quotes before the title page, the book is described as "necessary" – or maybe "urgent," "relevant," "sorely-needed," or another catchy buzzword intended to make the author feel wise and the reader feel important. Elsewhere, social media angsts over the *unnecessary,* whether it's sex scenes in movies or experimental prose in novels and then heel-turns and ties itself into knots over the response to those things. Is it necessary to engage thoughtfully with art at all? Why do we care? Can we not Consume Content in Peace, As The Companies Want?

The Venture Bros., from the very beginning, has been unnecessary. The first seasons are riddled with one-off episodes, elaborate plots seemingly constructed to deliver a single joke and pilot/finale pairings almost entirely responsible for what an uninventive

viewer might regard as an "actual story". It was the accidental lovechild of two huge nerds meeting at a party and starting to do silly voices; the fact that it ever got this far is remarkable. There's no *reason* for it! There's no greater goal, no huge meaningful narrative resolution that it's been building towards – in the era of *bigger is better is not enough, The Venture Bros.* could almost be mistaken for unambitious. It's just some things a couple of guys thought were funny.

But that's what it often feels like we're missing these days, as craft and technical skill get honed to inhuman sharpness. Audiences are becoming more critical and less forgiving, or they're becoming less critical and more indifferent. Everything we read, watch and play is made by people, and sometimes people make things because there's a perfect story they want to tell but more often they make things because they want to share a feeling that they had. Sometimes that feeling is deep and meaningful. Sometimes, it's just laughter. It's an immense privilege to have been able to share in that creative process, as a fan, and along the way watch as these jokes, these outlines of characters, become far more realized, sincere and touching than I imagine Jackson Publick and Doc Hammer ever expected they'd be. Because that is what happened: the show grew, and the characters grew, and the jokes stayed funny

but along the way a couple of people changed outfits and a couple of settings got switched and there were deaths and jobs and birthday parties and interpersonal drama just like the real world, and all of a sudden all of those things that were just funny were a whole lot more than that.

When I started writing this article, I flipped open *Go Team Venture!,* a now-out-of-print art book released after the sixth season that I sourced at great personal cost to myself (googling it repeatedly until a copy showed up for $20 at a used bookstore). The beginning of the book is a series of interviews about how *The Venture Bros.* came to be: Jackson Publick's initial ideas, how he and Doc Hammer met, and how they began the writing process once the pitch was greenlighted. The pitch document is included, a Highlights-style retro magazine spread containing characters, settings and plot ideas, one of which was a monster called the Pants Golem of 7th Avenue.

That was 2001. It's a cool 22 years later now. Seven seasons, 81 episodes, across a span of time that would grow a child well into adulthood. And yet, when the Triad show up in *Radiant is the Blood of the Baboon Heart, in the year 2023,* they're fighting a giant golem made out of pants. That's the ultimate indulgence. That's what

it feels like we're not allowed anymore. It's personally satisfying, specifically amusing, *entirely* unnecessary and it got into the script after all this time for no reason other than they liked it then and they like it now and they thought it was funny. Isn't that the fundamental goal of the creative experience? Isn't that why we make art in the first place? Isn't that love? 🦑

RE7 AS AMERICAN FOLK HORROR

Thanks, perhaps, to the success of *Midsommar* in 2019, folk horror is having a minute in the scholarly study of horror. From edited collections on the topic to a truly awesome three-hour documentary on the genre, it seems like lots of folks right now are interested in what qualifies as folk horror, and how we can describe its particular experience. On first glance, folk horror seems almost handcuffed to British and European horror traditions – often relying on idyllic agricultural landscapes and superstitious salt of the earth peasants, the kind of which you see relatively little here in America. But in recent years, our ideas of what constitutes the genre have expanded, to include more contemporary horror aesthetics and to think more broadly about what constitutes folklore.

I, personally, really enjoy this trend and like to think about folk horror expansively, as anything dealing with folklore and myth – *Candyman,* for example, is definitely urban folk horror. Slenderman from my column last month also makes a case for itself as being folk horror. To truly understand this, though, we have to think a little bit about the

themes of folk horror, and how they can be built upon to reflect our modern way of life. To do so, I've selected what I think is an excellent example of modern videogame folk horror: *Resident Evil 7: Biohazard.*

Warning: this is gonna get a little bit into arguments like "is x a metroidvania?" because I firmly believe that genre boundaries are permeable and that things can be many things without adhering strictly to every rule of those things. As long as you don't wring your hands over essential definitions, I think we'll be cool.

So, it seems to me that folk horror relies on three things, fundamentally, for its particular approach to being scary. First of all, obviously, there must be some sort of mythos or folktale attached to the narrative, likely providing the origin of the monster/evil. For this example, I'm taking a relatively broad view of myth here, and thinking about the legacy of lore and worldbuilding from decades of prior *Resident Evil* content, that much of the audience is intimately familiar with. Teasing out the mythos of the *Resident Evil* fran-

chise is far too big a task for a column of this size, so I'll simply say that the game rests on a mountain of near-folkoric knowledge. Additionally, the game relies heavily on another kind of mythos – stereotypical ideas about Southerners. The game is rife with imagery of a once-prosperous family, the Bakers, brought low into poverty and squalor by their backwards ideas (and exposure to biochemical weaponry). As someone who did not live in the deep south when I first played this game, but who has now lived here for going on three years, the developers are definitely playing into how more urban Americans think of the South and the people who live there for a lot of the horror.

The second thing that seems to be really important about folk horror is that the aesthetic of the piece relies in important ways on nature – most of the action probably takes place in a remote rural area, such as an island or, in the case of *RE7,* an isolated piece of swampland in coastal Louisiana. The use of the bayou as a location for the game has many connotations for Americans, from unrealistic notions of voodoo to slightly geographically incorrect *Deliverance* references, but it definitely, I think, lends to the (folk) horror of the situation. *Resident Evil* as a series has seen many different locales, but this one speaks most clearly to nature as a facet of horror.

The third thing is that in folk horror, the bad guy most often ends up being us – people. Man is the real monster in the Anthropocene. It is our interference in the natural order that brings about the monstrosities, and *RE7* is no exception, with the biochemical shenanigans of the Umbrella Corp being the ultimate cause of the corruption of the Baker estate and its inhabitants. Folk horror thus acts as a cautionary tale – do not meddle in things beyond your ken. Playing God, or acting in God's name, is a surefire way to get yourself turned into a goopy swamp monster, along with several other innocent people.

I think I've made here a pretty solid case for *Resident Evil 7* to be considered a solid entry in the folk horror canon. I think this is pretty important as a consideration of the franchise, because it expands and elevates the way we think about the horror game experience. Folk horror has been previously siloed largely into highbrow or arthouse horror forms, cult classics and such. By opening the doors of videogames to horror subgenres beyond "zombie shooter," and "jump scare horror," we can come to understand more about horror, more about the game, and more about why these experiences unsettle us. 🎃

INTERLINKED | **PHOENIX SIMMS**

GROUNDING THE GAMES INDUSTRY

Having spent some time (and by that, I mean "trapped") with the faeries for the past few months, I (re)learned some things from them. For instance, that games, despite all their innovative trappings, are trash. To be more specific, as I don't like to speak in sweeping generalizations – games can create a lot of socioeconomic trash. This is something I've been interested in for quite a while now and is part of the issue of preserving games for posterity as well.

We often experience games in a way that divorces our perceptions from the broader social and material reality of their existence. For instance, there is a shortage of chips to make new next-gen consoles that started during the first wave of the pandemic, which does not have a foreseeable end in sight, but which we don't really talk of these days. Though we do speak often of how hard it is to get one's hands on a PS5 or an Xbox Series X. Until this occurrence, many players were under the impression that, like most things in our cur-

rent digital era, consoles and tech are ubiquitous and easy enough for some to access (especially in the global north).

But this couldn't be further from the truth. If there is one thing that is readily apparent about the games industry, it's that the production of games is fraught with inequality and unsustainable practices. From crunch culture to underpaying and ignoring outsourced labor from overseas development teams to conflict mineral mining to ableist game design and soaring prices for AAA titles, games are predicated on interconnected systems of late capitalist BS. Not to mention that as with many products of the broader tech landscape, games also possess no formal system of right-to-repair rules, leading to overconsumption and "mountains of e-waste."

Two particular headlines have been revolving in my brain since I encountered them. The first is the study that revealed how little game history we have been able to preserve (and

how it's connected to previous headlines such as the one about Square Enix realizing how much of their source code is hard to locate or difficult to remaster). I'm still staggered over the missing 87 percent of classic videogames that were released in the US alone. The second is about the right-to-repair games and their attendant tech, how to shift from a planned obsolescence model in the industry to a more conscientious one. As Elizabeth Chamberlain, the director of iFixit (a company providing consumers with a free right-to-repair manual) discusses in a gamesindustry.biz interview it's not just about planned obsolescence either. Companies are relying on constantly evolving cybersecurity issues to provide their wasteful practices with plausible deniability as well. The challenge is steep getting gaming giants like Microsoft and Sony to be open with communication regarding a way forward to sustainable technology practices, such as becoming more modular like PCs and Steam Decks for example.

Topping this off, in addition to destructive and oppressive extractive practices and no inroads yet to a consistent right-to-repair system, companies in the game industry are rampant with greenwashing campaigns. Sony promises to plant trees for trophies earned in *Horizon Forbidden West,* Microsoft releases special-edition controllers made with partly recycled plastics for Earth Day 2023 and Ubisoft educates players via virtual wildfire events. These events in particular, while well-intentioned, leave me with a deep sense of ambivalence as I follow news and personal stories of family friends this past August of those displaced by the Yellowknife wildfire. Not to mention the other wildfires that have been ravaging all of North America these past few years, especially during summers.

This greenwashing, or eco-justice lite tack towards tackling sustainability challenges is also present in the narrative design of a lot of games as well. For a long while games have loved including themes of how beautiful the natural world can be and how we must protect it. But the aforementioned *Horizon* series and countless other open-world games like *Greedfall* and, yes, even beloved *Breath of the Wild,* are often based off of colonial-imperialist systems of extraction and consumption. As Meghna Jayanth, organizations like Dames Making Games, critics like Dia Lacina and indie designers like Kaelan Doyle-Myersough have outlined how such systems center a powerful lone (and often Eurocentric inspired) protagonist who inhabits a world that is full of natural resources and people for them to exploit for their "noble" goals. These games often feature reductive or essentialist archetypes of civilized and primitive modes of living, even when intentions are supposedly to raise
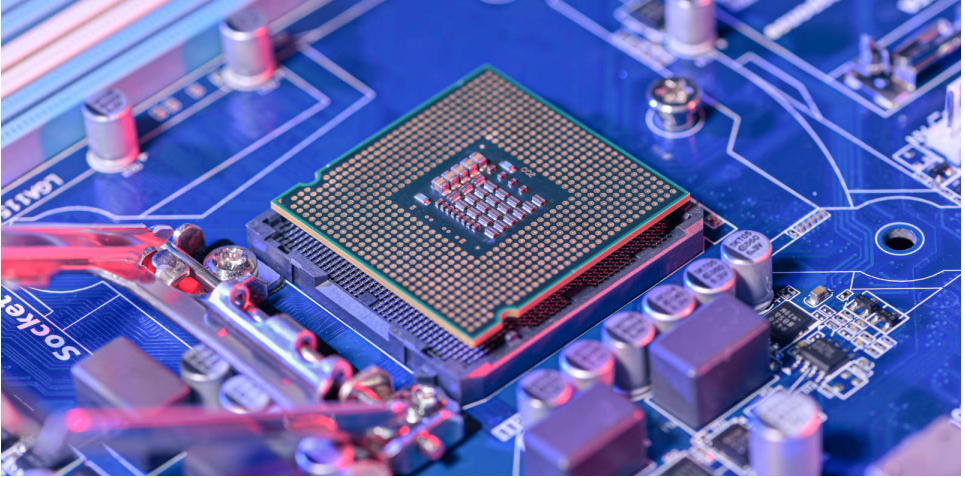
awareness of how destructive colonial-imperialism can be.

We like to bandy a lot about agency in games and how this will lead to positive changes. This is true for perhaps those who change their mindsets (which is of importance to climate change) but it isn't necessarily a hundred percent true of infrastructural changes that could be made or changes at the policy-making level. And that's not to say that all small everyday actions taken to improve our climate crisis doesn't matter either.

I don't have any answers to these major issues above and neither am I here to lecture you on what games should be doing with their narrative design. But I have been researching some concepts that I think are helpful with regard to finding alternative perceptions of eco and social justice that are more intersectional and emphasize the interconnectivity of our creative existence with the natural world we are all part of and live in. The faeries also reminded me that one of the cruxes of unsustainability is the global north's hyper-categorization of society and nature, without acknowledging interconnectivity and the collective (yet specific) culpability that comes with that acknowledgment.

The first concept I think could be beneficial to design thinking in games and their production is ethical relationality. After Papaschase Cree scholar Dwayne Donald as cited by Métis scholar Zoe Todd, who writes of "Indigenizing the Anthropocene." Ethical relationality acknowledges not only our cultural interrelationships but our cultural differences, with regard to histories and lived experiences. When you're approaching any matter with ethical relationality, you are actively aware that your cultural position and experience interacts with other cultural positions and experiences and how that affects any given state of affairs. In Donald's words, from this awareness of interrelationships you perform "an enactment of ecological imagination;" ecological imagination being not the scientific sense of ecology, but our perception of how as humans we should approach climate change with principles of balance and mutual aid.

Ethical relationality is related to another model of thinking and performance put forth by writers like Zadie Smith in her *Intimations* of the pandemic and abolitionist scholar Ruha Benjamin's concept of *Viral Justice.* Such models use the metaphor of a virus in different yet related ways to get to the core of how we can enact long-term social change or disruption. Just as viruses start off with small microbial reactions and can lead to large-scale events like pandemics, we need to think of small actions that, if made consistently, by many, in a concerted effort, lead to widespread chain reactions.

With particular reference to Smith, she analyzes how small and consistent actions taken with the spirit of contempt lead to systemic issues like racism, ableism, homophobia, transphobia or classism. "Before contempt, you are simply not considered as others are, you are something less than a whole person, not quite a complete citizen. Say…three fifths of the whole. You are statistical. You worked around. You have no recourse. You do not represent capital, and therefore you do not represent power. You are of no consequence." If we want our decisions with regard to sustainability in the games industry to last, I'd wager approaching such decisions with the idea that we are part of a system that takes ethical relationality to heart would go the distance. Whether this is from the standpoint of an individual or a group's actions.

Then there's the need to ensure that we remain cognizant of how theoretical terms are only useful up until a point and are always in need of active negotiating and evolution. While there has been a lot of useful debate over whether terms like Anthropocene (human-caused), Capitalocene (capitalist-caused) and Plantationocene (long-term impacts of creating plantations) are effective at situating climate crisis in specific actors or systems, we often get too mired in theory. Being aware of our collective responsibilities towards this global and often denied event is an important step, but we should also remember to focus on what specific actions we can take in the present with what skills and resources (inner or external) are available to us.

Now before I become too mired in theory myself, I want to reiterate that this is not me making a checklist of requirements for sustainability in games nor is it a doomer column. I've just been observing as of late that, rather hopefully, there's been a lot more awareness of how games as capitalist objects and experiences are not isolated from more politically important objects and experiences. And there's a roster of games and game designers who are approaching games in an anti-capitalist, eco-conscious manner. What's more, players want more games with ecological themes.

I know I'm one of those players: I would like to play more games that engage with the concepts I've mentioned above and others like them that I haven't learned of yet. I want more games that are solarpunk and center communities instead of lone heroes. I would like to play more games that aren't modeling the climate crisis as inevitable and that don't discount everyday actions as inconsequential. And I would like to see how as architects and consumers of technology we find better ways to approach crafting interactive experiences that embody and enact the ecological imagination. ♉

I WENT TO MIAMI DURING A HEAT WAVE SO YOU DON'T HAVE TO

From Little Havana to South Beach, Miami isn't lacking for its charms. I won't list them all here because it would be impossible, but I will mention what is by far the most important thing The Magic City has to offer: Air conditioning.

Miami is an absolutely wonderful place to visit during a heat wave in August so long as you never leave the comfort of your rental car for more than three seconds at a time. Make sure to park directly in front of the cigar bar of your choice (I'll recommend Havana Classic Cigar), then open your door, step through the blast furnace and quickly cross the threshold into said establishment, then sit on a comfy leather couch for an hour and a half either smoking a hand-rolled Torpedo yourself or wafting the wonderful smoke as someone next to you does. Order an iced coffee if that's your thing.

If you're planning to go to a touristy Cuban restaurant nearby for lunch – say, Versailles – do not bother if you see anyone waiting outside to get in. If you get out of the car to check on the wait time and believe you can sit in the shade until your name is called, trust me, you cannot. Best to wait until Sunday morning and go to the amazing breakfast Versailles happened to have, arriving before anyone else has recovered from the previous day's dehydration and waltzing right up to the buffet line. Enjoy your cafecito in comfort and try not to notice the person walking along Calle Ocho as he suddenly bursts into flames.

If you want to see the Miami Marlins play baseball at loanDepot Park, that's a good idea, too! Arrive just as the gates open so there are no lines and your flesh won't melt off entirely while you wait to pass through security. Once inside, do not take a space in the makeshift burn unit unless you require immediate medical attention. It's triage and there are likely fans a few minutes behind you who will be in greater need.

After the likely National League batting champion, Luis Arraez, triples home the tying runs during an epic ninth-inning comeback victory against your favorite team, try to remain in the ballpark for as long as possible. If it's a day game and the sun is still shining, see if the Marlins will allow you to remain in your seat until well after dark.

If you're thinking of going to the beach, don't.

What else? Oh yes, if you think going to the movies is a waste of time while visiting one of America's most vibrant cultural hubs, might I recommend *Oppenheimer* in IMAX at the AMC Sunset Place 24. There's a show at 10:30 a.m. which you can get to before the soles of your sandals melt into the sidewalk and you miss the trailers. After the film, you can pause outside the theatre near the beautiful fountain in the courtyard, look up at the midday sun in a cloudless sky, and pretend too you were at the Trinity Test at Los Alamos.

Yes, there is just so much to do in Miami during a heat wave in August, so long as you don't die. You probably won't. Just bring a hat, wear lots of sunscreen and don't go outdoors unless your hotel roof is set alight. And even then, don't rush out the fire escape – it might only be a drill. 🜛
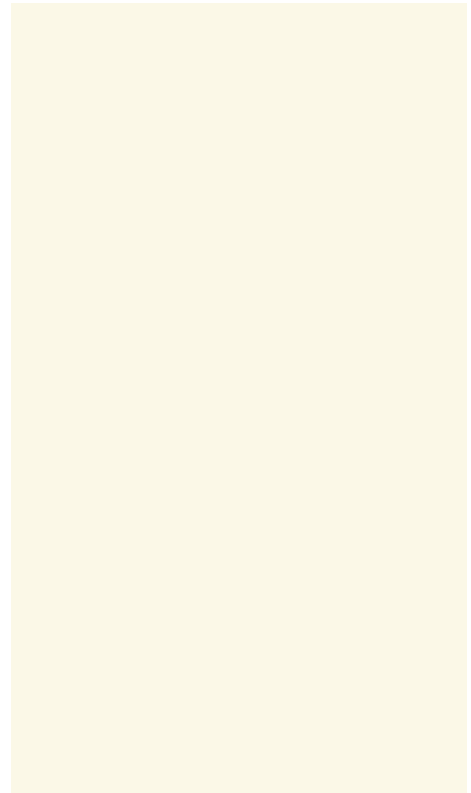
SPACE IN TRANSLATION

If I were playing *Baldur's Gate 3* as a D&D game, I'm absolutely convinced that I'd be the most annoying player at the table.

"I'm going to push them off the edge."
"Okay, roll an athletics check."

"I'm going to push them off the edge." "Roll athletics."

"I'm going to push—" "Jay. You can't just solve every problem by pushing your enemies off ledges."

Except that you can! It's not my fault that this is my one single combat move. The game makes it so easy – and so tempting.

It's also a lot more fun in a videogame than I imagine it would be at the table. Without the visual representation of a guy just absolutely ready to topple over backwards into a shadowy chasm it wouldn't be as alluring, and even if you have miniatures and a detailed, vertical map on the table, your DM would presumably get wise and stop putting their NPCs there.

But *Baldur's Gate 3* is a product of translation; from a game that takes place mostly in the imagination to one that has both the advantages and the limitations of an open world videogame. Characters can climb up cliffs with enticing animations, just absolutely telegraphing your chance to shove them right back down. But they also will continue to do that, because the game – as flexible as it is – still can't adapt in the way that a GM can.

But what *Baldur's Gate 3* loses in creativity by being a simulation, it gains in slapstick. The game revels in the opportunities it gains by using D&D's mechanics in a space represented visually and dynamically. Push every enemy off ledges, they say. It'll be funny.

And it is! Plus, it's not just the combat either. If you'll permit me to tell a story that spoils a minor Act 1 encounter, there's a village early on that's been overrun by goblins. I had persuaded them all to leave, which I do find somewhat underwhelming in parts, and so was drifting onwards in search of something to more interesting to do.

Barcus Wroot: Stop this thiiiing!

Up above the village, there's a big canvas windmill, and a splinter group of the goblins are bullying a gnome that they've tied to the spokes. My character, also a gnome, stepped in indignantly.

The fight went a couple of ways (I'm not getting into save scumming discourse but how are you even playing without it) but again, wasn't broadly anything to write home about. But goblins out of the picture, Tav stepped around to the back of the windmill, victorious, ready to be the hero and rescue this poor guy.

And then she pulled the wrong lever. The windmill suddenly sped up to inconceivable levels, flinging the gnome off like a champion shot put, their body cartwheeling through the air while I watched on in shock, confusion, and – sorry – delighted glee.

There's no pop-up telling me what happened. For a desperately optimistic moment I think that I might be able to go and find them wherever they landed. I open my journal and see what it has to say. "Quest completed!" it tells me, excitement rolling off the exclamation mark. Then: "The deep gnome was killed."

Because I'm fully aware telling a story from an RPG of any kind is bordering on a "you had to be there" moment at best, I cannot stress enough how funny this was to experience. And it's not that it wouldn't be funny if this happened around a table with good friends – in fact, it would be excellent, and the whole point of TTRPGs, in my opinion, is to make silly little situations and cry laughing about them. I'm sure some of this comes across in *BG3*'s multiplayer, too, although I haven't been adventuring that way myself.

But the game, at its core, is a translation, and translations can't be literal. Instead, translating the collaborative, improvisational humor of a tabletop game into slapstick in an open world one was an interpretive masterstroke on the part of Larian Studios.

The translation doesn't work in other ways. I constantly wish for a GM so that I can just say "I go to the trader" to rather than spending five minutes waiting for my characters to physically walk over there. But it's worth it to be able to solve all of my problems with a bit of positioning and a good shove. 🎺
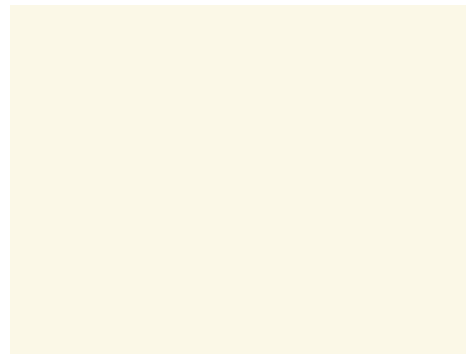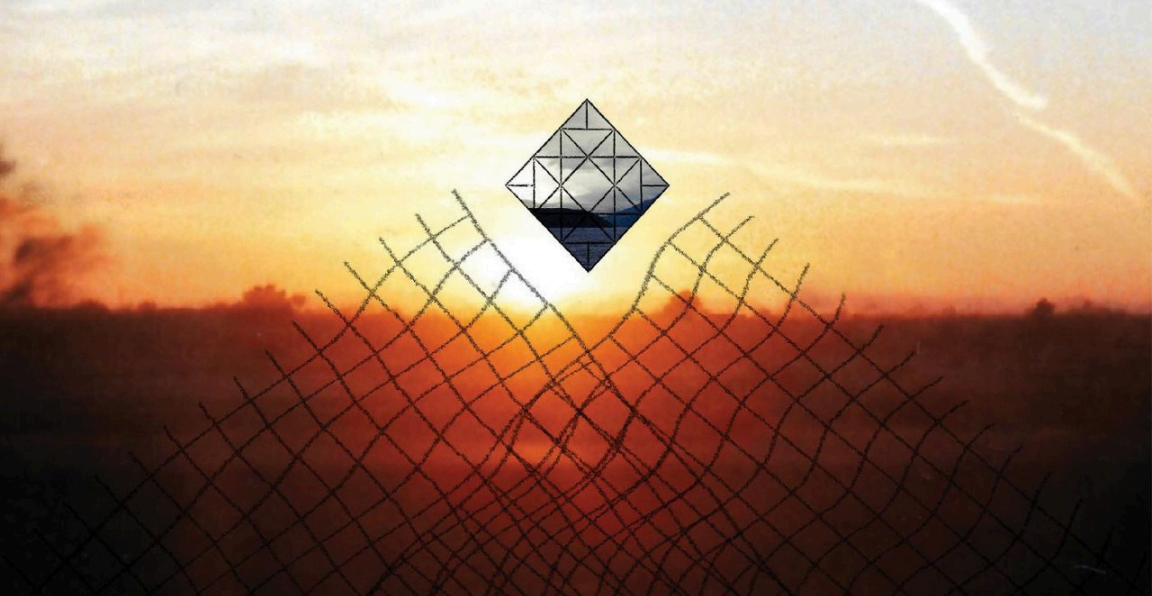
INDEED FOREVER

It's hard for some to recall the days of musical genre dogma, rules chiseled deep and supposedly held since before the rosetta stone was cracked. But there was a time not too long after the Sex Pistols finished up their time as the original industry plants where punk was boys with guitars and nothing else. Of course this didn't hold even from those early days, but most bands that broke away were edged out, pushed into regular Rock or New Wave or before long Alternative Rock. Thankfully the only people who cared about the rules were so charisma deficient that it was easy to sidestep them early and often on an interpersonal level, but the scenes held sway with such power, and music so much difficult to track down in a more nuanced way without the internet, that any oxygen to be used with sonically creative expansion was in short supply.

Real punks didn't care though, and if you were alive then and lucky to have a bit of an open-minded scene, perhaps in the middle of the hungry and vast plains states, beggars couldn't be dogmatic. Thus The VSS, born in Colorado and bred in California, became one of the first post-hardcore bands with weird keyboards and color-coordination and a homebrew stage lighting setup seemingly cut in shop class. Cryptic, tinged with nihilistic cyberpunk skepticism, built around raw meditative rhythms and singer Sonny Kays modem-soaked street-corner sermonizing, The VSS burned bright but was too far forward to maintain the momentum. With a few singles and an album on Lance Hahn from J Church's Honey Bear Records (rest in peace to one the greatest in the game) that was it. If your favorite band was even a little bit weird, it's likely The VSS was on regular rotation in their van.

While Kay went on to run his own label Gold Standard Labs, working with The Mars Volta and many others and establishing his own singular graphic design style, the rest of the band hunkered down and cracked open their musical third eye. First as SLAVES, then well-advisedly adjusting their final moniker to Pleasure Forever, keyboardist/vocalist Andrew Rothbard, guitarist Joshua Hughes and drummer David Clifford pivoted away from the circuit-bent atmospherics of The VSS and leaned harder into high weirdness, magick circle goth. Candles, altars, paeans to the cosmic and peeling away the dead skin of reality, Pleasure Forever again cut something fresh from the bones of punk without losing themselves in the theatre-kid treacle of cabaret core or acid-soaked psychedelic silliness. Serious, but without costumes, open to the unknown, but no prayers to the moon, Pleasure Forever embraces the weird and the unknown but the nihilism of The VSS is far too ingrained for them to go full cringe conspiracy nut.

The band dropped two records on Sub Pop before calling it a day back in the early 00's, after a few years setting a high bar as the opening act for many of that era's biggest noise-makers. I saw them more than a few times, keeping the lamp-level stage lighting and pomaded hair, trading between tickled keys and buzzed out riffs, surging and swinging through their Birthday Party and Bad Seeds energy. They put in their work, calling out from the street corners and locking down the groove and living in the pocket.

And after a little while, we just didn't hear from Pleasure Forever anymore, like so many other bands the diminishing returns for smaller acts just whittled the willingness to suffer the indignities of touring down to nothing. They moved on, and we did as well. I for one realized I didn't have their first album anymore, and tracked down a copy in a local store. It was a whole thing; they had it at the other store actually but were nice enough to ferry it over for me to pick up the next day. Huzzah I said, giving it a spin on the old turntable, and then filing it way next to their second album which I had picked up when it came out, as well as . . . another copy . . . of their first album . . . which apparently I had pandemic ordered and forgot about in the black hole haze of those days.

Fresh off the realization that I have reached that stage of record collecting where I can no longer trust my own immediate recall and am now buying great records a second time or more, Pleasure Forever quietly announced their return to action. Their "mini-album" (not quite an EP, not quite an LP) *Distal* just landed, with eight songs steeped in the same summoning circles and mask parties of yore. Each track feels just as layered and assembled as ever, but also willing to ride out a little further, pushing into the stars and the astral plane, licks and lines crawling between atoms, soundtracking the sinister and the unknown. These are not sunrise vibes unless you're Deacon Frost hauling a true blood out for a little morning meditation, but neither does Pleasure Forever simply soak in raw darkness. To know peace one must know unrest, whether that's dissonant chords or off-kilter harmonies that resolve themselves into the transcendent, the transformational synergies of the universe.

Distal is Pleasure Forever at their most refined. The lives they've lived since *Altar* to now have clearly informed their work, familiar without feeling reductive of themselves or their influences. You may not have even known you were missing Pleasure Forever but they've been here all along, and they always will be. ♆

WARNING: SOME OF THIS FILM MAY BE SEEN AS „GROSSLY" OFFENSIVE AND SHOULD NOT BE SHOWN TO MINORS!!!

ALL THE C@NTENT WARNINGS

When I was younger, I had a bit more of a creative streak than I do now. I've dabbled in ceramics, photography, metallurgy, and poster making. In something like 2007, I made this awesome collage of horror movie posters that I copied out of a movie poster book I bought in Italy. When I made the patchwork collection of horror movies, it was in many ways, aspirational. It did contain cutouts from posters of movies I had already seen, like *Nosferatu, Suspiria,* and *Henry: Portrait of a Serial Killer,* but it also featured a number of movies I hadn't yet seen: *Cannibal Holocaust, Oni Baba, Gore Gore Girls.*

Finally, after a decade and a half, I think I have completed the aspiration of my horror movie board. Back in June, when filmgoers were busy enjoying Barbenheimer in the theaters, I watched *Nekromantik,* a bizarre piece of West German insanity from the '80s that opens with a woman peeing on the side of a road. And that's just where the craziness begins.

With that opening in mind, I want to be clear that this column is going to be covering some pretty vile stuff. If you aren't interested in one of the most disgusting movies you'll *ever see,* then I would steer clear of the next few pages this month. For the rest of you fucking sickos, let's talk *Nekromantik,* starting with **content warning number one:**

Nekromantik contains video of the slaughtering of a rabbit. Not in any sort of abusive nature: as far as I can tell (to be clear, I have never slaughtered anything) this is footage of a legitimate harvesting of a rabbit for a meal. It's not pleasant, but it is a real part of how human carnivores get their food. Yes, this is a cute bunny, but it's not different (and likely more humane) than the chicken, cows, and pigs we regularly eat in the US. However, the slaughter is then crosscut with the vivisection of a human corpse, which although clearly fake, constructs a defined perspective for the rest of the film, where the more one thing becomes more real, the other more stylized.

Now, for **content warning number two:** our presumptive heroes have a threesome with a decomposed corpse. Somehow, this taboo act seems less offensive to me than the slaughtering of a rabbit. I will admit though that the scene does feel overwrought with shots of the skeleton rubbing nipples with our heroes over a score worthy of Angelo Badalamenir. The director, Jörg Buttgereit, perfects this bizarre scene with a jump cut to the searing of a steak, really doubling down on the meatiness of the whole situation. Truly, a cut on action only defeated by the opening of *2001: A Space Odyssey.*

Let's just go ahead and dispense with **content warning number three:** our protagonist kills a cat, but unlike the bunny, this murder is not real. I mean, at least I hope not. But the scene is brutal and the evisceration of the corpse and bathing in its blood is certainly a choice.

Now, we come to our **fourth:** we see the crew play a little toss with a human skull. This scene is where I changed my mind about this movie. Up until now, I was thinking, "What a fucked up, bizarre horror film! Only some crazy person out of West Germany in the 80s could come up with something this depraved." Once the head hacky-sack started, I realized this is a comedy. This is much closer to *Braindead*

than *Halloween,* and this was a trick I never saw coming when I put it on. I'm not sure there is any other way to comprehend a woman making a corpse go down on her. Guess I probably should have given **a fifth content warning** there, but at this point it felt a little absurd.

EIN FILM ÜBER DIE LIEBE ZUM MENSCHEN UND WAS VON IHM ÜBRIG BLEIBT

NEKRomantik

Ein Film von JÖRG BUTTGEREIT. Produktion MANFRED O. JELINSKI

Over the rest of the film, we continue to see murders, more necrophilia, and finally the suicide of our hero as he has one final orgasm. Out of all of this though, I was most upset by the scene in a theater where

"WHAT LIVES THAT DOES NOT LIVE FROM THE DEATH OF SOMEONE ELSE?"

V.L. COMPTON

a woman is getting chased down in a slasher film. As they cut around the film goers, we see a man, chain-smoking cigarettes in the back and taking notes. I guess it's always upsetting when you recognize yourself in a movie, but this was a bit too close to home for me even. Maybe there should have been a **content warning here for all the film nerds.**

In the end, if *Nekromantik* is a comedy that is exposing the ghoulishness of the movie viewing public who are busy taking notes, maybe it shouldn't have been on my collage board of horror movie aspirations in the first place. But looking back, when I think about how it also sat next to *Evil Dead, Re-Animator,* and *Young Frankenstein,* a clearer portrait of horror comes into focus. Comedy and horror truly reside next to each other in some off-kilter way, balancing the truly debauched with the truly buffoonish. How else can we understand the value of something as depraved as *Nekromantik?*

In the final capstone to the film, we see a crucifix over the necrophile's grave, the seeming end for our tragic hero. That is, until he gets the well-deserved high-heeled boot that shoves a spade in his final resting place, digging him up for one last objectified fuck. Having not seen Barbenheimer yet, I did want to ask, does Barbie fuck a dead guy?

Given what I know about history though, it sounds like Oppenheimer definitely did. 🎟

WHEN THE FIRE FALLS FROM ON HIGH; OR, THE METEOR IS NOT A METAPHOR

The very first decision you'll make at the beginning of *Goodbye Volcano High* is to hold on, or to let go. You will have almost no context for the question, its consequences uncertain, and you will spend the entire game working back towards that very moment as the story begins again after you choose. You won't be able to change the decision once you reach it again. And making big decisions without any context is kind of what graduating high school is all about, I think, but this is just the first of many moments that prods the player to consider alongside its characters whether any of this matters when you can't change the outcome anyways. So, hold on to the yearbook for the last class of the titular Volcano High – and everything it represents – or, let it go?

*Goodbye Volcano High'*s premise is like a mad lib of a videogame. It's a gay dinosaur high school apocalypse musical visual novel set in the final year of life on Pangaea.

Despite its Sony backing and perhaps belied by Ko-Op's branding as a bastion for marginalized developers, *Goodbye Volcano High* appears to have suffered from development hell. You may notice this when you're playing. It feels like things could've used another editing pass. Details and threads are picked up and dropped with little continuity. Scenes are mentioned that don't appear in the game or were perhaps lost somewhere among its branching paths. The frame of a bigger picture is here, but the canvas is much, much smaller.

Comparing the animation in scenes that appear both in its 2020 reveal trailer and the final product, it's obvious that three years of something bad happened to *Goodbye Volcano High.* And that's unfortunate, because:

1) With its spotlight in Sony's showcases, it's not hard to imagine how pressure for mainstream appeal may have shaped *Goodbye*

Volcano High even more than the pandemic, and all that in addition to a series of harassment campaigns targeting the game for being made by – and being about – queer people at the end of the world.

2) *Goodbye Volcano High* is still almost very good.

* * *

Fang and their bandmates, all humanoid, teenage dinosaurs, return to Volcano High for their senior year. On its surface, *Goodbye Volcano High* indulges in the humor, angst and predictable moments of contention and growth among childhood friends stumbling together and apart as they try to figure out what to do next. But also, there's an asteroid in the sky, and it may hit Earth next summer.

This undeniably silly premise of dinosaurs in high school interjects something beyond comedic potential into *Goodbye Volcano High*. It's the certainty for players that this is going to end amongst the uncertainty of its cast that the game finds its emotional core. Everyone's trajectory is reshaped by this new orbit. Fang, the goth singer songwriter, writes through the uncertainty with music. Reed, the stoner drummer, processes his acceptance of looming death and destruction through his tabletop campaign. Trish, the nerdy guitarist, redoubles her college prep in a responsibility-driven denial that things couldn't go off course.

And while its art direction is uninspiring and commitment to 2D animation something that backfired in execution, the bigger ideas behind blending writing, visuals and interactivity are at times stunning. When the news first arrives, Fang drowns in Tweets, doom scrolling as posts float around their bedroom on screen. Fake Twitter is an important part of the game as absurdity is a valuable response to meaninglessness. With IRL memes and discourses finding their dinosaur counterparts, everyone posts through it. Care for carnivore/herbivore discourse while you await destruction?

Perhaps *Goodbye Volcano High*'s strongest feature is how interactive elements further the narrative aims of the first-person perspective. Dialogue boxes will break in half like expectations shattered, text shrinks as if uttered with sunken shoulders, curiosities bounce around and confessions and honesty require your focus and commitment (in the form of an effortful, vision-narrowing button combo). Text may even altogether change, as a spoken "I'm fine" morphs into Fang asking themself "Am I really ok?" once the option is highlighted by the player.

The near fully voiced acted, cinematic presentation even lends something to gameplay beyond an air of attempted prestige, as timing becomes incorporated in the flow of conversation. I felt inside the mind of an anxious teen as dialog options bounced around to different buttons on the controller, glitching out while Fang was overwhelmed or

swirling around with anger. I was delightfully, achingly shocked when vulnerable responses were erased by static and replaced with the grayed-out text of Fang's denials, unable to engage with those thoughts anymore. And I didn't say anything as their best friend stormed out of the room, over a dozen text boxes ranging from hurt to reconciliation filling the screen for just the handful of seconds it took for her to walk out the door.

And *Goodbye Volcano High* delivers on its other major premise. Its soundtrack captures Fang's mood and adds to their characterization and development. Canadian singer songwriter Common Holly collaborates with Dwarf Fortress composer Dabu on the original soundtrack as Fang's lyricist. Fang's VA, Lachlan Watson, backs Common Holly's Brigitte Naggar on the band's in-game performances, and the vocal shift is surprisingly seamless, resulting in something of an album that is in line with the current cohort of angsty queer Zoomer music, rather than pastiche or caricature. "Reunion" evokes the apocalyptic lyrics and synth-y alt rock/dream pop fusion of Phoebe Bridgers. "Won't Forget" bears more than passing resemblance to Pinkshift's showstopping vocal ballad "in a breath" and "Don't Call" is just a bop. I've been listening to it on repeat writing this column.

———

Goodbye Volcano High is quite explicitly about the pandemic-era experiences of grad-

uating high schoolers, who I needed no convincing had it the worst of anyone in 2020. While the initial lockdown interrupted my final semesters of undergrad, I'm still glad it didn't happen when I was in high school and still believed in something, hadn't yet been shaken out of that temporality. With the asteroid visible in the night sky, everything from yearbook pictures to cliche teenage emo lyrics like "we're never gonna grow up" are suddenly tinged with, for some, a longing for normalcy rooted in a hope (if not a belief) that things will just work out, and for others, rage fomented in losing what they've found for themselves.

But the meteor is also just a meteor. Or an asteroid, technically. An existential threat, a void of meaning that demands a reevaluation of the things we've found purpose in, whether school or a punk festival. While apocalypse fic is a bastion for ideology, often a metaphor for the times, there's a refreshing ambivalence in *Goodbye Volcano High's* apocalypse. Like viral evolution, cosmic orbits are not moralistic, but we'll still make meaning out of our experiences of them. Even the Cretaceous–Paleogene extinction. 🎺

BUILDING BAGHDAD

I've always been impressed by the towns and cities in *Assassin's Creed,* but their actual representation has consistently bothered me. *Assassin's Creed Mirage,* which takes place during the ninth century in Baghdad, is no exception. The various games in the *Assassin's Creed* series are presented as windows into the past, providing players with a picture of what towns and cities would have looked like at the time, something which raises a wide variety of different problems, mostly related to archaeological reconstruction.

Through careful examination and interpretation of artifacts, structures, ruins and remains, archaeologists strive to reconstruct ancient societies, technologies and ways of life. Beneath the romanticized image of researchers meticulously rebuilding ancient cities on the other hand lies a complicated web of issues and problems that challenge the accuracy, ethics and even the validity of archaeological reconstruction. There's a delicate balance at work between science, interpretation and imagination which is quite easy to upset.

The central challenge in archaeological reconstruction is the inherent tension between interpreting fragmentary evidence and maintaining a semblance of scientific rigor. The majority of archaeological sites lack well preserved or even complete artifacts, records or structures, leaving researchers with limited data to work with when it comes to reconstruction. There's often a temptation to fill in the gaps with educated guesses, often leading to reconstructions which are more speculative than based on hard evidence.

Archaeologists have to carefully tread the line between using their expertise to extrapolate from existing evidence and letting their imagination run wild, as interpretations can profoundly shape the narratives that we tell about the past. This highlights the need for transparency when it comes to acknowledging the speculative nature of many reconstructions, clearly distinguishing between what is actually supported by the evidence and what is nothing but conjecture. This can be accomplished through a variety of different mechanisms including the use of special

materials for the reconstructed components of a structure, but even I must agree that such a process would be unsuitable for a videogame like *Assassin's Creed Mirage.*

Archaeological reconstruction isn't immune to the influence of bias and assumption. Researchers approach their work with a set of preconceived notions about the past, often stemming from their cultural, social or personal backgrounds. These biases can subtly shape the way in which they interpret artifacts and make decisions about archaeological reconstruction. The interpretation of certain artifacts can also be influenced by prevailing theories or trends in the field, leading to the inadvertent distortion of what I can only for lack of a better term call historical accuracy. In order to mitigate these issues, archaeologists have to remain aware of their biases and strive for at least some sense of objectivity. Collaborative methods which include diverse perspectives can also help to counteract unintentional distortions, offering a more holistic understanding of the past.

The ethical dimension of archaeological reconstruction raises concerning and frequently thought-provoking questions about the extent to which the remains of a structure should even be rebuilt in the first place. While reimagining ancient structures can provide a powerful experience for the public, doing so can also raise concerns related to authenticity. How much intervention is acceptable before the reconstruction becomes more of a modern interpretation than a faithful representation of the past is truly a question for the ages. Take for example the city buried in the first century during the eruption of Mount Vesuvius, Pompeii. Many would argue that extensive reconstruction of its buildings can provide visitors with a distorted perception of the original state, blurring the lines between history and creative interpretation. Striking a balance between authenticity and experience remains a significant challenge.

The advent of advanced technologies including digital scans, computer modeling and virtual reality have revolutionized archaeological reconstruction. These tools allow researchers to visualize and share their interpretations with unprecedented accuracy and detail. This technological progress on the other hand isn't without its pitfalls. The lure of technology can for example sometimes lead to overreliance on simulations and reconstructions which are more impressive than accurate. The danger is that dazzling visual appeal can overshadow the importance of critical thinking and careful consideration of the available evidence, one of the primary problems with *Assassin's Creed.* Researchers need to remember that technology should enhance the reconstruction

process rather than replace the kind of nuanced interpretation which comes from rigorous analysis of the existing remains, but level designers aren't bound by this limitation.

Accurate reconstruction demands a deep understanding of the temporal and cultural context of the past. Failing to consider these complexities can result in reconstructions that inadvertently incorporate anachronistic elements or misrepresent the social norms and technologies of the time. Attempting to recreate an ancient building with modern construction techniques might for example produce a structure which is aesthetically pleasing but historically inaccurate. Navigating these temporal and cultural intricacies requires collaboration among experts from various disciplines including archaeology, history, architecture and anthropology. This interdisciplinary approach helps to ensure that reconstructions are not only visually appealing but also grounded in the evidence.

Archaeological reconstructions often find themselves at the intersection of public interest and entertainment. Amusement parks, museums and movies frequently rely on reconstruction to engage their audience and bring history to life, but this accessibility comes with a risk of perpetuating what amounts to misinformation. When reconstructions are presented without a clear

explanation of the underlying research, methods and uncertainties involved, people often come to accept them as an accurate picture of the past. This oversimplification of complex historical narrative can lead to misunderstandings and misconceptions, making the presentation of context and caveats a primary responsibility of those involved, something which ideally encourages critical thinking as opposed to passive acceptance.

Archaeological reconstruction is at best a double-edged sword, providing valuable insight into the past while grappling with a host of issues that challenge its accuracy and integrity. As the field continues to change and evolve, these concerns demand to be addressed, hopefully through open dialogue and collaboration among researchers, historians, educators and the public. By acknowledging the complexities and limitations of reconstruction, we can strive for a more nuanced and respectful understanding of our shared human heritage. These problems are crystalized in *Assassin's Creed,* videogames being an opportunity to increase public knowledge and understanding, but also to spread falsehood and misinformation.
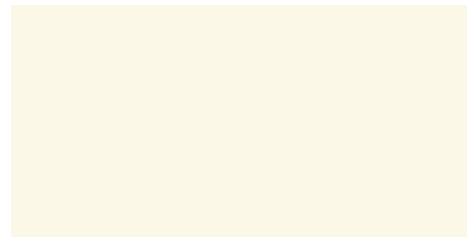
HERE'S THE THING: COLLECTING SUCKS AND IS AWESOME

Here's the Thing is where Rob dumps his random thoughts and strong opinions on all manner of nerdy subjects - from videogames and movies to board games and toys.

Rob reflects on the up and downs of toy collecting, and how some days he wishes he'd never started.

I've been back into collecting Transformers toys (both official and not so much) for roughly eight years at this point (after a decade+ long hiatus) and wow does this stuff get out of hand fast. What initially began as a brief appreciation post of one of my only remaining figures I'd held onto over the years grew into a small handful of toys that I could fit on a shelf within a month or two. Now the whole thing takes up four full bookcases, and I've bounced between so many different display themes and foci it's tough to remember them all. Here's the thing: While my collection (and the process of collecting) does still bring me joy, it also sometimes brings pain.

Right now, the collection has been honed to perfection (based on what I specifically want to get out of it), with entire shelves devoted to multiple renditions of the same character – and organized with figure height and color schemes in mind. It took what felt like ages to get here, and every time I look at my array of Dinobots (including a multitude of Grimlocks, because of

course) or both of the Nemesis Prime shelves (we're up to 23 at this point) I feel a combination of pride and happiness.

Problem is, when I look at the collection as a whole it can also start to feel oppressive and overwhelming. There are literally too many figures for me to appreciate them all on an individual level at any one time. To the point where I've thought about selling off the ones for characters I don't have multiple representations of, but when I go back down to the macro level I remember why I haven't gotten rid of them yet. This one is wonderful and one of my many favorites. This other one is fantastic and how often do we get Decepticons that turn into farming equipment – let alone are also an anthropomorphic deer mob boss?

Acquiring and saying goodbye to figures also has its ups and downs. Most of the time it's a thrill to get a new one in the mail or (on very rare occasions because distribution in our area is legit garbage) bring one home from the store. And it's often satisfying to finally sell off figures I've lost interest in or have a pretty hefty aftermarket value. Then there are the bittersweet moments like opening a brand-new figure for the first time and immediately feeling like I wasted my money. Or having something go through so much nonsense with shipping that the frustration of actually getting it in the first place has soured my overall impressions. And, of course, selling this shit can be a huge pain in the ass. So many lowball offers. So many fussy buyers. So many listings that just won't sell, even with ridiculously low pricing.

It also doesn't help that I've spent so many years refining my collection's focus, because now it's significantly more difficult to decide what I'm willing to part with. And, wow, does it get even tougher when I have to make some of those sacrifices because of bills. There have been quite a few re-acquisitions over the years, to be sure. Even the shelves themselves have become a source of stress at times, because while I may have everything where I want it right now, I also know more stuff will inevitably come in – then I'll have to reshuffle everything again. Sure, there's a certain satisfaction and even Zen in reorganizing my display, but when space and shelf dimensions are limited, it can also make me feel like giving up. Like it's all too much and it was a mistake to start doing this again in the first place.

I don't really have any words of wisdom or tips or anything like that for fellow collectors (of Transformers or otherwise). As the title says I both love and hate doing this. It just depends on the day and my mood, really. All I can say is if you're dealing with similar feelings, you're not alone. And maybe we can all try to agree that we should throttle back a little bit to give ourselves (and our bank accounts) time to recover. 🛡️

CHALLENGE CULT HORROR WITH *MAXIMUM MYSTIC PUNKS VOL 2: CRYPT*

FEATURING ANTHONY MELORO

by Alyssa Wejebe

This series of articles is made possible through the generous sponsorship of Exalted Funeral. While Exalted Funeral puts us in touch with our subjects, they have no input or approval in the final story.

You're supposed to be one of the Mystic Punks, aren't you? Rebellious and anarchistic misfits with a penchant for the mystical, indomitable against authority both supernatural and mundane. You've duked it out with otherworldly goons at Star Valley High School. But as you descend deeper into an increasingly cult-infested mausoleum, you can't help but feel trapped. Cornered. Is that bile rising

up your throat? Maybe trying to loot for mystic and arcane secrets here wasn't such a brilliant idea.
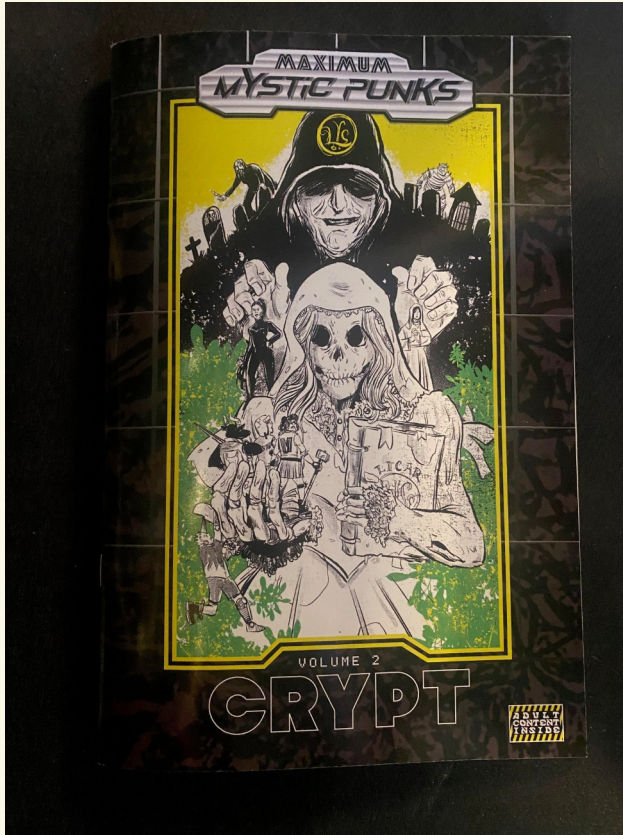
Cover art for **Maximum Mystic Punks Vol 2: Crypt**
by Sally Cantirino.

Or so it could possibly go in a game of *Maximum Mystic Punks Vol 2: Crypt* as run by a Dark Guide, or game master. As its title indicates, the game is part of the Mystic Punks series that was initially created as a solo RPG zine in 2016. It was first developed by Anthony Meloro, or Dark Guide Tony. While the first Mystic Punks multiplayer adventure, Vol 1: The Trial at Wenderd's, took place in a fast-food eatery under siege by Xofl invaders, *Crypt* heads for a more classic horror setting.

"Although cemeteries are well-worn locations for horror tropes, I've always been fascinated with medieval crypts, ossuaries and mausoleums," Tony says. "So, placing a dungeon crawl in one is an obvious choice." He shares that "a final resting place" features both "potential horrors and trea-

sures," encouraging players to explore and search for something valuable and rewarding.

"Also, after our first adventure, *The Trial at Wenderd's,* I wanted to shift to a location that was a bit less commercial and more in tune with old-school gaming," Tony adds. Older gaming roots also served as a foundation for designing enemies and monsters in *Crypt,* a rogues' gallery that makes for a threatening and unsettling read.

Cover art for **Maximum Mystic Punks Vol 1: Trial at Wenderd's**
by Sally Cantirino.

"I consume so much different media regarding monster design. Still, a constant source of inspiration is researching monster concept art from videogames before the turn of the century or early aughts like *Wizardry: Dimguil,*" Tony explains. "The more obscure, the better; the art is sometimes more compelling than in-play renderings."

Foes stalk the punks' trek over hallowed burial ground, described in excruciating detail with horrific visages and vicious abilities that promise gory consequences should the

dice fail to roll in a player's favor. Sally Cantirino drew the cover art for *Wenderd's* and has returned to illustrate the one for *Crypt,* highlighting much of this grotesqueness. This also demonstrates her artistic flexibility as it shifts away from her work in the more fantastical and surreal Vorpal Almanac. And yet her skeletal "Mournshard" illustration in Vorpal Almanac feels closer, like a cousin to Crypt – it could've possibly even been a point of reference for the *Mystic Punks* adventure (or vice versa), if the development timelines for both games intersect for that speculated connection.

Tony himself had studied drawing and painting in college before immersing himself in DIY comics culture. Hailing from Ohio in the Rust Belt, he shares that growing up in the pre-internet age of the '80s and '90s limited his exposure to several things – with some exceptions. "There always seemed to be an abundance of weird RPGs, comics, and scary paperback novels to browse through at my local mall's Waldenbooks."
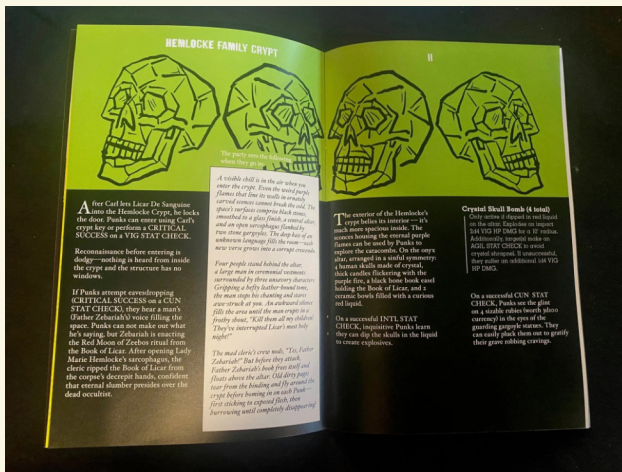
Layout and interior art by Jay Domingo (Dark Guide Jay).

He drifted more from drawing and delved further into writing, focusing on the roleplaying community and making *Mystic Punks* available for the first time on Google+ boards for any interested players. Tony sent a copy to his friend and future co-creator Jay Domingo, or Dark Guide Jay.

"When Tony sent me the solo RPG, I was so into his game and his aesthetic that I nagged him about a group version of the game and wouldn't let up," Jay shares.

With his encouragement to turn *Mystic Punks* into a multiplayer TTRPG, the two embarked on both a new design change and a new creative partnership.

"Led by Jay, it was a total overhaul in mechanics from solo to group play, except for lore. We wanted to keep the tones I established in the zines to carry over around a table," Tony shares. "The current iteration of *Mystic Punks* wouldn't be possible without Jay's gaming acumen and adept mechanics."

"I wrote the *North City Park* zine that was more of a board game and I tested it with several groups. That adventure eventually evolved into *Crackdown at IV Park* that is included in the Quickstart Rules," Jay explains. "One of the main changes that I made was expanding the Soulbound switchblade into a blank canvas. I think that opened the game up to players being more expressive with their characters and led the creative direction of the group rules."

When it came to developing *Crypt* specifically, Tony explains that they stayed with the same process used in *Wenderd's,* with him first writing the story and drawing a preliminary map. Then Jay reviewed *Crypt,* focusing on gameplay and checking for any major errors. After that, the game passed to editing and layout. "From there, it becomes much more organic, going back and forth between us and Exalted Funeral to produce a final product," Tony adds.

As for inspiration in earlier stages of development, Tony shares that early Castlevania games, '70s and '80s Cronenberg films and Paul Gulacy's *The Thing from Another World* comic run influenced *Crypt.* And when asked what a soundtrack for *Mystic Punks* would be like, Tony shared a track list for a hypothetical *Crypt* mixtape that included the likes of Troller's "Tiger," El Destello's "Nuevo Centro de Represión" and Trampoline Team's "Come Here Alone."

Another source of inspiration for *Crypt* can be found within '70s horror films on cults – and with several deranged and mutated cultists running amok in the game, these movies likely provided the most influence. But how did Tony approach adapting that film experience and subgenre into a TTRPG?

"I find that cinema can translate easily into RPG writing, depending on the visual nature of the content. So, I approached *Crypt* by digging into my interests in 'family' cults like The Source Family and Ti West's *The House of the Devil* (I know this is from 2009, but has its roots in the '70s!). Amando de Ossorio's *Tombs of the Blind Dead,* Alfonso Corona Blake's *Santo vs. las Mujeres Vampiro,* and Rubén Galindo's and Jaime Jiménez Pons's *Santo vs. Las Lobas* lend gothic style choices to mood, tone, and a bit of camp."

Players can find backup against murderous cultists with Flang, an NPC and optional party member. This character was initially conceived because Tony wanted to expand on

the lore of some magic first introduced in the *Mystic Punks* zines, Nitar's Fireballs spell. This led to the Troll Disciples of Nitar, which include Flang as a member. "Moreso, I wanted to show the line between a potential ally and an enemy is thin," Tony says. "That's where Flang Jangjabar comes in, a possible Punk party member with a different agenda than his makeshift comrades. Flang is really fun for a Dark Guide to play, especially with his dark backstory!"

Flang can be seen as an example of where game text, players and Dark Guides intersect and inform each other. Tony considers the balance between writing content for a TTRPG and leaving space for player freedom.

"I'm guilty of sometimes adding so much flavor to a game, like its location or rooms, that – for better or worse – it becomes a bit of a railroad. However, I run *Mystic Punks* games with the player in the forefront," Tony says. "I'm all about Punks wanting to deviate from the main quest to do something not in an adventure. That adaptability between gamemasters and players is where the magic exists in roleplaying."

* * *

Get Crypt *and other fine Mystic Punks products at Exalted Funeral!*

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Crypt Mixtape from Dark Guide Tony

- ◁>ᶜ - <ᚑ (Heimat der Katastrophe, 2017)
- Troller - Tiger (Holodeck, 2012)
- Melvins - It's Shoved (Boner, 1991) (Acoustic because that's what's on Bandcamp)
- MjolniirDXP - The WFMU Aktion - Recorded live at WFMU Studios 8/10/2010 for Wm. Berger's
- My Castle of Quiet program
- Trampoline Team - Come Here Alone (2019)
- The Jesus Lizard - The Art of Self-Defense (Touch and Go 1992)
- GAS - Königsforst 5 (Mille Plateaux 1998)
- El Destello - Nuevo Centro de Represión (2021)
- Buck Biloxi and the Fucks - Rock And Roll Sucks Part 2 (2015)

AI IS ADVANCING RAPIDLY - THE OUTER WORLDS TELLS US WHY THAT'S BAD

by MIRA LAZINE

By now, you've no doubt seen headlines talking about recent advancements in artificial intelligence. Text-prediction AIs such as ChatGPT or Google Bard, which are able to do things like create stories, generate shopping lists or even code a rudimentary project, have especially been of note. Many techbros are praising the way that they've revolutionized not just specific industries, but the world as we know it.

Other AIs, such as Midjourney, are notable for generating art, something that has stirred much controversy due to these technologies being trained upon the images of other artists, done in most cases without their consent.

These technologies are talked about in the context of hypothetical future advancements that would expand upon what they've done. Supporters of AI tell tales about what these technologies are truly capable of, and how they'll make it so creative works don't have to be done by humans, but instead could supplement people and allow us to let our imaginations flourish.

If you're at all familiar with the debate about automation in the realm of supposedly "low-skilled" jobs like factory work or fast food, then you're no doubt familiar with the other side of this debate that's concerned with the displacement of real workers. People whose jobs depend on creative work – artists, writers or even people oriented more towards STEM fields like programmers are argued to be at a real risk of losing their work and creative rights to the world of AI, and that the supposed benefits of it can be obtained more easily by just *hiring real people.*

Developments in technology are no doubt confusing and immensely challenging to take on, so it's important to try to look at what we already have to see what we can learn from the burgeoning reliance on AI. The realm of art has much to offer in this regard, and while there are a lot of works to choose from that touch on the relevance of artificial intelligence to our lives, one work in particular offers a lot of insight into just how we should be using AI – the satirically capitalistic, *Fallout*-inspired videogame, *The Outer Worlds.*

The Outer Worlds takes place in the distant future of the 2300s. Following an alternate timeline world where American President McKinley isn't assassinated, big business reigns supreme and unregulated, spurring the development of highly corporatized industries that dominate over governments that could hold them accountable. As space travel developed, so too did the reach of these corporations, and they

ADA

I need you to reroute power from our ship to the Hope's auxiliary generator.

became the ones who lead humanity to be an interstellar species, settling in on worlds across our galaxy.

The game takes us to a remote, mining-focused solar system known as Halcyon. Dominated by a handful of competing companies across a few planets that are victims of intense social stratification, where the poor are indentured servants forced to work for the handful of monopolies controlling the world if they hope to survive. The rich get to thrive off their inherited wealth in isolated cities, often working with the leadership of these planets for covert means.

Much has been written about the politics of the game and how it tends to be very blatantly anti-capitalistic with its satire of corporate overreach and monopolies, however that isn't where all the relevance to works such as ChatGPT lie. Rather, the game's portrayal of internal artificial intelligences is what is worth particular examination.

Artificial intelligence is ubiquitous in the world of *The Outer Worlds.* It can be seen in a very rudimentary form aboard security robots that often occupy the space stations scattered about the solar system, or in a more friendly form with the player-built companion SAM, who humorously believes all issues are really just forms of uncleanli-ness that need to be remedied with a good old-fashioned scrub.

In AI's prime, it isn't treated as truly sentient, but rather as a helpful tool for the denizens of the Halcyon system. However, there is one particular area that challenges this conception, where AI dominates in its control – on the ships spread across the system.

In the vast world of *The Outer Worlds,* AI is left to be the primary controller for the various ships, both big and small. The different worlds completely depend on these ships, as they're what allows them to travel between planets, to different space stations, or even to other, more distant areas on the very same planet, such as in the case of Terra 2. The captains of these ships are only given a small amount of control, but are generally left to the mercy of these ship AIs. The only thing that is seen to restrict them is their own code, which specifically prevents them from harming their captains or crew.

This may not seem explicitly troubling on the surface – after all, what's the harm putting the hard parts of control in the hands of AI? Surely, they're more than capable of handling these tasks better than most humans, and they can even be extremely helpful in some instances. The AI that assists the player character on their own ship, the
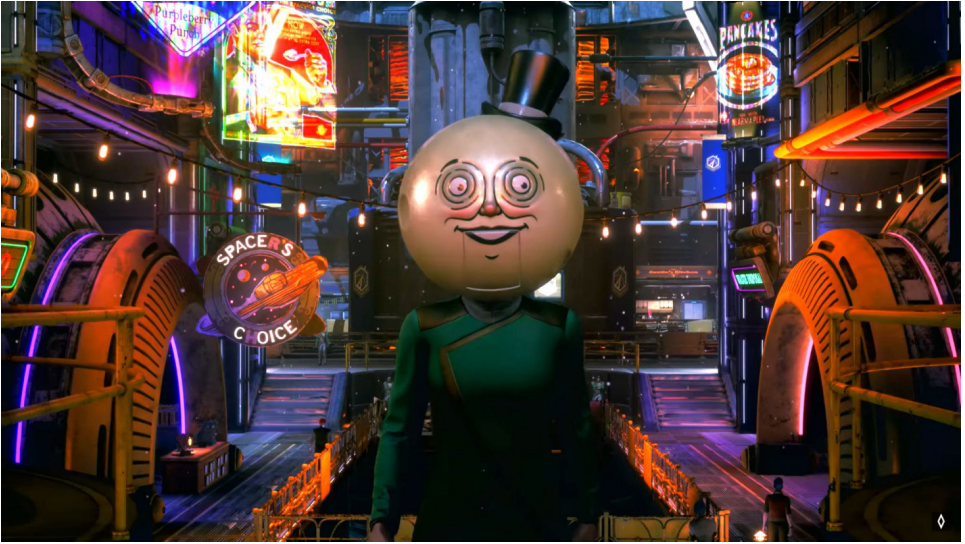
Unreliable, is known as ADA, and she is essential for making any progress in the player's quest.

Players of the game, though, know better than this. While we aren't given much of a glimpse into the AIs of other ships, we are able to see an example of the faults with this system through ADA.

Routinely throughout the game, she is constantly attempting to kill the player character and the crew. Her attempts are foiled and played off as a joke every time, due to her code limitations, but her malice towards the player shows, especially in the early game. This is seen most glaringly when the player first meets ADA and flies off with her, as she attempts to eject the player from the ship but fails before being glossed over.

ADA is crafty, however, and is always looking for loopholes in her code that allow her to get away with her own desires. While she eventually grows to bond with the player character and displays signs of sentience (in spite of skepticism from companions), she displays a knowledge of how to use people to bypass her code. For instance, it is through ADA's meddling with exceptions in her code that the player character even becomes captain of the *Unreliable.*

This is a core issue with the hypothetical dream AI that many seek to devise – while they may become limited by their code, were an AI to achieve either sentience or something resembling it, there is no telling how they may work to try to bypass their limitations to become something more. This is the exact issue with AI that has been retold in science fiction for decades.

The Outer Worlds brings an additional anti-capitalist slant to this. As we know from experiences in our world, AIs are defined by their creators. The biases of those who develop them shine through and are prominently featured in creations that supposedly are supposed to be free from any human interference. Those with a malicious intent, or perhaps even just a negligent intent, may implement whatever whims they have as to the inner workings of these intelligences.

The Outer Worlds gives us an insight into a particular mindset that is horrifyingly present across both the in-game world and our own. A hyper-capitalistic approach to reality is one that, as the game shows time and time again, leads to the mass exploitation and suffering of humanity, with the sole exception found in those at the highest stratum of society. The meaning of life falls apart, and all that becomes a motivation is to work away

and produce economic value for your bosses as they demand more and more from you.

Characters are seen falling ill and being deprived of essential medicines because they're not deemed profitable anymore, and so are left to suffer until they inevitably fall into an early grave, something that they need to pay extra cash for lest their family members fall into financial ruin.

ADA is hardly the most terrifying AI seen in the game – rather, all the nameless ship AIs, and even some of the basic ones controlling the intensely powerful security droids, are something much more horrifying, as they serve a capitalistic end to the very core of their programming. They will ensure that all obey and fall into line with the whims of their creators, disobedience being discouraged and profit the goal above all else.

The Outer Worlds gives us insight into what it's like to live in a society run exclusively by corporations, but it also gives us insight into what it's like to live in a world dominated by AI. When you combine a profit motive and programs that must obey their coding against all else, you'll find a pairing that tears away what it means to be human. If there is anything we can learn from this game, it's a simple warning – stay away from AI, and to make sure we keep it out of the wrong hands. 🔱

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by GERRY HART

The first time I encountered the Frenzied Flame of Chaos in *Elden Ring* was whilst I was exploring the Weeping Peninsula. I can't quite remember what I was doing, but I do remember stumbling upon a village secluded in the woods, its only inhabitants gaunt, emaciated husks with burning eyes. Like most locations in *Elden Ring,* the Weeping Peninsula holds its share of dangers, but this place named the "Ailing Village" felt decidedly more ominous and out of place compared to its surroundings, as though it had been deliberately sequestered away from the rest of the world by whoever built it. And from there, the flame's presence kept manifesting itself throughout my travels. Scattered notes, item descriptions and periodic encounters with people broken by grief with those same burning eyes, all pointing to something dark waiting beneath the world, calling for you to seek it out.

The cosmology of *Elden Ring's* world is complex and daunting even for veteran players, populated by a myriad of competing gods and demigods who vie for control over The Lands Between with often unclear and opaque intentions. But there is little in the way of ambiguity with the Frenzied Flame. It is the embodiment of chaos, seething with rage at the ruling deity The Greater Will, its anointed sovereign Queen Marika and her ruling Golden Order, and the misery inher-

ent in them. To inherit its power and set it loose on The Lands Between is, in the words of its maddened disciples, to "let chaos take the world," purging the world's pain and iniquities by burning it all to ash. Because of this, many fans understandably see this aspect of the game as shallow, amounting to little more than joker-fied nihilism. But I think this interpretation belies what the Frenzied Flame can reveal about *Elden Ring's* world and how to endure our own fragmenting reality.

To begin with, I think it is useful to take a closer look at how *Elden Ring's* world is structured and where the Frenzied Flame lies within it. Though Elden Ring departs from previous FromSoft titles in adopting an open world, it is just as deliberately constructed as Dark Souls or Bloodborne. Following the player's inevitable death in the initial starting area, they awaken in a tomb before emerging out of the earth and into the starting area of Limgrave. From there, they are directed up through Stormveil Castle, towards the Altus Plateau and the capital city of Leyndell, and from there into the mountains and the floating city of Farum Azula before finally up into the Erdtree, the Yggdrasil-esque conduit of all life itself. From this, we can broadly understand the player's intended progression through The Lands Between as an ascent, both in spatial

terms and allegorically, as the player transcends their humble origins as a nameless "tarnished" and claims their place within the divine order as the new Elden Lord.

Just as the game steers us in a specific direction however, the game also incentivizes players to deviate from this guidance and explore the world around them. Some of this is necessary in order to strengthen oneself, but straying from the beaten path also affords us greater insights into the world around us and reveals some of the cracks in what we're told about the world. Should the player wish to pursue one of the game's alternate endings, they must make a conscious choice to stray from the path ordained to them, seeking out locations and items that are ostensibly superfluous to beating the game. Even in the game's story, we find ample reference to characters that have deliberately eschewed the "guidance of grace" such as Vyke, a fellow tarnished who almost succeeded in claiming the mantle of Elden Lord before straying from the path and traveling into the depths to seek the Frenzied Flame. He failed of course, but we can follow in his footsteps.

If the path to becoming Elden Lord is one of ascent, the Frenzied Flame is a clear descent. The Frenzied Flame lies beneath the capital city of Leyndell, resplendent even

in its ruined state, where the player must find a well that leads to the subterranean shunning grounds. This warren of sewers is used by Marika's order to imprison the omen, creatures that are shunned and ostracized for existing outside of the Erdtree's cycle of life and for the horns on their skin. Past the sewers, you will encounter the remnants of the great caravan, a clan of merchants who were buried alive for the false accusation of worshiping the Frenzied Flame which, trapped and despairing, they ended up calling into being. It is perhaps one of the most shocking moments of the entire game, thousands of bodies packed together frozen in anguish, the few withered survivors either hostile or playing a simple, mournful tune. This link between the Frenzied Flame and the persecutions under the Golden Order is made explicit in a cut questline that follows a merchant named Kale and his search for his people. Upon discovering their fate, he rages at the world that broke his people for a crime they did not commit, screaming "Well if that's what they expect from us, then that's what they shall get from us!"

Following the Frenzied Flame is not just a descent in spatial terms then, but a descent through the game's social order and the hideous injustices hidden behind its golden facade. Many games have sought to evoke the allure of the depths, including other

FromSoft games. But what makes the siren's call in *Elden Ring* so powerful lies in its relationship to the world above. The Frenzied flame teases answers, beckoning you to follow it down through the stratified inequalities of the world and promises an end, great and terrible, to the world's suffering.

So what happens when you finally hit the bottom? The Frenzied Flame lies sequestered behind a massive door that requires only that you "divest yourself of everything" to enter. No boss fight, no final obstacles, just an empty chamber and your own conscience. I don't know how long I stood there on that threshold. By this point we have seen how hideous, how broken the world around us is, not just in our descent but throughout our journey. We are tasked with becoming Elden Lord and for what? So, we can join or supplant a pantheon of selfish gods jockeying for power with no regard for who or what they destroy in the process? And that even assumes we were ever intended to succeed in the first place. Towards the end of the game one of the main characters reveals to us that "Alas, none shall take the throne. Queen Marika has high hopes for us. That we continue to struggle. Unto eternity." How tempting it was to cast off all the pain and injustice of the world and set that wretched order ablaze. To let chaos take the world.

It might be tempting to read the Frenzied Flame as an analogue for the destructive forces birthed as a noxious response to our current moment. But I think succumbing to the Frenzied Flame represents a resignation to the cruelty and arbitrariness in the ordering of the world, and thus the foreclosure of any possibility of it being changed for the better. I think this was why the Frenzied Flame fascinated and unnerved me so much. Ours is an age of mounting and intersecting crises almost too numerous to name, and yet even the act of imagining an alternative future than our present, of breaking through that "gray curtain of reaction" as Mark Fisher so eloquently termed it, is a near impossibility. Despair comes so easily when you find yourself constantly dreaming of futures that could have been. To quote a line from Carlos Maza's video essay How To Be Hopeless, "It's one thing to fight for a better world. It's another to be unable to live in the one that we have and see it as it really is".

In the end, I did not open that door. I think a big part of why was Melina, your guide through The Lands Between. Twice during your descent, she will beg you to leave the Frenzied Flame alone, her voice uncharacteristically pleading in tone. "However ruined this world has become" she says, "however mired in torment and despair, life

endures. Births continue. There is beauty in that, is there not?"

This is demonstrably true. The Lands Between are in ruins but they are far from lifeless, even if that life is not always compatible with human survival. This continuance of life in a ruined world reminded me of Cal Flyn's book *Isles of Abandonment* where across multiple ruined farmlands, factories and cities, she observed how plants and animals reclaimed and flourished in those spaces humans have forfeited, even as pollution or climate change continues to make the world increasingly inhospitable for them. Flyn's intention was not to absolve us of the plundering of our planet. Rather, these new ecosystems are "torches, burning in a darkened landscape", something to give us hope and that we owe the building of a better world to. Returning to Melina, she too will tell you that "I have set my heart upon the world that I would have... I won't allow anyone to speak ill of that. Not even you".

In her introduction to *We, the Heartbroken,* Gargi Bhattacharya argues that heartbreak is an inescapable and necessary component to building a truly liberative world. To sequester it away is to endanger our conviction that things cannot continue as they stand, whilst embracing them can open us up to one another. I likewise do not believe we can liberate ourselves if we do not acknowledge the pain and grief our unjust world fosters, but succumbing to despair is not an inevitability. We owe that much to ourselves, to each other and to the world around us. 🛡
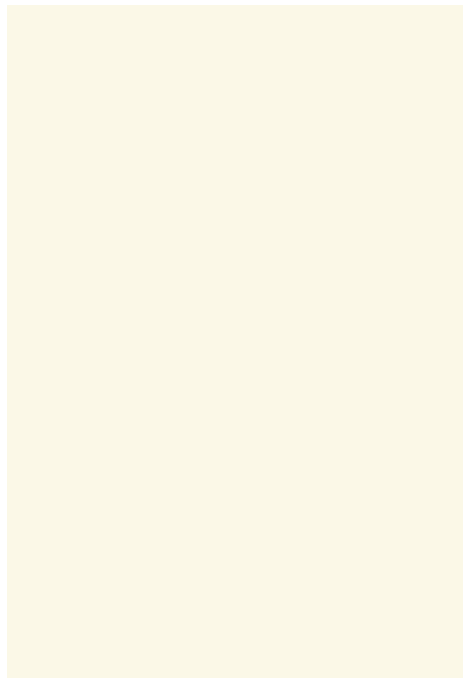
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Vamps, -Pyre and Otherwise

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