



UNWINNABLE

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SANTA'S 7 HELPERS

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This Machine Kills Fascists

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Dear Reader,

Welcome to one of my favorite months of the year, the last one. I'm not a big believer in a calendar year being a useful measure of time but I do like ending one. I'll be crunching through some special little tidbits for you all throughout the next few weeks.

2023 has seen some amazing and wonderful games and movies and music and everything we love here. But it's also seen a major contraction in the workforce producing those things. Now, as always, it is difficult to see the record dollar signs flowing and the record number of layoffs being had. So, remember, as you enjoy that game, album, comic, movie or whatever, remember that real people made it. Their livelihoods depended on you loving it and some corporate asshole somewhere might have wanted to make a number go up, and suddenly, one brilliant person working so you could enjoy a thing might be looking for a new job. Workers deserve the world.

With that being said, onto features! This month we've got Aldo García on the super Suda-way that *Killer7* operates. Backing this up is Jon Place on those little maps in the corner.

For this month's Funeral Rites, brought to you by Exalted Funeral, Alyssa Wejebe chats with the creator of *My Chivalric Romance*.

And the regular rogues! Jay Castello goes out to sea. Maddi Chilton on things that look good on shelves. Deirdre Coyle on *Starfield*'s goth. Emma Kostopolus on evil houses. Matt Marrone gives us his album of the year! Noah Springer does the history of hip hop in this milestone year. Emily Price sees stars and dungeons. Justin Reeve looks at all the pretty buildings and brings us 2023 in videogame architecture. And Rob Rich returns to the Commonwealth wastelands.

See you all in a few weeks in Exploits!

Welcome to a world without Henry Kissinger!

David Shimomura
Chicago, Illinois
December 11, 2023



PAST PRESENCE | **EMILY PRICE**

OBJECT LESSONS #3: MEGADUNGEON

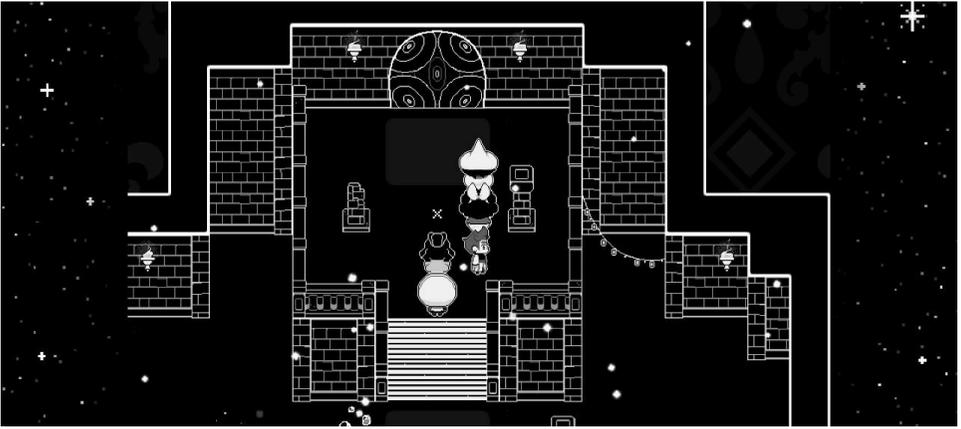
Halfway through this year I realized that I'd been playing a lot of RPGs; like, a lot. It was a good year for them, but on some level, I unconsciously made the decision to make up what I'd missed before. This might be the fault of how I started the year, which was with the *Dungeon23* project that went viral in December 2022. The goal was to draw and describe one room of a megadungeon every day for a year. Every Reddit thread for it was punctuated by someone saying "only 5% of people will see this to the end!" I started almost out of spite. And you know what? I dropped it in March. It turns out that making a megadungeon when you don't have a campaign to use it in isn't fun.

What is a dungeon? This is the kind of question you think about when you draw your fiftieth square grid room that contains yet another statue and another random battle. A dungeon is first and foremost arranged space. *That's* something I thought about when I played *Trails in the Sky 3*, which is a megadungeon itself. In having, perhaps,

the laziest inciting incident you could (you're trapped inside a cube; deal with it), only the space right in front of you matters.

The first area is a green maze with a nebula-like floor floating in a vast background of stars. There's another dungeon from the first game that's entirely gorgeous marble and easy to get lost in. This was on the PSP in 2006. Its outside environments are a little muddy sometimes, but the insides are their own little world. This series constitutes three out of the 17 RPGs I at least started this year. Its dungeons are long hallways, and I wouldn't describe their design as good or even fun. However, their layouts communicate a special utilitarianism: there's something at every dead end of their octopus-like structure.

At this point a normal person might be asking – did you say *seventeen* RPGs? How did I have enough time to play all of these? One, games form the foundation of my freelance job and two, they are a staple hobby as the world moves on from a pandemic that is



very much still happening (lol!!! just kidding, it's not funny.) In my Elizabeth Gilberting around countless digital realms, I began to develop Opinions about what makes a dungeon good. *Genshin Impact*, for instance, which I tried for a brief period again this year, has dungeons that are several isolated rooms usually connected by a couple floating platforms. You can run through them as many times as you want to get resources and items. I don't like these dungeons. For one thing, it's way too easy to fall off the edge of stuff.

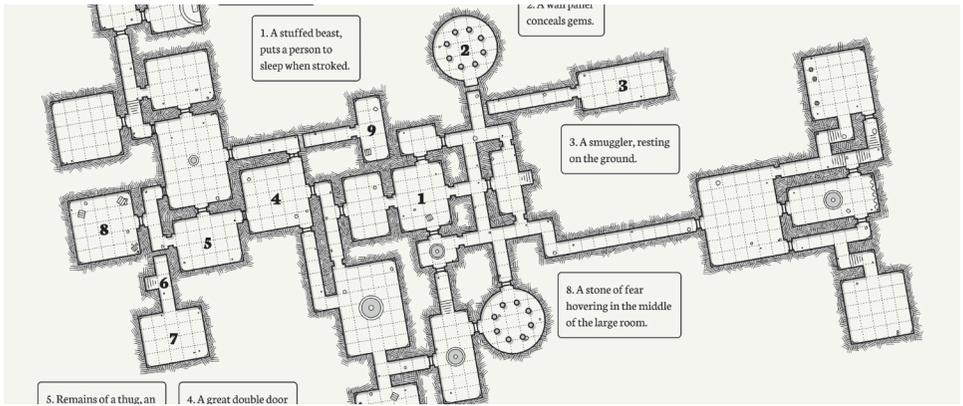
For another, I think the best dungeons are the ones you encounter once and never again. *Diablo IV*, which I played about 10 hours of, similarly expects you to run through its caves and barely disguised hallways over and over to complete challenges. I will only ever get the shallowest enjoyment out of this style of game. I just don't have the patience, or the desire, to walk through the same rooms over and over again.

This gets to something else I want to talk about: dungeon texture. In literary studies, texture is what we call the experience of the surface features of a work, like its sound and imagery, in contrast to its structure or argument. Games, obviously, have texturing, which itself can create texture: shadows and light, depth and space. To quote from [this essay](#) about games' aesthetic flaws, "every game is also a representation in the same way that other artworks are: using Kendall Walton's terms, they are *sensory depictions*, like paintings, sculpture and music, or narra-

tions, like books, poetry and radio plays, or hybrids of the two, such as television, comics and films." Like most of these categories, games have thematic texture and also visual texture that plays on multiple senses at once.

Sea of Stars is a great example of what I mean. It might be my favorite game of the year, and the reason for that is its environmental design, particularly the dungeons. They are not only made of beautiful pixel art but they are vertically oriented, with many puzzles that make you drop down through the level or take the stairs. Each dungeon feels like a perfectly constructed diorama. And each one is new. Despite that game's stated influence from *Chrono Trigger* and other classic RPGs, it creates different themes for each area and expresses them through myriad special effects: the lighting and fog have been particularly lauded examples. From the cloudy green crystals in the second dungeon to the coral and undersea windows of a later one, they are all sparkling with texture.

In contrast, there's minimalist dungeon design like the pure grid of *Dungeon Encounters* or my graph paper scribbling. A slightly more detailed minimalist dungeon is in *In Stars and Time*, which is a time loop game where you explore a castle called the House of Change. Once you discover you can't die, you go back through the same dungeon over and over, getting more information to defeat the king and restore time's flow. It's an extremely well-written game that



deals with themes about immortality and eternal stasis, as well as sexuality and family loss. It also requires you to go back through the same rooms over and over again, a sacrifice I don't find annoying because it serves the story the writing is trying to tell about how frustrating it is to strive through repetition.

A megadungeon only remains interesting when it's both cohesive in its whole and distinctive in its parts. To return to that essay on aesthetic flaws, "whenever there are multiple forms of representation working together, there is the possibility of different aesthetic values about those kinds of representations clashing." The smoothness of *In Stars and Time* greatly contributes to each loop feeling like an individual "floor" of something larger: every time something little changes, it feels sufficiently new. In contrast, each repetitive *Diablo* dungeon is alike in its structure and design, and since the differences mostly extend to visuals, I see that smoothness as a flaw.

The next step past this kind of repetitive design, or maybe a relative to it, is procedural generation; for instance, [One Page Dungeon](#), which produces dungeon floor layouts and basic item descriptions. Using it feels like the place I eventually got to with my dungeon, when I ran out of inspiration: googling fantasy tropes or flipping through novels to imagine appropriate things to put in empty rooms. In other words, using it feels a little like cheating. With no shade to these kinds of tools – they do require human input, after all – I can't not think of how people use AI to

generate inspiration, a process that cuts off one's ability to do so on their own.

An assumption I held at the beginning of the year was: a dungeon is a reflection of the person who dreamed it up. The motivation behind trying *Dungeon23* for me was something like starting an apartment in the Sims mixed with reading my horoscope. I think I imagined the process of creating one room each day as meditative, something that would reveal a fact about my psyche or how my day was going in whatever I created. In practice it was totally different: my real life had no impact I could discern on what I was creating. I'm glad my graph paper drawings won't be serving as a personality test, but I was also disappointed to find how impersonal what I made ended up turning out. And I ended up seeking that same level of investment in the dungeons I wandered through for the rest of the year: what signs can I see that a real person created this? How can I connect, however minutely, with the hand that drew this or wrote this word?

The results were mixed, but I still find dungeons as enigmatic as I did at the start of the year. I still see them as boundary keepers between free exploration and the world of Traps and Puzzles, condensed rooms expressing a theme through sound and light rather than anything explicitly said. And I hope to play more things in the new year that experiment with what makes a dungeon, and that still have the fingerprints of their designers left in the paint. 



THIS MORTAL COYLE | **DEIRDRE COYLE**

I MARRIED MY GOTH GF IN STARFIELD BUT I FEEL NOTHING

My devotion to *Skyrim* runs deep. I've written about it multiple times for Unwinnable. I will do so again if I ever get past the Alduin's Bane glitch.

What draws me into Bethesda's worlds, in addition to the rich exploratory possibilities and choice-heavy narratives, is the closeness I feel for their characters. I'm attached to [Farkas](#), [Serana](#), and various shopkeepers from *Skyrim*. I want to start a punk band with [Rose the robot](#) from *Fallout 76*. I even developed complicated feelings about Benny, a jackass in a checkered suit who *shot me in Fallout: New Vegas*.

Starfield is Bethesda's biggest game to date. More to explore, more dialogue options, more NPCs. *Starfield* has 1,000,000 square miles to explore, [where Skyrim has 14.3](#).

So why don't I feel attached to any of *Starfield*'s characters?

I've logged 212 hours. I'm still playing. It isn't that I don't "like" the game, exactly. It's just that, emotionally, I don't . . . care?

This column should be about Andreja. She is the most goth companion available, and she's an acolyte of a cosmic snake ("The Great Serpent"), which is – objectively – cool as hell.

When I met Andreja, she was quadruple-tapping a corpse, and she asked me not to let anyone else know that I found her Doing Murder. But after this, her moral alignment turns, rather disappointingly, lawful good. The explanation makes sense, sort of – she's seen some shit, and wants to turn away from her tortured past. But this means her moral alignment isn't much different than any other companion's. What's the point of choosing a companion when they're going to tell you the same thing? Yes, Andreja's a snake-worshipping goth, but it hasn't affected my gameplay to any particular degree.



After following Andreja's questline to its conclusion, she and I expressed our affection for one another. We couldn't officially marry because her snake religion doesn't allow marriage to outsiders. But we had a commitment ceremony on the planet Shoza II, in which Andreja gave me a knife fashioned from the skull of her childhood pet. (Her religion requires children to raise a "groat" and slaughter it when they come of age. "Through this groat we are shown . . . that all things serve the Serpent, and can be tools for his use." Dare I say, fuckin' yikes.) I wanted to feel something akin to what I usually feel for my in-game friends, spouses and goth girlfriends. But the feeling didn't arrive. I set out from Shoza II wanting only to keep collecting alien rocks and upgrading my in-game research. That was more satisfying to me than the story.

Is this a personal problem? Is Andreja actually as well-developed as *Skyrim's* Serana, and I'm just too jaded to see it? This is plausible. I've played a lot of Bethesda games, and *Starfield* has a lot to live up to.

Or maybe I'm overwhelmed by *Starfield's* cosmic angst. Maybe thoughts of quantum mechanics and the multiverse are pulling my attention away from interpersonal relationships with NPCs. But I don't think that's it.

In Cat Bussell's words, *Starfield's* "companions very much reflect the game's sense of stagnation. The game's four central companions change very little over the course of the adventure."

I realize it's rude to compare wives, but let's go back to Serana for a second. Serana was raised by vampires, manipulated by both parents and taught necromancy by her mother. I learned more about Serana's childhood during her quest than I've learned about Andreja in any capacity. The most intimate story I know about Andreja is that she once abandoned friends during an attack; her companion quest involves going on an amends tour. That's nice but doesn't feel as resonant as unburdening Serana from her family's legacy.

More access to story-rich locations might also have assuaged my feelings of aloofness. Furniture, architecture, book choices round out the characters in *Skyrim* and earlier Bethesda games. The barren nature of *Starfield's* landscapes – while appropriate for space, I suppose – contribute to my barren feelings towards my companions. With Serana, you travel to Castle Volkihar, meet her shitty dad and see her gothic childhood stomping grounds. With Andreja, you never see her homeworld of Va'ruu'kai because it's shrouded in secrecy – Andreja herself is forbidden from knowing its coordinates after leaving (which, to be fair, is a pretty cool world-building detail. I would have preferred to see the planet, though. DLC, maybe?).

After our commitment ceremony, when Andreja calls me her "favorite person," I'm not sure I believe it. Many others agree that *Starfield* has something missing. For me, it's a sense of human connection. 🍷

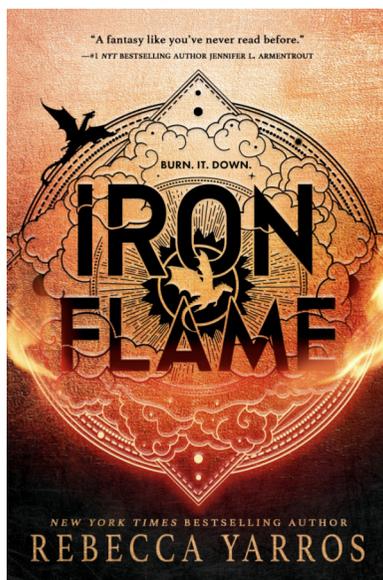
before. You've barely bought your first *thing* before another *thing* comes along, this one shinier, this one harder to find, this one a limited-edition-so-get-it-before-it-goes! You could be forgiven for forgetting that the *thing* was books one generally might be expected to sit down and read.

That's the most important part of these trends, at the end of the day: the *aesthetic*. Color-coded shelves are basically a prerequisite for any acceptably hip booktube-or-book-tokker. The [literary It Girls](#) sell products alongside their books like they'd sell brand name clothing, so that you don't even have to tell someone about the book you're reading for them to know about the book you're reading. Chic cover trends assure that potential readers are correctly associating your book with its trendy progenitors, whether it be the swirling, abstract colors of memoir, the modern-text-over-classical-image of mainstream fiction, or the ubiquitous cartoon covers of contemporary romance. The predictability of the product is assured; you understand before you begin exactly what you'll get.

This has always been the case in genre, of course. You come to James Patterson for one thing, Julia Quinn for another. But that's about content – thrillers are thrillers, romances are romances – where this is about *looks*. At some point the marketers stopped selling new books to read and started selling new books to say you have read, whose contribution to the cause is their chameleon-like lack of distinctness, their total void of originality. They're sold with tropes, generic names, cobbled-together backstories, resembling nothing so much as an endless cycle of self-serious Mad Libs.

An argument can be made for the liberatory potential of knowing what you like and giving

people an escape in the throes of late capitalism. The argument has *already* been made that BookTok is by the girlies, for the girlies. But comfort food alone is not a balanced diet, and the implication that consuming schlock is a feminist act because – what? because women don't want to read widely, to encounter new ideas, to have to think too hard? because reading was for men before we softened it, sexed it up, dumbed it down? – is stupid verging on offensive. Were we incapable of knowing what we liked until it was fed to us? Is this the most the modern woman should ask for? There is nothing progressive about parroting the company line. The company line, right now, is that you should buy their books.



The name on the tip of everyone's tongue right now is Rebecca Yarros and her blindingly popular Fourth Wing series. The second book, *Iron Flame*, has been in the news for more than one reason recently. The snake has begun eating its tail. People are saying Yarros' latest book has been written with AI, citing all sorts of things: the quality of the writing, forgotten plotlines, pacing issues, general incoherence. It's impossible to tell for sure, of

course, unless Yarros gets suddenly and uncharacteristically honest, which she has no incentive to do. The money's being made, the books are being bought, the launch parties are being attended and discussed. *Iron Flame* sold out in bookstores across the world before anyone said shit about it being AI. And what does it say about our standards for writing and editing that now hundreds of people are looking at it with a critical eye and all we can say is that we aren't sure?

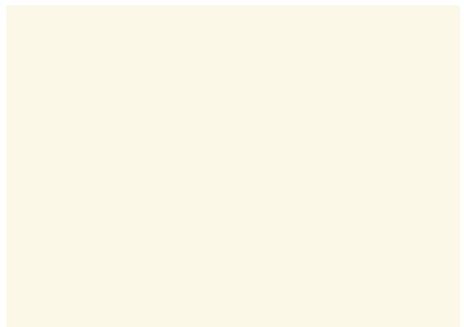
In Ray Nayler's great essay "[AI and the Rise of Mediocrity](#)," he points out how AI by its nature is incapable of creating anything orig-



inal: the entire scheme is that it can only create content through the composite parts that came before it, a "mash-up of old tropes" that "fill the world with grindingly average" products, media and pseudo-art. On the public's side, it benefits greatly from the creation of a "replaceable consumer," a "complacent buyer with reduced expectations of quality" who never asks for or expects anything better than "good enough." Sound familiar? The faceless aesthetic and trope-logged, trend-obsessed churn has gotten us halfway there. Why demand originality or creativity when they look the same on the shelf as any other book, and demand more of your time – thus dragging down your Goodreads reading goal – to boot?

Hopefully the *Iron Flame* debacle means the bubble will finally burst. People are talking about BookTok and traditional publishing in the terms of fast fashion, now, realizing slowly that an infinite stream of replaceable objects is about as spiritually satisfying as Soylent. The capricious favor of the internet

has turned on Yarros, and while I'm loath to celebrate sacrificing individuals to the voracious stomach of the social media machine, I'm happy I might finally stop hearing about her bad book. Then again, I doubt the death of the latest It Girl will lead to the death of the It Girl. Someone else aesthetic and marketable will step in to take her place – or at least, aesthetic and marketable enough to keep the charade going, all this involved pageantry of choice that isn't choice, wanting something you were told to want, liberation and freedom and representation through a sanctioned, sanitized product sold to you in hardcover for \$28.99, to look pretty on the shelf next to all the others. U





HERE BE MONSTERS | **DR. EMMA KOSTOPOLUS**

IT'S AN EVIL EFFING ROOM: LEVEL DESIGN IN HORROR

In Mark Z. Danielewski's book *House of Leaves*, alongside constructing one of the most unsettling haunted houses I have ever had the pleasure of encountering, also introduced me to a philosophical horror concept that reframed the way I think about a lot of my spookier experiences. In the book, Danielewski muses at length on Heidegger's concept of the *unheimlich*, literally translated from the German as "un-home-like." While I personally tend to balk at working with Heideggerian concepts myself, since in his life he had many unpleasant associations with the Nazi party and I want to be entirely transparent about that, he's also really hard to get away from if you do any sort of work with western philosophy, literature or criticism. And this idea of the un-home-like or *unheimlich* has stuck with me because I feel like it presents a very particular phenomenon in regards to the way we experience the discomfort of horror, similar to but distinct from things like the uncanny valley. A horror of place and of environment, as opposed to

horror distilled into discomfort at a specific object or person. Horror at the level of vibe.

On a broader scale, our media has a bit of a fascination with the idea of place-as-evil. Haunted house horror has been present since horror media was a thing (here's looking at you, Edgar Allan Poe), and we've seen basically every titan of the horror industry take on the concept, from Shirley Jackson and *The Haunting of Hill House* to Stephen King himself in, among other properties, *1408*, the film adaptation of which inspired the title of this piece. I've actually written about my feelings on the *unheimlich* previously, in the now defunct *We Are Horror*, may that publication rest in peace. But I think the specific ways in which videogames handle place-based horror deserves its own moment to shine, because in thinking about horror level design, we can work to uncover a lot of the general horror philosophy behind some of our most beloved franchises.

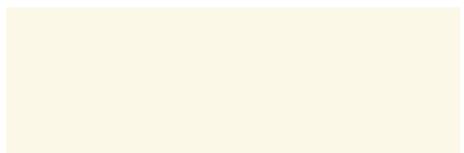


While in a typical study of level design, it would seem that the things that are present (objects, platforms, interactables, etc) would take center-stage, in horror level design, negative space and things notably absent are equally important to creating a sense of the *unheimlich*. For example, one of the most iconic level designs of all time is the exterior town in the original *Silent Hill*, which, due to technological constraints, had incredibly low visibility thanks to the dense fog shrouding the player character. While this design was born out of necessity, its impact on the terror of traversing the main map is unmistakable: the only indication that danger is in the vicinity comes from the tinny blare of your radio. Since the level actively obscures any visual notice of danger, the player is awash in a literal sea of the *unheimlich*. Things here are out of sight but very much not of mind, and there is no reasonable assumption that what's on the other side of the fog is normal, pleasant or safe.

Silent Hill 4 more directly engages with the idea of the *unheimlich*, since the premise of the game (which, as a side note, I contend to be the most thematically interesting in the series) is that you are trapped inside your one bedroom apartment and can only escape through increasingly threatening holes that appear in your walls. Through these holes, you as the protagonist escape into surreal locales that on the best day

would seem like liminal spaces, such as an empty subway station. These sojourns are limited, however, and you inexorably return to your apartment, slowly and horrifically changing with each new outing until finally, the apartment actively damages your health for as long as you remain inside. The home, traditionally thought of as a safe haven, is here turned on its head, and you are forced to flee that which is meant to protect you.

This really only scratches the surface of the examples for horrors of place in videogames, but what does all of this mean? And why is this significantly different in an interactive medium than in a passive one like film? Fundamentally, the difference here lies in the fact that, in a film about a messed-up place, the rules about how to watch a movie remain unchanged, whereas in a game about a messed-up place, we have to totally reconfigure how we interface with the medium. The very rules of play change when we can't trust, for example, that a wall is a wall, or that it's safe to exist inside of a given area. And it's for this reason that place-based horror tends to be some of the most viscerally unsettling to us – it takes the ground from beneath our very feet, and we are left unanchored, strangers in a strange land. 





ROOKIE OF THE YEAR | **MATT MARRONE**

LANA DEL('S) REY

It's Sunday morning at the 2023 Newport Folk Festival and something isn't right.

The early birds are perched from the merch tents to the far end of the Museum. It's well past time for the gates to open, as they always do precisely at 10, each day, each year, so the diehard folkies can flock to the Quad or the Fort to secure their best blanket positions. But this morning, the gates and the guards aren't budging, and the rumors on the merch side is that it's all Lana Del Rey's fault. On the Museum side, those rumors are confirmed as her voice carries over on the bay breeze from the Fort Stage.

The diva, it appears, has the nerve to be sound-checking.

It's unprecedented. For folkies already perplexed or even peeved by her place in the weekend's lineup, the delay – which someone squished nearby in the crowd tells us is kind of a trademark of hers – is further proof she has no place here. The spirit of the Folk Fest is all about the music, from the morning sets to the closers, not all about Lana.

Eventually, Lana Del Rey is ready, and, because she says it can, Day 3 begins.

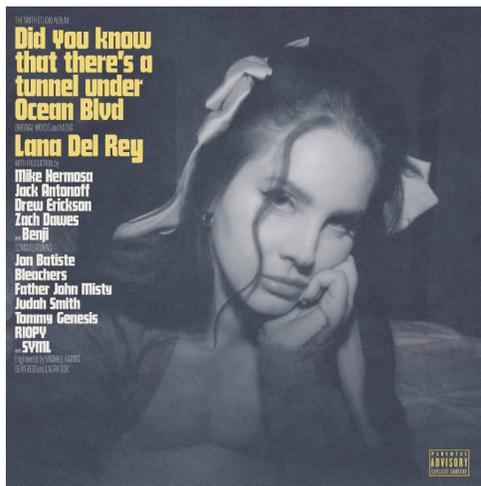
Seven hours later, I have had at least five servings of Del's Lemonade, not exactly the official drink of the Newport Folk Festival but close enough.

So, when Lana Del Rey finally takes the stage – after another delay, and to the sounds of screaming fangirls somehow piped through the speakers – I'm sugared up and ready for anything.

I liked "Video Games" well enough when it first came out, and I've been digging her new record, in anticipation of this set. I can't legitimately call myself a fan. But this evening, I am up for grabs.

Later I'd hear some folkies actually complain about this, but she's brought a fairly elaborate stage setup – and dancers! This kind of choreography at the Fort is basically unheard of, but it doesn't feel out of place

24 hours after [Jon Batiste](#) barbecued on the same stage. And while it's not exactly Bob Dylan plugging in his electric guitar, it's refreshing: Lana sprawled out on a piano; Lana reflected in a mirror as she combs her hair; Lana dragged off the stage at the end by the male members of her dance troupe.



days, running on adrenaline and Del's, every once in a while taking a sharp turn a little sharper than I'd have liked, imagining the car careening off the guardrail into the woods. Not long after Lana pleads, "fuck me to death, love me until I love myself" and asserts "it's not about having someone to love me anymore," there's her preacher, sounding

It's no wonder David Lynch is a fan: Her songs find space to be both artificial and heartfelt. I can't tell how much of a diva the diva really is. And I love it.

*I know they think that it took somebody else
To make me beautiful, beautiful
As they intended me to be
But they're wrong
I know they think that it took thousands of people
To put me together again like an experiment
Some big men behind the scenes
Sewing Frankenstein black dreams into my songs
But they're wrong*

* * *

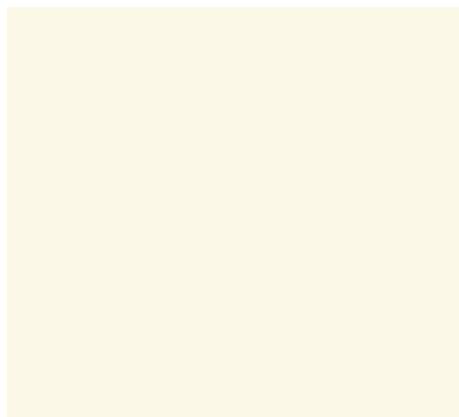
That night I drive back from Rhode Island, along back roads that twist and turn in the darkness, roads that are almost pitch black when my brights aren't on. My wife sleeps next to me in the passenger seat. Lana's record, *Did You Know that there's a Tunnel Under Ocean Blvd* – my 2023 Album of the Year, beating out boygenius and Sufjan Stevens – keeps me company, providing the lovely and sometimes surreal soundtrack for the journey.

It might be the perfect way to listen to this record: wired, thrilled by the past three

like he's being surreptitiously recorded by Lana's iPhone, imploring us not to live a life of lust, to appreciate the love and the family that we have. Later, she is taken in by candy necklaces even though she knows they're superficial. And then Lana leaves everything behind because "when you know, you know" – then sings a love song she wrote for her boy Jack Antonoff's wedding with the same lyric.

You know, twists and turns.

Eventually we get to my parents' house, turn off the car and quietly walk inside and upstairs to not wake up the kids. There's always at least one thing – usually many things – that keeps me coming back to Newport Folk every year. This year there was Lana Del Rey, who for a time seemed determined to keep it from starting. Only to say later playing the Fest was a lifelong dream – and then blowing it up. [U](#)





AREA OF EFFECT | **JAY CASTELLO**

SPACE AT SEA

When I say that space is socially constructed, I usually think of the green places. Maybe this is a personal bias. The first time I encountered the concept was in anthropologist and archaeologist Barbara Bender's case study of the train poster showing open English countryside punctuated with a single tree and describing it as "one of the best shows on earth" to be enjoyed while travelling through it – in first-class, of course.

The image is one of agricultural monoculture, the money that influenced it and the workers who made it disappeared from frame so that it can be captured as "a private view" for those paying to move through it without stopping. The imagined reader's social experience of the space is entirely different from the landowner's, which is different from the farm laborer's, which is different from the local hiker excluded from the land, and so on.

This is where I first encountered the sociality of space, and where I continue to experience it, living on the border of that same English countryside. But playing *Raft*, I now

think that maybe the clearest demonstration is actually in the sea. The oceans are a space of freedom, terror, traversal, piracy, exploration, exploitation, warfare, monsters, beauty, death and a thousand other things depending on their social context.

Perhaps this is because the oceans are inaccessible without some kind of social input. Even solo sailors carry with them the people who made their boats, their supplies, their maps. But more often your experience of the sea will depend entirely on what kind of boat you are in, and why. The ocean is a different place for the captain of the 17th century trade galleon and the passenger on the modern cruise liner; different again for a galley steward working 12-hour shifts on that very same ship.

In *Raft*, of course, the question of where you learned to build the raft and all the associated survival gear is elided. But the sociality of the seascape is nonetheless front and center, particularly playing in a group. There's always more than one thing you could be doing in *Raft*; building new bits of



the boat, looking for and exploring islands, hooking flotsam, processing materials, farming and cooking and so on.

The last of these is the one that I sink into, the rhythms of plant-water-harvest-cook-serve. And while our raft floats across an endless ocean underneath a beautiful, vast sky and my co-sailors explore scattered rocks, my space shrinks to a cyclical routine. Plant-water-harvest-cook-serve.

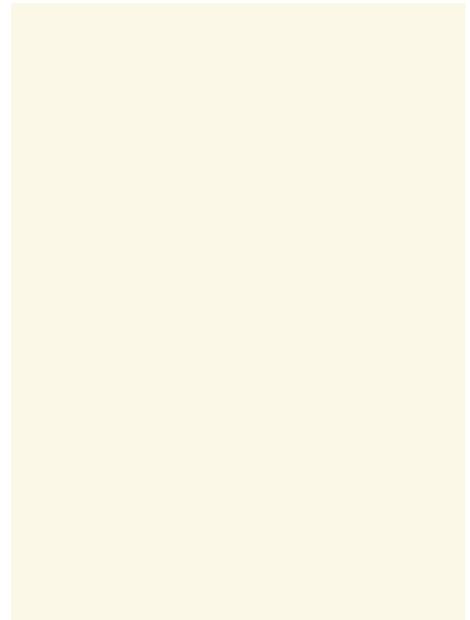
It wouldn't matter if this raft wasn't moving at all. The ocean is compressed down into one routine. Plant-water-harvest-cook-serve. In real life there would be worn paths along the route: soil to still to soil to kitchen. This is the space that is created by the cooking cycle; a necessary labor for being away from land made soothingly engaging by the tricks of gameplay.

Obviously, this being a game, and my being the potato farmer of my own volition, I also get to experience the space of *Raft* in other ways. I go to the trader's shack, set high on a hill and adorned with Christmas-like fairy lights. We explore a giant yacht, run aground and dark. I watch the moon and the cotton candy pink sunrises. One of the best shows on earth.

When I'm a sailor, an explorer or an observer, *Raft* is a different social space.

The game encourages moving between these social positions, demonstrating a fluidity of the spatial experience that isn't often accessible in real life. The first-class train rider never becomes the farm worker, and while the worker might take the train, they won't see the field as the advert invites them to.

But this fluidity is noticeable because head down, looking at the deck, pulling up vegetables from the dirt is the overwhelming spatial experience I have of *Raft*. The sea is infinite, and yet much of the time feels that it barely exists. 





NOAH'S BEAT BOX | **NOAH SPRINGER**

HIP HOP AT FIFTY

Header: Classic NYC hip-hop radio recordings on cassette

As we close out 2023, we also close out the 50th anniversary of the founding of hip hop, and after writing about hip hop for four years straight, I would be remiss if I didn't spend at least a little time reflecting on the genre, even though it's no longer my primary beat. I will admit, it's been nice not to feel forced to listen to every new album that drops just to write up a review; I spent a couple months this fall basically not listening to music at all, which felt a bit like a relief. After stepping back from the contemporary, I've had a chance to reflect a bit more on the different eras of hip hop, and what they mean to me.

Our current era, whatever you want to term it, is – in your narrator's humble opinion – a bit of a wash. Of course, there is always amazing work being produced, including new releases all the time by MCs like Danny Brown, JID, Billy Woods and even more popular rappers like Kendrick and J Cole, but I find much of what I hear

boring and a bit uninspired. I can't seem to understand the appeal of folks like Lil Uzi Vert or Gunna, even as they sell out stadiums. This is likely a me problem rather than, "kids these days don't make good music" problem. I think I'm just getting old. I read somewhere once that most people stop listening to new music by the time they are 35. I'm 37 now, so I feel like I made it a couple extra years.

I do think some of the lack of definition for this era stems from the ubiquity of personalized feeds and algorithms. It seems harder to find the consensus sound when what appears in the mainstream differs so vastly than what appears across your personalized feed. I'm not sure I've listened to a Drake song in over a decade, but apparently he's at a Michael Jackson level of popularity. The lack of a definition may just be a matter of time though – we aren't far enough out yet to quite formulate what this era actually is. We aren't quite in the Soundcloud era anymore, so maybe the TikTok era?

As for my preferred era, I have to admit that I'm a bit stuck in the blog zone, something from around 2009-2014 or so. Right as I emerged from my dark hole of imagining any rap made past 2000 was terrible, folks like Lupe Fiasco, Kid Cudi, Kendrick Lamar, A\$AP Rocky, ScHoolboy Q, and yes, even Kanye West, etched their music onto my brain. The blog era was also the first inking of this individualized approach to selecting music, and I was deep in it, consuming everything I could, even making a hip hop archive to track what I was listening to. Unfortunately, it disappeared after a bad update from Wordpress sometime in 2016.

The blog era was hardly the first era in hip hop, though. You could maybe call the early 2000s the bling era, and folks love to call the '90s the Golden Age. While I am fairly well versed in both of those spaces, I was very excited to see the new book on an era that I have known less about than most others: the mixtape era.

Evan Auerbach and Daniel Isenberg's new book, *Do Remember! The Golden Era of NYC Hip-Hop Mixtapes* brings to life an era of hip hop that I never got to participate in. Of course, I know mixtapes not only as the CDs I burned in 2007, but also as the way many artists like Lil Wayne, 50 Cent and The Notorious B.I.G. broke through into the mainstream. What I didn't know was the material history of the tapes, the people behind the scenes who, since hip hop's inception, were making and distributing these tapes in hope of making a name for themselves and their crew.

In Fab Five Freddie's intro, he talks about never owning a turntable, just a boombox, and making tapes was the way that the music spread across the five boroughs of NYC. Live recordings of concerts became treasures to be passed around, similar to the cult surrounding live Grateful Dead bootlegs around the same time. And then there are the tapes themselves, lavishly rendered throughout *Do Remember!* in full color, offering a glimpse into one of the original visual products of hip hop. It

also brings an element of graffiti to the genre that often feels criminally overlooked these days. Seeing Kid Capri's and Lovebug Starski's tags on the tapes feels like a forgotten art form.



Collage featuring Starchild, Lovebug Starski and Bruce B mixtape art

Outside of the amazing reproductions of the tapes, *Do Remember!* focuses heavily on interviews with some of the formative mixtape producers from the '80s and '90s, often somewhat forgotten figures who have truly formed much of the sound of the golden age of hip hop and beyond. Whether it's DJ Clark Kent talking about how Kid Capri changed the mixtape game or Darryl McCrary explaining how he went from a small-time mixtape seller to owning a store that had Lil' Kim and Erykah Badu coming through, Auerbach and Isenberg's interviews breathe life into this bygone era. After reading even just a couple pages of the book, you can start to see just how closely connected all of these major artists from the era were through mixtapes, and you start to get a feel of the texture of NYC in the '80s and '90s.



Rock 'N' Will's "Hard Pack" photograph, featuring Ron G, Buckwild and others



DJ Clue mixtapes with tracklist cover art

And it's this texture that really ties the mixtape era together, and I think that it's this sort of defining texture that feels lacking today. It's hard to settle on the materiality of a sonic medium in the first place, but without the physical media offering something real, material – well I just don't know how to feel about the music. And sure, you can argue that there is a dominant sound in hip hop, something stemming from both Drake's success and the trap aesthetic out of Atlanta. However, I could just as easily point to artists like the Griselda crew or Billy Wood's Backwoods Studios that defy any overarching feeling about the contemporary.

Nevertheless, as we close out this 50th anniversary of hip hop, looking back on these formational eras and materials of the genre has also offered solace. Yes, we may be in a space of transition and unclarity around hip hop at the moment, but the roots are deep and long. The material is there, and as people return to purchasing physical media, maybe we will see a revival of some of that materiality, and maybe a revival of mixtapes as well. U



FORMS IN LIGHT | **JUSTIN REEVE**

BEST ARCHITECTURE IN GAMES

This time around, even despite my normal aversion to oversimplified rankings with categorical scores, the sheer number of noteworthy architectural accomplishments in videogames throughout 2023 has once again moved me to put together a short, concise and mostly unordered list of the best level design and environmental art of the year. This compilation, adhering as usual to alphabetical order, highlights the top ten standout examples. These each contribute a unique architectural perspective to the medium, showcasing the incredible innovation and technical prowess of this continuously developing field. I believe the significance of these achievements are worth acknowledging, so each entry has been accompanied by a brief explanation of my reasoning, offering a glimpse into the transformative power of digital media during this long year.

Alan Wake 2

Alan Wake 2 ventures into a captivating world where architecture plays a pivotal role in the psychological horror experience. The

story unfolds in the fictional towns of Bright Falls and Watery, with architecture becoming a dark and haunting canvass for the mysterious and eerie events which take place. The highly detailed environments, everything from serene lakeside cabins to abandoned theme parks, heighten the atmospheric tension. The streets and alleys of the two towns are creepy in their own right, creating an interesting contrast with the concrete jungle of the other main setting, New York. In both of these cases, *Alan Wake 2* makes use of architecture as both a backdrop and a mechanic for intensifying the psychological tension of the tale being told, enveloping you in a highly evocative and suspenseful game world.

Assassin's Creed Mirage

Assassin's Creed Mirage is truly a testament to the architectural prowess of its level designers, even within the impressive context of the series. The architectural splendors of Baghdad during the ninth century capture the essence of the period. The game dives into the details of this politically tumult-



tuous time, taking you on a trip through its unfortunately underserved historical setting. The architectural wonders of the Islamic Golden Age become a vital backdrop for such historical intricacies. Similar to previous entries in this long running series, *Assassin's Creed Mirage* skillfully weaves the tales of notable figures into the narrative, blending some storytelling into the meticulously recreated structures. The game invites you to explore the architectural grandeur of a bygone era, seamlessly intertwining history with digital media.

Baldur's Gate 3



Baldur's Gate 3 unfolds a rich tapestry of architectural marvels. The game presents a diverse and immersive world where architectural elements play an important part in the intricate storytelling. The city of Baldur's Gate itself stands as a testament to the intricate design, with its sprawling urban landscapes and detailed structures, ranging from Romanesque to Gothic in terms of style. As you venture through the numerous dungeons, caves and caverns, *Baldur's Gate 3* showcases a wide variety of architecture including ancient ruins and abandoned buildings within sweeping, broken landscapes. These highly dynamic environments contribute to the imposing atmosphere, making the architecture not just a

backdrop but a vital aspect of the visual and narrative experience.

Hogwarts Legacy



I was reluctant to include *Hogwarts Legacy* on this list for what should at this point be fairly obvious reasons, but at least when it comes to the architecture, I can hardly deny the incredible attention to detail. The game creates a spellbinding architectural experience within its well-known world of wizarding. *Hogwarts Legacy* transports you to a meticulously crafted Hogwarts, introducing architectural wonders rooted in magical lore. The iconic castle of Hogwarts itself, reimagined with all sorts of architectural flair, features enchanted classrooms and secret passages. The vast open world design includes diverse magical landscapes from ancient forests to hidden caves, each reflecting a spectacular fantasy aesthetic.

Jusant



Jusant introduces a unique architectural marvel in the form of a tall tower divided into distinct biomes with diverse traversal mechanics and challenges. Traveling to the top of this tower, you unravel the mysteries of a lost civilization, piecing together its untold story. The eerie concrete ruins jut out into the open sky, ending abruptly before a sweeping desert landscape. The interactive elements of the gameplay mechanics are truly impressive, consisting of climbing and

mountaineering techniques including the ability to place pitons, crucial for safety. Strategically placed ropes help with efficient backtracking. The game also incorporates an aquatic player companion which helps you explore by revealing clues and presenting various interactions hidden in the level design. *Jusant* blends architectural intricacy with mechanical innovation, offering dynamic and engaging gameplay within the confines of its enigmatic world.

Lies of P



Lies of P intricately weaves a narrative through its architectural elements, an accomplishment in and of itself, but in this particular case, a true triumph. The game unfolds within a dystopian world where the environment becomes an elegant tool for superb storytelling. The architectural nuances featuring towering structures and desolate buildings mirror the dark and mysterious undertones of the narrative. The oppressive cityscape and clandestine locales build an imposing atmosphere, leveraging architecture to convey the dark and moody essence of the game. This of course creates a compelling synergy between the level design and the unfolding narrative as you embark upon your grim and gloomy journey through the game world.

Like a Dragon: Ishin!



Like a Dragon: Ishin! masterfully integrates historical architecture into its rather atypical narrative, at least for the series. Taking place in the highly dynamic period that was nineteenth century Japan, the game showcases the architectural splendors of the Edo and Meiji periods, ranging from bustling streets to both traditional and not-so-traditional interiors. The attention to detail in the various recreations of well-known landmarks of course adds another layer of depth and complexity to the experience. The architectural diversity including teahouses and feudal residences only further builds the authenticity of this intricately designed game world. The meticulous care taken in reconstructing such period-specific structures becomes a key element in conveying the rich historical tapestry of this particular time and place, dropping you into a visually stunning and culturally resonant gameplay experience.

Resident Evil 4



What can I say about the architecture in the remade *Resident Evil 4*? The game reimagines the iconic survival horror setting, while still managing to remain incredibly true to its grim source material. The remake retains the atmospheric essence of the original, featuring intricate environments like the eerie rural village and the scattered Romanesque, Baroque and Gothic structures. The dynamic lighting and revamped environmental art only serve to intensify the overall experience, the mysterious castle and surrounding area showcasing a fusion of horror and fantasy aesthetics. Through its meticulous level design decisions, *Resident Evil 4* transforms the familiar locations into haunting landscapes where the architecture takes center stage,

becoming a crucial tool for pulling you into the terrifying ambiance of the game.

Spider-Man 2



Spider-Man 2 invites you to explore a dynamic and visually stunning representation of New York. The finely crafted cityscapes boast meticulously detailed buildings, iconic landmarks and of course the famously bustling streets. Swinging between skyscrapers and maneuvering through back alleys, you'll come across all kinds of interesting encounters within this realistic and vibrant architectural environment. The attention to architectural detail in the game extends to the interiors, reflecting the depth and complexity of this notorious concrete jungle. *Spider-Man 2* provides a breathtaking open world environment for you to explore and of course marvel at its intricate design.

The Legend of Zelda: Tears of the Kingdom



The Legend of Zelda: Tears of the Kingdom immerses you into the captivating land of Hyrule, a place where architecture is a narrative cornerstone. The majestic focal point of the entire game, Hyrule Castle, anchors the grandeur of the now collapsed kingdom. The diverse regions from forests

to deserts showcase meticulous architectural details, while Sheikah and Zonai technology introduce futuristic elements. Ruined temples and ancient structures contribute to the overall feeling of historical depth. The integration of verticality enhances the various other gameplay mechanics, as you explore bustling towns below serene shrines, floating aloft. This synthesis of the traditional gameplay elements of the series and the innovative design ensures that architecture becomes a vital storytelling component in this immersive world. 



HERE'S THE THING | **ROB RICH**

HERE'S THE THING: SURVIVING FALLOUT 4

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.

Fallout 4 has a bit of a reputation for being exceptionally mediocre at best, but a new outlook and approach to the 2015 title has turned it into Rob's latest obsession.

You know, it's funny. I was super excited about *Fallout 4* when it first came out back in 2015 (eight years ago already, good lord), and it's fair to say I was even impressed with it when I first started playing on my PS4. The production value (i.e., animations, graphics, presentation, etc.) was so much more than what I was used to from the previous games, and I was thrilled to start exploring post-apocalyptic Massachusetts. Then I got bored and stopped, because it ultimately wasn't all that engaging despite the technological leap. But here's the thing: I recently grabbed the Game of

the Year Edition (with all the DLCs) on PSN for like \$10, started playing on my PS5, and came to the surprising realization that I kind of love this game and can't stop playing - if I play a very specific way.

I couldn't tell you if it happened before I traded in my original physical PS4 copy or after, but at some point, *Fallout 4* got an update that added mod support. Not as robust as the PC version, but still a worthwhile addition for consoles. But more than that, it also got Survival Mode - a more challenging difficulty setting that ups damage output for everyone (you, enemies, etc.), removes the fast travel feature completely, adds the need to eat, drink, rest and only saves when you sleep.

So rather than go my usual Normal Mode route, I decided to find some interesting mods and give Survival a try. Most of the mods I chose were cosmetic (better lighting and weather effects, etc), one was the semi-essential "fix all the bugs" mod that



addresses a lot of the game's Bethesda-isms, one makes Deathclaws extremely tough and my personal favorite allows enemies to live when non-vital limbs are blown off – really useful for literally and figuratively disarming other weapon users.

Don't get me wrong, I love what the mods have added and am excited to see what else I might be able to dig up in the future, but Survival Mode was the real game-changer for me. As frustrating as it's been to lose a lot of progress (and therefore time) when I hadn't slept in a while and didn't see a mine on the floor – or didn't realize that feral ghoul was a Legendary enemy, or got blindsided by a pair of mirelurk hunters, or got one-shotted by a high-level sniper, etc. – the whole experience has also been engaging as hell.

Survival Mode doesn't make *Fallout 4* better, it makes *Fallout 4* a different game. It takes it from a rambling open world shooter RPG with a story that exists to an intense and oppressive struggle to stay alive. Playing in Survival Mode really makes it feel like you're in a post-apocalyptic nuclear wasteland that's extremely unpredictable and dangerous. It probably helps that I didn't play through all that much of it before this attempt, so most of what I've explored has been a complete surprise. Not knowing what's around the next corner or

what's in a given building can be utterly harrowing – in a good way.

I did lose patience with my game a bit when I ran into some Bethesda nonsense at one point, with my companion, Piper, refusing to get on an elevator and thus dooming me to a solo trek through a ghoul-infested basement – and those suckers hit obnoxiously hard and fast. I didn't want to switch to a lower difficulty because that would lock me out of Survival and I just can't go back to playing *Fallout* with no hunger, thirst, etc. But I also couldn't stand the idea of trying to solo that damn basement for a fifth time. So, I dipped back into the mod menu and found one that was perfect. It adjusted the Survival Mode damage numbers so that they were more in-line with Normal, and that's it. So, getting sick, starving, etc. was still possible (as is dying because even on "Normal" some enemies hit like a truck driving a bigger truck that's hauling a bunch of trucks) but I wasn't dying in like two or three hits from one of those fucking ghouls anymore.

Since then, it's only gotten worse. For my ability to play anything other than *Fallout 4* or concentrate on anything else when I'm not playing it, I mean. Minute-to-minute it's been one of the most absorbing games I've played in . . . maybe ever? So many of its systems that seem silly or annoying outside of Survival make so much more sense now,

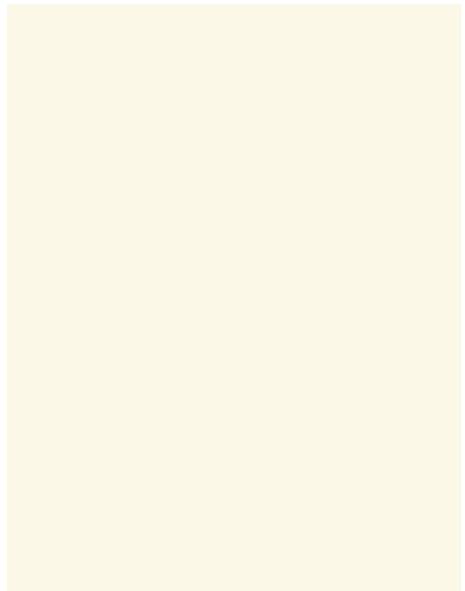


have become way more important and keep giving me more and more things to consider.

Nobody cares about cooking normally, unless it's to sell for more money later or used to craft more useful aid items, but when you have to eat you finally have a reason to think about whether or not you should use some of your precious carrying capacity to pick up some molerat meat. Drinking used to be pointless, but now I get excited when I see a body of water or a drinking fountain – especially if I have some empty bottles on me.

It's even got me engaging with the Settlement system in ways I never expected to care enough to try. They aren't just side-game distractions anymore. Now they're important waypoints I can set up for myself as I travel back and forth across the Commonwealth. Little safe havens for me to rest, grab some food or purified water and get some much-needed sleep. And after I found out you can use settlers to establish supply lines between each settlement to share scrap (for easier building even if all your actual junk supplies are miles away) I started splitting my time more evenly between managing settlements, taking part in quests and simply picking a location to try and pillage for all the junk I can find.

None of this makes *Fallout 4* the best game ever, or even the best game in the series, on an objective level. But it has turned it into a game that I have a very tough time putting down and can't stop thinking about once I do. Oh, sure I could plow ahead and "beat" it by completing the main story and running through the various DLC missions but that's not what *Fallout 4* is for me anymore. It's not a game to beat or a story to see through to the end. It's an escape to a bleak alternate reality where my character's story is just as much about simply living in the world as it is about tracking down a lost child or deciding which faction is worth supporting. Maybe even more so. 





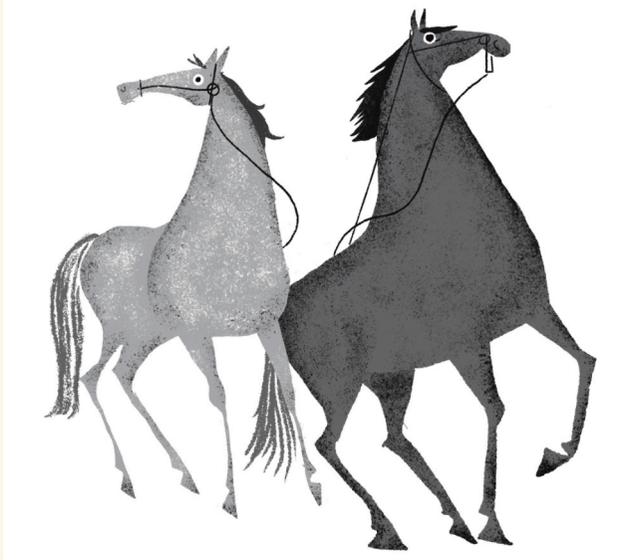
GETTING EXILED WITH MY CHIVALRIC BROMANCE

FEATURING RICHARD RUANE

by Alyssa Wejbe

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.

From initially dabbling in writing and editing for games as a freelancer for the original White Wolf Publishing, to starting [R. Rook Studio](#) in 2019, [Richard Ruane](#) has crafted a number of games, including *Barrow Keep* (nominated for an Indie Game Developer Network Groundbreaker award), the *Ennie*-winning *Moonlight on Roseville Beach* and *Sherwood*. The latter ended up contributing to the development of another game, the tongue-in-cheek [My Chivalric Bromance](#). While its title is a tribute to and parody of the



classic New Jersey emo band My Chemical Romance, the game's roots dig down through medieval history.

“As part of my research for the game *Sherwood*, I'd read a lot of Middle English chivalric romances that are sometimes grouped in the outlaw tradition, sometimes clustered together as 'exile romances,’” Ruane explains. “They [differ] from the better-known Arthurian romances because instead of focusing on knights going on quests or pursuing courtly love, they focus on the experience of living in exile from a homeland (AKA England).”

Ruane wanted to develop an adventure-focused game highlighting this facet of the chivalric romance tradition. In terms of gameplay mechanics, he also wanted a game without stats but remained compatible with classic adventures.

“My friends Markus Linderum and Tony Vasinda had done something similar with *Down We Go* and *Through the Void*, creating adventure-focused games that relied entirely on class and level, but I wanted to experiment with replacing stats entirely with tags,” Ruane shares. “I'd initially put together a d20-based game that counted relevant tags and added them to a die roll, but when I started working with Exalted Funeral to publish the game, I decided to shift to a d6 pool system in the spirit of *LUMEN SRD* and *Blades in the Dark*.”

This originally started coming together for the [OSR June Jam](#) hosted by Monkey's Paw Games in 2022. “So [*My Chivalric Bromance*] was developed entirely for the jam, though several of the systems were things I'd experimented with or pulled from other games I'd written,”



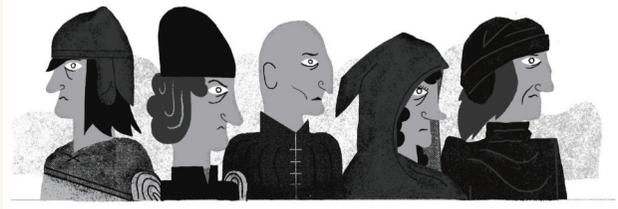
Ruane says. “Because I’d done a lot of the ‘lore’ research for *Sherwood* and was using mechanics that had seen a lot of testing, I was able to work pretty quickly. I briefly experimented with a magic class, but opted to focus instead on just the knight and the squire.”

The knight and squire in exile are central to *My Chivalric Romance*, queer companions united in their wandering but containing multitudes in their thirst levels. “What we call ‘thirst’ – a strong, possibly overwhelming, sense of attraction – is important to a lot of medieval romances, especially those from England in the High Middle Ages,” Ruane shares. “I had the idea for an alignment based on attractions rather than morality, and wanted it to be freewheeling and fun, that left room for all kinds of players and that GMs could easily improvise with.”

In the core rulebook, guidelines for “Thirst Alignment” feature different types of interpersonal dynamics, ranging from sexual to asexual, from romantic to aromantic (and it is, in fact, chill with players possibly making heterosexual, cisgender exiles). The book also states that “Thirst Alignment may expand, narrow, or just clarify as you play the game,” making space for fluidity and change. Ruane added that once he had written that section and ran it for a medievalist specializing in chivalric romances, he read *The Elusive Shift* and realized that some of the early D&D-focused zine writers in the seventies played with similar ideas, like having players randomly generate their character’s sex and sexuality at the start of the game.

Likely as another aspect of relationships, character communication is also highlighted in gameplay, particularly with the mechanic for “Honest Answers.”

“I’m not a fan of dice-rolling for social situations, but I know there are several times players and GMs need help determining what NPCs will say and do next. My friend Ethan Harvey noted that the only social mechanics they really liked in most adventure games were those that helped them determine when an NPC was telling the truth,” Ruane says. “Rather than try to create a ‘Detect Lies’ skill, I tried to pull from the

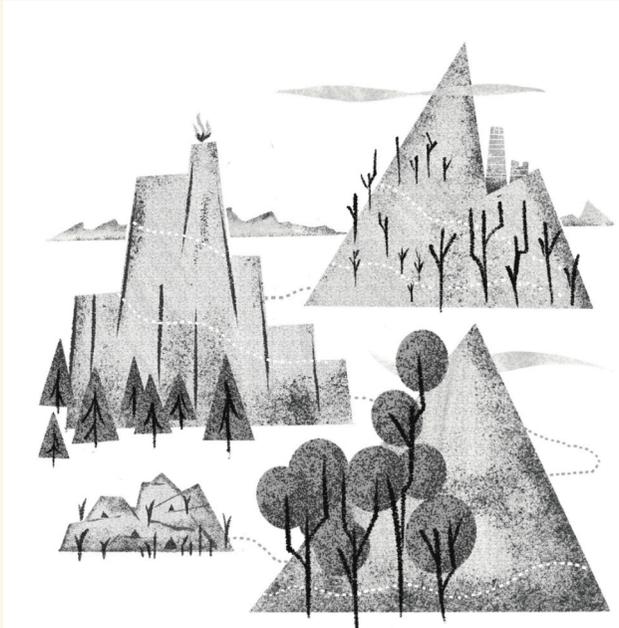


contemporary romance tradition and give PCs a chance to just demand honest answers under specific conditions.”

Some of those conditions include asking someone your character saves after a fight to just speak plainly. It’s an interesting detail merging emotional narrative and game-play. You’ve probably seen it before somewhere in a story on screen or on the page – high emotions after a crisis facilitating more free communication between characters in the heat of the moment. Characters that weren’t ready to truly talk before, only to have peril draw them closer and prove each other dependable as confidants. If you can trust them with your life, you can probably trust them with the truth. Or perhaps there are other circumstances involved, like the new severity of a situation makes obfuscating facts no longer viable. *My Chivalric Bromance* seems like it could be open to that and more, able to spark and reinforce such narrative high points in play.

“The exile romances are the biggest influence,” Ruane says, naming *Gamelyn*, *Fulk FitzWarin*, *Hereward the Wake* and, to a lesser extent, *Eustace the Monk*. Working on *Sherwood* also involved reading several medieval romances about exiles. Ruane explains that these exiles often ended up living as outlaws, as well as associated with more popular outlaw stories like Robin Hood. He lists important resources for that included Lesley Coote’s *Storyworlds of Robin Hood* and Stephen Knight’s *Robin Hood: A Mythic Biography*, texts and commentaries collected online at Robbins Library at the University of Rochester, and translations and commentaries in *Medieval Outlaws: Twelve Tales in Modern English Translation* edited by Thomas Ohlgren and company. *My Chivalric Bromance* even incorporated historical research with the Roe Dragon described in the book’s “Bestiary.”

“Much of the Robin Hood tradition and other medieval exile/outlaw traditions is about forestry and hunting rights, so I’d spent a little time researching common animals that kings and aristocrats often protected under game laws,” Ruane explains. “While the roe deer – a small deer species that rarely gets much larger than 4’ long – are fairly common in Europe, they’re a strange concept to Americans who are used to North American white-tailed deer. D&D-style games

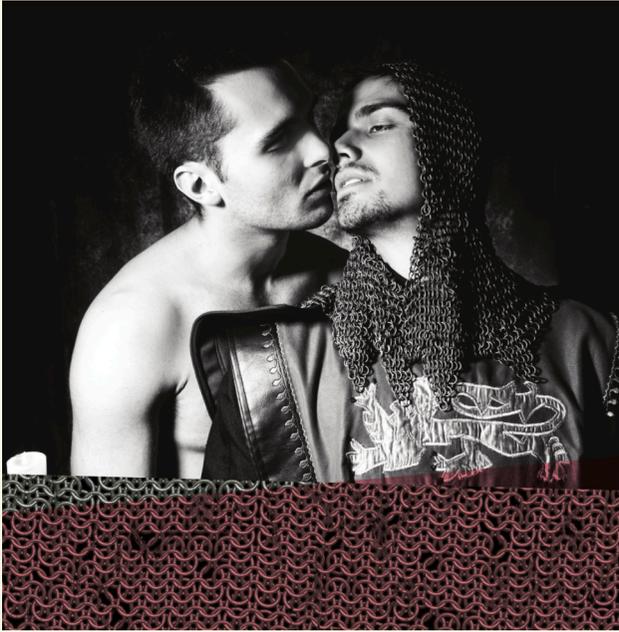


have often contemplated smaller, less majestic species of dragons, so I proposed one of my own.”

Queer romantic fantasy and fantasy romances like T.J. Klune’s *Verania* series and A. H. Lee’s *The Knight and the Necromancer* series were additional literary influences on *My Chivalric Bromance*. “I’d been reading so many contemporary fantasy romances and medieval chivalric romances, so I knew I wanted to call it Chivalric Bromance,” Ruane shares. “But I completely missed the parallel to the band name. I owe that to an incredible Brazilian game designer, Wendi Yu. Once she pointed that out to me, I changed the title and never looked back.”

In the realm of games, Ruane adds that he was most inspired by *City of Mist*, John Harper’s *Blades in the Dark* and Spencer Campbell’s *LUMEN SRD*. He further breaks down his influences, citing that the concept of that Knight as its own class in *My Chivalric Bromance* drew a lot from [Old-School Essentials Advanced Fantasy](#), while rules for the Squire class gathered inspiration from the Brave class in Christian Mehrstam’s *Whitehack*.

“One of my goals was to create a game that would [work] well for my favorite OSR ‘talking dungeons,’ including the great Jennell Jaquays’s *The Caverns of Thracia* and Hydra Cooperative’s *Slumbering Ursine Dunes*,” Ruane says. He even used the first level of *The Caverns of Thracia* to run a game of *My Chivalric Bromance* while showcasing it at PAX Unplugged.

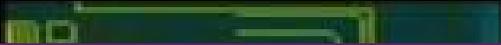
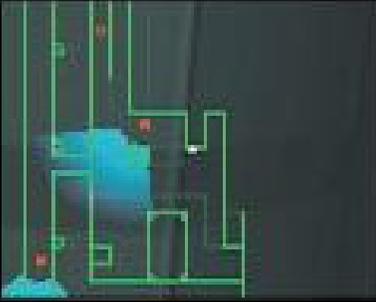


Swapping a more traditional experience point system for a mechanic called “Stories and Secrets” was inspired by another game. “I loved the advancement mechanics for the second edition of *The Black Hack*, requiring PCs to recount their adventures,” Ruane shares. “This was very much my take on that for a slightly more focused adventure game.”

The game’s story starts with knights and squires in exile. But it doesn’t have to stay that way, at least with squires. The book has a system in place where through trial and error, growth and progress, a squire can be knighted. Like the relationships, emotions, and different thirsts *My Chivalric Bromance* seeks to bring to the table in all their mutable layers, the squire can grow through these experiences. Through chivalric bromance, the squire can become a knight.

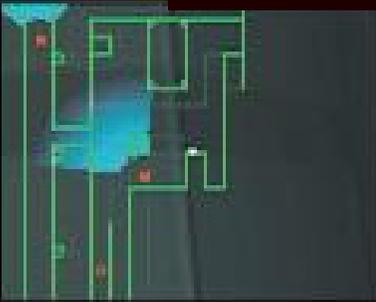
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A DESTRUCTIVE LOVE AFFAIR WITH MINIMAPS

by JON PLACE





The first few minutes of *Metal Gear Solid* on the Sony PlayStation sits in the pantheon of iconic videogame openings. A perfect blend of eerie choral music, the thrill of barely avoiding detection and the cinematic reveal of our hero Snake as he performs a strip tease in a lift. As the player ascends with alarm klaxons blaring, tensions are high and Snake sprints out of the lift, ready to take on some high stakes, tactical espionage action. Then, the forward momentum stops. The Codec call comes in. It's time for some admin.

What comes next isn't the longest Codec call or exposition dump in the history of Hideo Kojima's career, in fact, not even the longest in the game. But after the pulse pounding tension of Snake's underwater infiltration, stopping for a chat with management seems like a misfire. But what follows introduces one gameplay element that, for me, comes to define the following ten hours of gameplay. Staring at minimaps.

"The bright dot in the middle is you Snake." An innocuous sentence uttered by Mei Ling, our resident tech expert, that has remained in the depth of my consciousness alongside *Simpsons* quotes and the lyrics to "Mambo No. 5." Repeated to me so often whilst playing *MGS* on an early demo disc, I realized recently I can recite every quip

seconds before the characters do. In this cinematic Mei Ling introduces the player to the cutting-edge military technology that is the Soliton Radar system. The radar doesn't just render space, but more importantly, highlights guard placements and their fields of vision.

In a game where avoiding detection is one of the most pressing concerns, staying out of view of the roaming enemies is top priority. And so, as you play through *MGS*, your eye naturally shifts to the top corner of the screen and, if you are anything like me, that is where your attention stays. You ignore the carefully constructed arenas; the fancy particle effects and the carefully crafted character models. Instead, everything you need exists within a miniature world inside an already miniature world.

The Soliton Radar is meant to help players succeed; it facilitates the stealth gameplay. Checking the minimap, at least on the lower difficulties, is encouraged. It sits in the player's periphery, allowing you to keep track of the blind spots that come from the semi top-down camera perspective. Kojima wants us to become reliant on technology, and I am almost positive that this early formative moment of my gaming history fundamentally changed my brain chemistry. I am now wholly addicted to staring at minimaps.



It wasn't until I was sitting playing the newest Bethesda megahit *Starfield* that I reconsidered my relationship with the minimap, and how this one element of the UI monopolized my thoughts. Even in firefights on alien worlds or tracking down an informant on a space station, I was glued to the minimap. My eyes fixed on that small corner of the screen. All I knew was that the red blip was to the right. And so, I pointed my gun right and fired, tracking enemies and running in the direction dictated by the orientation of the minimap. Without a single thought to where I was.

When I landed on a new planet I would beeline to the points of interests, never taking in the sights, space-hopping across what could have been arid deserts or lush jungle biomes, it made no difference to me, I just wanted to reach the next blip on the radar and collect those sweet experience points. That's when I stopped and asked myself, am I even having fun anymore? I had lost that sense of adventure and discovery that comes with open world games. I wish I could say that I managed to work through my obsession with minimaps in *Starfield*, but instead I switched it off and moved on. Perhaps one day I will return to it, but when your patterns are pointed out to you, you start to re-assess them. I wasn't playing the game; I was following an arrow.

Minimaps are everywhere, polluting many of the games that I have spent the most time with. As games got bigger, and their worlds got bigger still, the need for a constant map sitting on the screen at all times became more important as a tool for navigation. In some of the biggest titles of the past 40 years of game history, from the *Borderlands* series to *The Witcher 3* to the collectathons of Ubisoft, minimaps point you towards the next point of interest. And like a big dumb idiot I would aim my cursor towards them and press W. Is the joy of discovery and adventure lost when all you do is stare at an infographic? Perhaps. It certainly removes the fear of the unknown. When you know exactly where the enemy is at all times, or the exact location to find the next upgrade, what good is wandering aimlessly? Or carefully edging to a corner to peek for enemies?

Perhaps making the player dependent on the minimap in *Metal Gear Solid* was Kojima's intention all along. To create a reliance on technology. Certainly, the later entries into the *Metal Gear Solid* franchises, *MGS4* in particular, touches upon the horrors of relying too heavily on tech. In *Metal Gear Solid* the minimap made the player dependent on the safety and direction of the Soliton Radar, reliant on this ability to tell you exactly where the enemy is looking at all times, to give you all the information you need at all times. On my first playthrough of



Metal Gear Solid 1 was too reliant on the radar, so much so that when it was ripped away from me after tripping an alarm, or via another moment in the story, I truly knew fear. Frantically search for an escape not knowing whether the next turn would lead to safety or ambush.

This isn't a passionate call to arms to boycott the minimap, but a sincere want for their use to be reconsidered. To fully integrate the HUD into the design of the game, for their existence to have a reason. Mei Ling in *Metal Gear Solid* integrates the radar into the lore of Snake's world, but even with this, the radar takes away from the player's engagement with that setting. *The Witcher 3* and *Far Cry 3* required you to perform an action first before the areas are pinged to the map. These games try to incorporate the minimap into the lore by asking the player to check a noticeboard or climb a radio tower. But after that, what is this map on my hud meant to represent but a distraction? Geralt too has a Soliton Radar of sorts. One that gives him the uncanny ability to know that across that grassy knoll lies the schematics for a new pair of sneakers. The minimap is all function without a connection to the realities of the world that the player exists within, a shortcut to a win that shifts focus from the game itself.

Give me a reason to look at the map as an obvious act, not as an unconscious habit, and just as equally give me a reason to disregard the safety it offers. *Metal Gear Solid 3* did this to some extent, shifting the game to years before the futuristic technology of nanomachines and instant radar imaging. Limiting the use of the sonar based on your ability to scrounge for resources. I had to survive without it, to win the ability to use it. The radar was a conscious choice, asking me to pick when to use my precious supply of battery power. Because of this the minimap became a constant source of tension, a balancing act between the safety it brought and the drain on my resources. It took away instant access to the game and forced me to think, plan and adapt.

The minimap makes it all too easy, and for me the solution was to retrain myself, by finding ways to remove HUDs from my games. Not as a way to increase immersion, but to save me from myself, to re-engage with the present moment and take away the easy comfort that a minimap offers. 🍷



***how we learned to
stop arguing and
enjoy the vibes***

by ALDO GARCÍA





Subversion (*like most things regarding modern politics*) is a disagreement. An objection, seeking to make a contradiction visible – like following a dot to call attention to other various dots and threads until a chain of connections presents itself (*ideas, circumstances, relationships, agendas*) – and a frame is revealed. For a course of action to follow suit, then, strong impressions (*power*) are displayed; to distance oneself from the frame; to implicate us all. To send, in other words, a direct request (*invitation*).

Aesthetics, however (*like most things regarding modern politics*), is an impression; sensations being invoked for a particular effect. When done in excess or without a clear political intention in mind, the opposite is true; the frame and the impression become muddled (*taken advantage of*) – like hyper-fixating on the picture within, to the point of overlaying a new personal (*intended*) outline on top of the original. Perception, more than an instrument for collective action, becomes a compromise; it creates new meaning outside the intended one. It makes any frame, you see, into whatever you (*they*) want it to be.

To the dissident agent, it's a blatant invention, and it denounces it as such; to some within this frame, however, this looks (*feels*) subversive, like the start of a conversation

they've only had with themselves; and now, constrained by its captors, fueled by their "rejection," hungry for a frame that keeps upholding them, one must only ask the question they've always longed to hear:

"What would you do to keep this world however you want it to be?"

- - -

Style (*like modern discourse itself*) is *everything to Killer7*. It is a game that engages with every implication within this "quiet invitation" by employing the aesthetic sensibilities of political polarization to recreate, deconstruct and reveal the frame it seeks to subvert. It's what gives it bite as a work of art, and what makes it indulgent at times to the point of self-obstruction as a work of fiction.

Granted, *all* Suda51 games have this reputation. When it was released in 2005 over the general consensus of "*yes, this looks, in fact, like a videogame*", *Killer7* performed self-indulgence to the world the way only one of his joints still does it: extensively, broadly, equitably when it feels like it, *never* selfishly and *always* passionately. Most can get something out if they know how to get it. It's very much like a Kojima game in that way, only that instead of getting eight-hour reflexively deconstructive fan films and



someone named “Die Hardman” joining in the middle of the deed, Goichi Suda skips the role-playing (*not really*) and goes straight into postmodern gratification and disappointing female characters.

And granted, postmodern gratification is very much accounted for in this game. Especially now, when most of it is unintended, in the ways that the global political landscape reflects back on how its stylistic intentions and effects, ironically, mimic the aesthetic trappings of some of the most superficial, effective discourses in the communities that perpetuate our world’s oldest (*and newest*) systematic oppressions.

“Shit, you’re just a killer after all”

Like every Suda51 game, *Killer7* is a narrative experience first, and one in which coherence isn’t a priority nor something the game’s willing to give for free. Plot and exposition limit themselves to the constraints of the protagonist’s profession and the world’s precarious setting.

You’re an agent of the world government (*U.S. of A.*); seven, to be precise, an “entity/assassin organization known as the Smith Syndicate, aka the ‘killer7,’ managed by its embodied persona and main personality, Garcian Smith, aka ‘The Cleaner,’ and led from the shadows by Harman Smith, aka ‘The Master.’ Your mission – to eliminate every dissenting personality in the

geopolitical scene (*Japan and else*) until the status quo (*world dominance*) is resumed. Your main target – “Heaven Smile,” a terrorist organization with demonic suicide bombers as their agents, prominent for attacking the United Nations headquarters during the signing of the World Security Treatment, destabilizing the world’s newly unified government.

There is also the caveat of the playable character’s perception being, by nature of its condition, disjointed. The killer7, more than an actual organization, is a series of unrelated personalities residing within a single body (*one of them is a luchador*). Some present themselves differently depending on who and where the character observing them is, only to later be revealed they were either lying or actual living deceptions. Information suffers the same condition – names and organizations are mentioned matter-of-factly by remnant psyches of past victims (*one of them is hanging from midair in a bondage suit while using the words “master” and “tight” a lot*) – letters are sent to characters the player won’t meet for a while, describing abilities and backstories from every personality – “allies” point to certain dots and threads without any interest in untangling them because their agendas, like every other character’s, don’t *necessarily* involve the protagonist.

Details are sparse; understanding isn’t needed: cooperation (*needless to say*) is



mandatory. Your “power” is a tool, nothing more, and the ones in charge will keep it that way until you stop being useful or obedient.

In other words, the perfect conditions for succumbing to aesthetic coercion.

“Trying to die in style?”

As convoluted as the narrative is, *Killer7*'s aesthetics are somehow even more impressionistic. Case in point. here's how any given sixty seconds of gameplay are experienced:

Traversal is in third person and on-rails, with “exploration” being specific deviations from the railed path – combat is in first person, with various weapons and rhythms of attack, depending on the personality being controlled and the puzzle that any particular enemy or boss represents – progression is gated through character-specific interactions, item or logic puzzles with clues given through environmental clues – cutscenes punctuate, slow and downright stop progression in the form of secondary characters giving worldbuilding facts or clues for future enemy combats.

Visuals and sounds are, more than anything, a series of impressions as strong as the gameplay loop (*even more so, really*). Non-interactive segments and gameplay are filtered through a cel-shaded art style, enhancing every intense color and gradient on the

frame, while high-contrast lighting creates even greater depth of field into the already striking forced-perspective shots – as menus are juggled, the UX breaks the fourth wall with diegetic TV screens, visible code on the already jarring pause screen, Japanese katakana appearing in reload screens more for texture than thematic resonance – and as levels go by, ambient, techno, rock and jazz alternate without transitions while being punctuated by the demonic laughs, distorted dialogue, gunshots, acoustic guitars and abrasive one-liners.

Killer7 lives and dies within these “vibes.” Every element of its aesthetics is a series of riffs on the narrative's main theme; more than any particular deconstruction, though, the game plays like a reconstruction of different presentations, genres, and modes of gameplay that never blend together entirely. They call attention to themselves. It's text-book postmodern, extremely engaging by virtue of being Brechtian. It has the *flavor* of subversion – bold, uncompromising, confident.

It *demand*s participation whether you understand your part or not. It *wants* to be seen, and as most people who've played it understand too well, it *needs* to be engaged within its own terms to even be grasped as a story. What you feel is, literally, what you get.

But to draw meaning out of it, well, that's pretty much your job. So, ironically, it can



only feel like it's poetic retribution that, much like every work of art that precedes personality over discourse, people mostly use the latter to engage with the first. Frames, *you see*, can be as impressive as anything within them. Sometimes more so.

“All it does is turn”

Art is allowed to be eccentric. It must be. Expression needs a personality to convey the people behind it – their passions, adversities, disagreements (*postmodernism, in that sense, is one giant disagreement*). To employ its means to convey the ends, that's what art does best, and *Killer7* certainly achieves impressions that most games haven't, before or since. Dissertations that expect to transform something, however, cannot, must not, put indulgence or commerce over the awareness it wants to create, nor the mobilization that most follow.

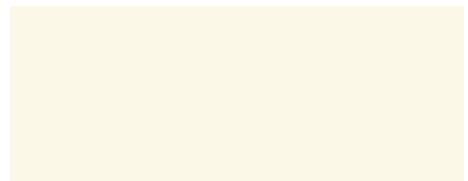
Most critics peeked at this irony quickly. Discourse surrounding *Killer7*, to this day, resembles how some film critics talk about Takashi Miike's work; they praise/denounce the strokes and splashes of unhingedness in detail, mostly without mentioning how the general outline of its deviancy frames a picture of ourselves. Funny enough, *No More Heroes 3*, another Suda51 joint, spends numerous cutscenes talking to itself about Miike's films, mostly to conclude that all of his work is, in fact, *quite cool*.

To follow the threads until a frame is revealed, that's what subversion does best. To disagree with eloquence, one must first engage with the world and what it's saying. But engagement in and of itself isn't power – it only questions it or upholds it for the ones giving the invitations.

Discourse is addictive that way; it *feels* like power. Sometimes it is, when employed correctly. Others, however, it's only used to engage one with an oppressive system, making them feel like they're part of them. That's how power is upheld in the heads of its followers; they mistake engagement with being critical, and before they know it, they start to like the involvement.

There's a word for that – “Kakistocracy.” it refers to a government led by people so vile, inept or corrupt that to detract attention from the structure that keeps them in power, they assemble a web of dotted symbols as obtuse as their own so that the whole when looked from a distance, seems . . . appropriate. Classy, even. A frame worthy of being discussed for as long as it stands. Some still surprise themselves as they find out what they can kill to feel like they're inside it.

(You know, whatever it takes to honor the invitation). 



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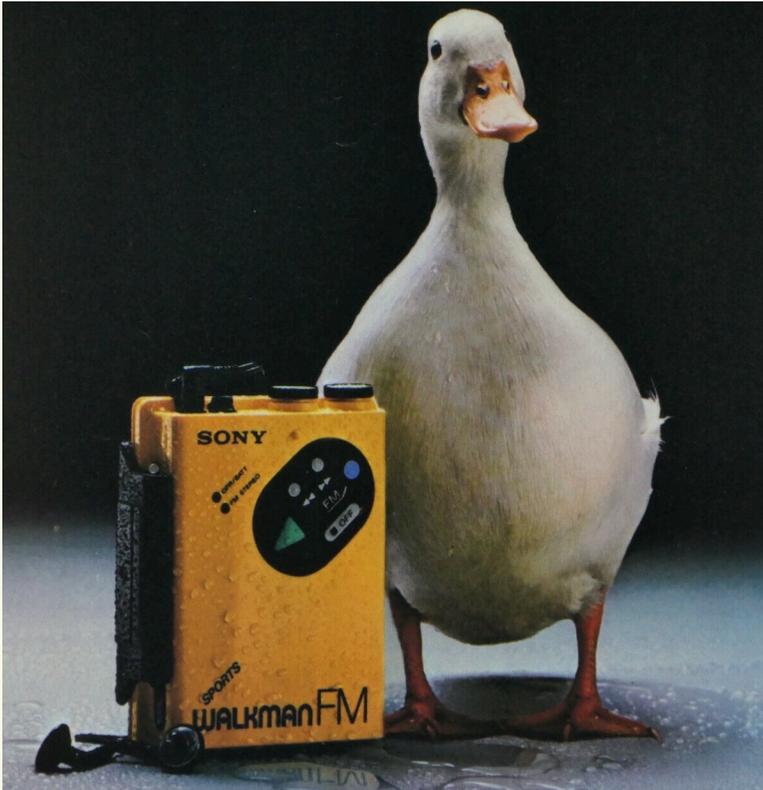
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