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ISSUE

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PLAYING NANCY DREW

welcome to volume eleven, issue one of

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This Machine Kills Fascists

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Dear Reader,

Happy 2024 to all who celebrate!

Welcome to the new year and a not so new us. I'm resolving myself to get through my backlog this year, at least with regards to disc games in cases that are slowly piling up on my entertainment center. How about you? It's been great having a few days away and just letting myself fully enjoy something like *Alan Wake 2* with some distance from everyone else's enjoyment of it. So, if you're like me and there's a *lot* from 2023 (or beyond) you've had marinating the only thing stopping you is to do it!

With that being said, onto features! First up, Alyssa Hatmaker joining us to acknowledge we are, in fact, playing games. Also this month, Amanda Tien on Nancy Drew!

For this month's Funeral Rites, brought to you by Exalted Funeral, Phoenix Simms chats with Isaac Williams, the creator of *Mausritter*.

Checking in for this outing is Oluwatayo Adewole getting salty and feeling the burn. Jay Castello has a few OBJECTIONS! Maddi Chilton gets into mostly *Normal People*, mostly. Deirdre Coyle's goth femmes are numbered. Amanda Hudgins prepares to bid farewell to Self Insert. Phoenix Simms takes a wide look at the industry. Emma Kostopolus puts bullets in a gun. Matt Marrone plays *Skyrim*. Noah Springer went to a museum. Justin Reeve shines a single flashlight on Washington state. Emily Price starts off romantic. Rob Rich will never stop playing with his toys and we love him for it. Levi Rubeck saw a big instrument. Ben Sailer doesn't go hungry.

See you all in a few weeks in Exploits!

David Shimomura

Chicago, Illinois

January 7, 2024



NOISE COMPLAINT | **BEN SAILER**

AGE, ANGST AND PAINT IT BLACK

I used to wonder whether I would one day outgrow punk and hardcore. Back in my college years, pursuing a journalism degree with delusions of changing the world, I'd often heard the cliché that you get more conservative with age. I didn't fear the possibility that my politics might moderate with maturity, but I did fear the possibility of becoming complacent and losing sight of the values that I learned from reading *Punk Planet* and listening to *Against Me!* CDs.

Today, I'm closer to 40 than 30 and it's safe to say those concerns were misplaced. I've been fortunate to have achieved most of the goals I set for myself, I live comfortably with my wife (and soon our first kid) and I'm generally less anxious about my day-to-day circumstances than I was back when. But I can't say I feel better about the world at large; if anything, I might be less optimistic about the future of the planet and society. I don't listen to as much aggressive music as I once did, but sometimes, the cathartic wake-up call of a good hardcore record remains unmatched.

Thank God for Paint It Black. At this point in my life, there might not be a single hardcore punk band capable of hitting harder in my head and my heart. They aren't the first band to fuse social consciousness with buzzsaw riffs and undeniable groove, but they are one of very few who have done so for more than two decades, all while staying relevant to an audience that spans multiple generations. While most of their peers have split up (and some have reunited), they've operated at a slow but steady cadence, passing in and out of the spotlight but never totally fading away. They make their presence felt when the time is right, and when they released their fourth full-length album *Famine* last November, they were neither a moment too soon nor too late.

When Paint It Black releases new music, it's an event, an invitation for listeners worldwide to gather and receive their sermon. Before *Famine's* release date in November 2023, it had been ten years since we'd heard Paint It Black on their 2013 EP *Invisible*, and 15 years since they released their last LP on 2008's *New Lexicon*. However,

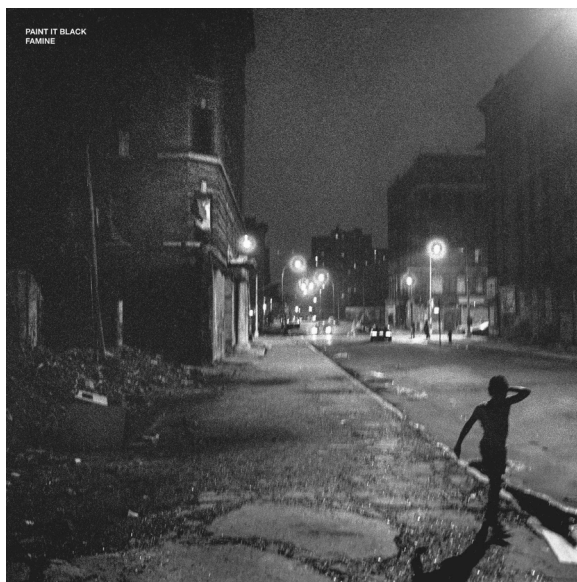
from the opening notes of the title track to the closing feedback of “City of the Dead,” it’s evident they haven’t standing idly by for the past decade. They are as sharp as they’ve ever been, both lyrically and musically, with a record that was built to confront the present moment head on.

There’s nothing complex about Paint It Black’s music on the surface. The band is fronted by vocalist Dan Yemin (of Kid Dynamite and Lifetime fame), whose

voice is carried more by passion and urgency rather than actual singing ability. They’re also instrumentally sparse at times, sometimes leaning on little more than an ominous bassline and vocal barks (“Exploitation Period”) or relentless speed (“Serf City, USA”) to make their point heard. Never do they overstay their welcome; *Famine* fits eight songs in under 20 minutes, all killer and no filler, never a note nor beat out of place.

What makes the band’s sound work – as it does for most bands in this genre – is the way they put all the pieces together. Guitar lines that may sound simple are often intentionally sparse to leave room for the rhythm section to breathe, allowing the drums and bass to drive their heaviness, rather than overemphasizing the blunt force of detuned power chords. *Famine*’s third track “Safe” serves as an excellent case in point of this approach in action, with guitarist Josh Agran weaving jagged lines over bassist Andy Nelson’s rumbling low end until drummer Jared Shavelson picks up the pace a bit past the halfway mark and drives the song home to its anthemic conclusion.

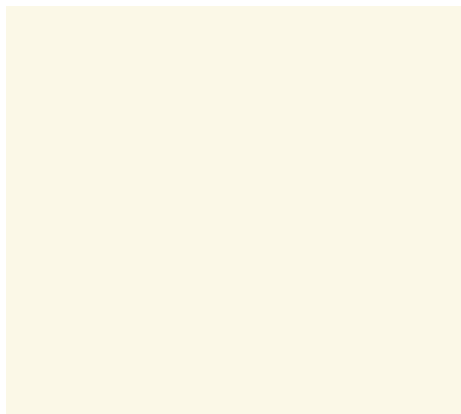
Yemin pens simple lines with the intent of being understood, careful not to bury his message under strained metaphors, while avoiding reductionist sloganeering. There is



nothing complex about lines like “not everyone is free / and that doesn’t feel safe to me,” but nor does there need to be; sometimes simple truths delivered with conviction are all that’s necessary. Not many vocalists are better than Yemin at making the listener feel what he’s feeling through sheer force of will, and

he demonstrates that the value of righteous anger, when directed with purpose, does not need to know an age limit.

Sometimes I think I’ve left hardcore in the past. Then, sometimes, a band like Paint It Black comes along and reminds me that maybe I need this music more now than ever. *Famine* offers both a pressure valve for existential angst and an exhortation to harness that anxiety toward productive ends. This music is aggressive because its subject matter calls for a response that refused to be controlled, and when I turn on the news, I can hardly think of a more fitting soundtrack for whatever hell 2024 will deliver. [U](#)





RUN IT BACK | **OLUWATAYO ADEWOLE**

SEX AND CINEMA

Happy New Year! We'll be back to big jumps and long travels soon, but let's take a moment and reflect on the year gone by. Many threads move through the year, but the one that I want to hone in on is sex. Its regulation dominates legislation, particularly concerning queer people, and it also looms large over discussions of culture. At the same time as a quasi-accepting era which brings us more art focused on marginalized people, a soft Hayes Code re-emerges, allowing for the clean lines of queerness but not the smudges.

As forewarning - this piece will involve discussion, but not description, of sexual violence.

The main focus here is going to be on two films which purport to challenge our particular status quo with stark different results, *Saltburn* and *May December*. The former film follows Oliver Swift (Barry Keoghan) as he spends a summer at Saltburn Manor at the request of Felix (Jacob Elordi) and gets more enmeshed in their lives. The latter follows actor Elizabeth (Natalie Portman) as she

follows Gracie (Julianne Moore) and her husband Joe (Charles Melton), whom Gracie assaulted as a minor and then married after she had his children in prison, in preparation to play the now-free older woman in a film.

The Anglosphere is obsessed with sex but also terrified of it. Celebrities and advertisers sell sex in the abstract, but sex workers face heightened pressure, being pushed into working in more dangerous ways to avoid prosecution. Sexual education exists as a battleground for control over the sexual agency of upcoming generations. This puritanical fixation renders queer bodies as inherent threats. It's what puts drag story time at the center of public debate in a society that refuses to handle the causes and venues of harm that don't make a good tabloid headline.

In cinema, it continues to be the case that sexual content is treated more harshly than violence when it comes to ratings, limiting audiences for pictures with that content. The most popular film franchise of the past



decade is near sexless. The screen's constrained just like the world around it.

Saltburn frames itself as a sort of bulwark against this timidity of contemporary context, a controversial picture that pushes boundaries. And it certainly does do that in some ways, social media is filled with people having stark reactions to the film (in various directions) and critics (myself included) have loud diverse opinions. Also, its sex scenes push further than what is typically expected of contemporary film. However, the way they're shot betrays a prudishness at work. The scenes are all shadow and implication, with the focus tight on the faces. There's little tangibility to it and while these actors are working hard with the material, few have chemistry. It is also true that "Dark Romances" are some of the most popular books of our time and have been semi-mainstream since *Fifty Shades of Grey* exploded – so this is perhaps not as outsider-y as we would be led to believe.

What also reinforces these issues is despite the empty attempts at homoeroticism that heavily rely on Jacob Elordi being conventionally attractive – there is only one gay sex scene on the screen and it's an assault. To understand gay adult sexuality as largely insincere and *solely* connected to violence and domination is just the other side of the coin of an artistic sphere that produces

Heartstopper as the most popular representation of queer culture while outsider work doesn't get proper support and funding. Gayness must exist in soft fantasy space or not at all. Elordi's Felix only remains angelic because he does not sully himself in the muck of tangible gay realities.

By contrast, Haynes and Burch unpack the culture of transgressions that *Saltburn* rattles the cage of. This film is intentionally littered with sexual harms that no-one even blinks at. First of these is when Gracie's ex-husband was a college student who started dating her when she was in high school and no-one on screen even blinks. Gracie perpetuates a string of manipulations towards Joe, and the violence of these is shown by the film through Melton's sharp shifts into childlike body language, but again none of these characters note it. Even Gracie's initial public crucifixion is not interested in the harm done to Joe, but instead the scandal of it all, the tabloid/true-crime drama of the psychology of someone who did such a taboo act, and the melodrama of her giving birth to twins in prison. She becomes a pantomime villain. What's important to note here is that part of what enables the pushing of Joe to the edge of the frame is his specific position as a man of color. Fennell's *Saltburn* ends up embodying the approach Haynes is critiquing with its treatment of the



sexual assault of Farleigh – the one person of color present in the Saltburn manor.

Men of color and the sexual threat attached to them have been a persistent anxiety in societal understandings of sex. There's a clear double bind here where these men are both objects of disgust and objects of desire – but always objects.

In the midst of Swift's rise to power, Farleigh (Archie Madewe) publicly humiliates him to take him down a peg and then in response Swift rapes him. The scene is shot in a way that's meant to be reminiscent of the earlier point where he has consensual sex with India (Millie Kent), one of the scions of the Saltburn estate.

There is potency in exploring the complexities of sex and power along race and class lines on screen. I also want there to be space for explorations of the blurred lines of kink, consent, violence, fantasy and more. Films like Rodrigues' *Will-o'-the-wisp* and Fassbinder's *Querelle* tackle these themes with varying levels of success. The problem is Fennell has no interest in the exploration of the image of rape and racial domination that she invokes, it's just a throwaway to shock and scandalize. While Swift's manipulative but ultimately consensual sexual encounter with India is returned to via cutting glances and spiteful monologuing, the rape of Far-

leigh is pretty much ignored in screenplay, direction and performances. He is just an object through which Fennell can show how "crazy"/dangerous/sexy her white lead is. This is something that feels particularly gross from a director whose last picture was about dealing with the aftershocks of rape.

At face value, it seemed like *May December* might have done the same. Its initial marketing campaign is predominantly focused on Natalie Portman and Julianne Moore not Melton (who plays the CSA survivor). But as we move through the film and unpeel the layers it becomes clear that this is Melton's movie as much as it is Portman and Moore's. Joe is understood as a sexual object by both Gracie and Elizabeth, and the racial dynamic here is key. It's most glaring the one-time Joe and Gracie have a proper argument, with her declaring that he was "the boss" and in charge when she assaulted him (pulling from an interview with Mary Kay Letourneau and Vili Fualaau who serve as loose inspiration for the film). This is what happens to boys of color, they get their childhood stripped away for the use of the white people that surround them. These are also some of the people forgotten in reductive white feminist narratives. However, in Melton's detailed performance increasing time alone in the frame as the film goes on, Haynes is rejecting that objectification and allowing him to be embodied.



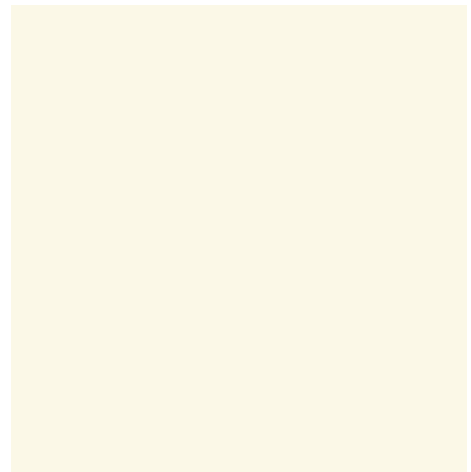
This is a luxury often not afforded to people of color in our contemporary fixation on true crime – especially when it contains a scandalous sexual element. Ryan Murphy's *Dahmer* series certainly couldn't afford the man's victims that courtesy, instead keeping their selfhood and agency fairly limited. The one big exception, Tony Hughes was still a little weakly embodied as his life was understood through pity related to his deafness.

Saltburn is a deeply referential text but never supersedes what it pulls on, especially not regarding discourses around sex, there's less being said about the relationship between class or masculinity and sex here than is said in media like *Brideshead Revisited* or *The Talented Mr. Ripley* that are being ripped from here. Fennell performs endless invocations but lacks the direction which cemented that art in the cultural memory. It would be unfair to ask Fennell to be as skilled as those forebearers (or Haynes) on her second feature, but it is reasonable to expect an aim at something more inspired than what we get.

In *May December*, the relationship to the metatext feels far more intentional. Haynes' film feels directly in conversation with the true crime fascination that continues to produce documentary after documentary and podcast after podcast. Portman's actress Elizabeth follows the steamy tabloid version

of the story, the one full of hormones and overdone impressions, instead of seeing the multifaceted power dynamics at play. She is a character study in the sort of empty and unthinking cruel detachment that telling these stories without meaningful empathy or purpose produces. There's a real deftness with how specifically Burch's screenplay pulls on real-life moments at some points and leans out of them in others that allows the sharp cultural critique.

In the end, I'm glad we have gotten some films that are semi-popular and trying at least a little to break past pallid monotones. But I want artists to make work that breaches the real boundaries, without discarding people of color along the way. The only way to find out is by waiting and seeing so come through 2024! 🍷





PAST PRESENCE | **EMILY PRICE**

ROMANTICIZE YOUR LIFE!

If you look up *#romanticizeyourlife* on TikTok, you might expect to see sunlit vistas, flower fields or someone walking in light rain with their coffee. But what you'd actually find is a series of lists more comprehensive than a given page of the DSM. Rather than a general ethos, these videos systematize the process. For example, one video that was reposted (copied) by several accounts includes:

- “Create a pinterest board”
- “Take neat efficient, but pretty notes (use highlighter colors that match your aesthetic)”
- “Be organized and at least try to get good grades”
- “Take photos every time you see something beautiful, like nature”

All these videos urge you to “romanticize your life”, a trend that is reborn like a hydra head every few months. Entwined with “how to romanticize school” videos, this genre gives very explicit directions for users to have softer, more appealing lives. The phenomenon has a lot in common, in my opin-

ion, with manifesting, since both share the idea that you can influence your material condition through your thoughts alone.

A video that convinces me of this further is the “work from home with me” video, where someone takes 1-3 second aesthetic clips from the beginning of their day. I would draw a direct line between this and the studyblr blogs of the 2010s, of which I was an avid reader. (Save me mildliners...) As others pointed out then and now, these things are all about buying the right combination of things to make you productive/make doing your job more bearable. However, these videos have precious little of anyone actually doing their job. For this reason, I like @depressiondotgov on TikTok, who voices over these videos to point out that all these people own the exact same beige highlighter.

There's some disagreement about what this trend actually constitutes. In another version, the “main character energy” video, the person stands on a train or otherwise crowded place with a tote bag or book or something else that makes them stand out.



Black Lemon

A perfect - if unlikely -
combination of sour and bitter

PRESS ANY BUTTON

These are fine, I guess, and they only require the ability to not care that you're pissing people off by filming on public transportation. This [article from 2022](#) quotes several people who see "romanticize your life" as a form of mindfulness. One example of this is r/benignexistence, where people talk about random parts of their day like [their university president buying them an ice cream cone](#).

However, since this trend started on TikTok, I think it's fair to judge the videos about it as their own thing, and the vast majority of them are all about consumption. The video that made things click was called "Romanticize your life, no matter how mundane." It's a short video where a woman gets ready in a bathroom, showing the first second of her hair care routine, the perfume and clothes she uses, and scenes like buying a bouquet of flowers. "The only thing that matters," the text reads as these clips go by, "is making life as enjoyable as possible."

The irony of having that message next to those images is almost poisonous. Is her life as it's presented here (hair care and flowers) really mundane? If so, these are leisure activities – she can just go and do something else. On the flip side, if these things are the glue that makes real "mundane" life less boring, they are hollow pleasures. I like doing my nails as much as the next person, but it doesn't make me fulfilled or happy –

if I used that as the glue to my life then my life would fall apart.

Obviously, I'm thinking about this too hard, because most of these videos are sponcon. But as these types of videos do, they trickle down to regular people who do the same thing without ad revenue. In her [article about tradwives](#), Gaby Del Valle mentions a woman who became a homesteader without the generational wealth that most modern tradwives have to take advantage of. The less lucky tradwife "asks God 'why don't I have a fifty-acre farm, seven children, forty chickens and five jersey cows yet?'" This parable-esque moment makes the whole phenomenon transparent: to do any social media trend founded on consumption, you have to have money.

Thinking about all of this has made me think about how romanticizing one's life is approached in videogames, the most main character syndrome medium of all. Often, games that show a desirable lifestyle do so through a job. [This recent article](#), "Comfort is a Weapon," points this out: "it's no wonder that so many games that nowadays carry the 'Cozy Game' moniker seem to be more interested in selling people on the fantasy of running a small business in a rural community. Like those facades, they sell people on the idea of a world, where



poverty doesn't exist, without really touching the systems that create it in the first place."

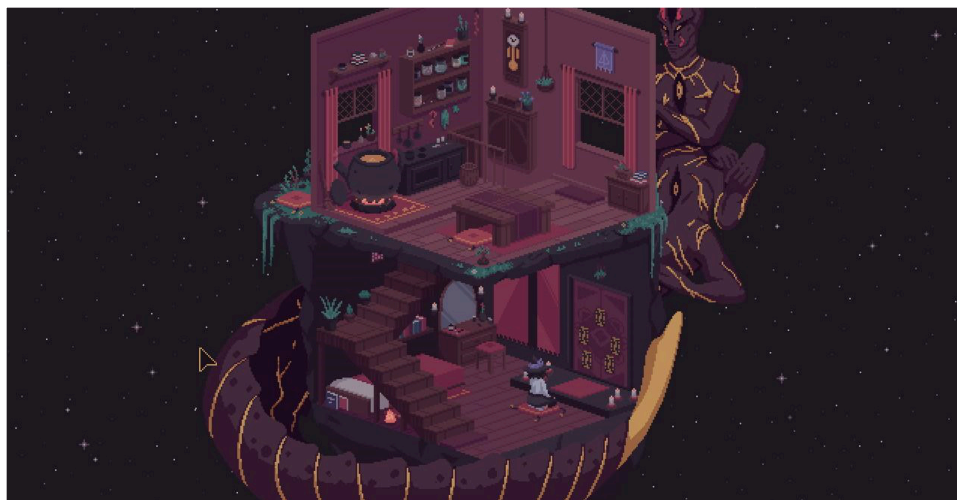
The first example I thought of is *Coffee Talk*, a visual novel where you run a nocturnal coffee shop in a fantasy alternate universe version of Seattle. To get this out of the way, I was a barista for a little bit, and I was not good at it. It was difficult, messy and not aesthetic. While *Coffee Talk* isn't trying to make the main character a Main Character in any sense (you don't even see them while you're playing), the cafe itself is a refuge that has replaced bars in the area. You spend a lot of time staring at different selections of coffee and tea you can make. The other characters have cozy-fied jobs, particularly the journalist who comes to the cafe to write her novel.

Multiple reviews of the sequel have picked up on this, [describing it as "cozy"](#) and even "therapeutic". (A good counterpoint would be *Eliza*, which is also set in Seattle, and is about therapy.) But is *Coffee Talk* romanticizing being a barista? Yes, in a general sense. It makes the point of the job be connecting with people (rather than, say, getting yelled at for making someone's cappuccino wrong). It provides a generous reading of the profession, that it's not only about making coffee but about solving problems. Everyone who comes in has a distinctly different aesthetic that contributes to the cafe's appear-

ance of being a social space meant for everybody. The job itself, helping people via drinks, is fun; the reviews are right, it's cozy. Would I even play it if it wasn't?

Another game about community, *The Cosmic Wheel Sisterhood*, uses a witchy aesthetic that can almost make you forget it's in service of a story. That story is about the care and keeping of friendship and the danger of having the power to shift fate. The game reminded me of another trend that was born last year, the fascination with girlhood. This is a category both vague enough to mean anything and also super strict. It's an existence of literal childlike innocence (a state that's of course unavailable to many actual girls). It's also one pre-lots of personality formation. "In girlhood," [writes](#) Isabelle Cristo, "we're not yet even ourselves."

The Cosmic Wheel Sisterhood is about womanhood. Its characters are old enough to have had many relationships. Unlike the sterility of girlhood, these women are messy. But there's still a sense that Witchhood is for the girls, that it's an aesthetic state in addition to a profession. There's a scene where the main character Fortuna explores a space house that belongs to a supernatural witch mentor, and thinks about how she'd like to take her sister and friend on a vacation there. Every Witch picks a calling and an appearance corresponding to it that repre-




sents their inner self, which beyond being stylish makes their position visually apparent and represents the flexibility of Witch society regarding gender.

But if we view the Witches only as beings who've achieved pure satisfaction with themselves, we miss another underlying theme of the game: the terror of immortal life and infinite possibility. At the beginning of the *Cosmic Wheel Sisterhood*, Fortuna, who has been exiled for her Tarot talents, summons a demon to help her become more powerful. She's living in a beautiful two-story house where pointed stars and dried herbs and soft pillows cover every surface. But being there for 200 years has turned it into a prison. Being a cool, sexy Witch is not enough to distract from the horrors. There's a sense even when things pick up that the aesthetics of things don't matter; the suffering she's undergone simply can't be fixed.

What struck me spending time with these videos was how romanticizing one's life is framed as an imperative. Why wouldn't you? These videos attract plenty of self-identified depressed people who think these videos might help them get out of the hole because the videos present themselves as a how-to guide for being happy. This leads us back to the problem they're created to appear to solve: I only need to *#romanticize* my life if my life has proven unsatisfactory. On the

other hand, I can notice, reflect, and appreciate – all things that aren't directives, nor do they necessarily make me feel better about the conditions I live under. To quote Andrea Gibson's poem "*In the chemo room, I wear mittens made of ice so I don't lose my fingernails. But I took a risk today to write this down*": "Do you know how many beautiful things can be seen in a single second?"

Why should I, we, romanticize? Color coding tabs on my binder won't make me more myself, it will just make me spend money. The flatness of these videos, and their repetitiveness no matter who makes them, only makes the trend more nakedly about detachment from things that actually matter. If games and other art can take anything from them, it's a warning: if the only thing that matters is making life as enjoyable as possible, then personal pleasure always takes precedence over politics, social conditions, and everyone else's well-being. I can't imagine anything less romantic. 



SELF INSERT | **AMANDA HUDGINS**

MARY SUE

Mary Sue is one of the most well-known fanfiction tropes in existence – largely derided, it holds a cultural cache that extends outside of fandom. Greater than omegaverse or coffee shop AU's, it transcends to its own indication of writing. There's a feminist nerd media outlet named for it. The Twilight Saga, and indeed quite a bit of female-fronted media, is accused of demonstrating it. But what (or who) is Mary Sue?

The conceit is simple. A female character who is unusually competent at everything. If the car breaks down, she's the one to fix it. She has a PhD in organic chemistry and could have played concert piano if only she had the time. Impossibly beautiful, but not vain. She has one characteristically charming flaw. She's clumsy. She has glasses. She just loves Jane Austen too much.

Whatever the author's favorite characters – she's either friends or love interests with. The author's least favorite characters are her enemies, but in the way where she will always triumph, will always come out on top.

There's an implicit understanding that the Mary Sue exists as a kind of author self-insert. This is her worst characteristic because a character like the Mary Sue is impossible to develop in an interesting way. In power scaling terms, she's an anime character with no equal. There is no fight that she cannot win, because the author loves her too much. Because she is perfect; the author has taken attributes from themselves (a brunette, a Jane Austen fan, bookish) and added just a bit more. She has violet eyes. She's isolated at school, but only because she's just So Good. So Cool. She's a white girl from Ohio that personally knows all of the members of Stray Kids because of her cover of one of their songs on YouTube, and they love her for how much she knows about Harry Potter.

In the reading of fanfiction as escapism, the Mary Sue makes sense. She is you, a teenager who is stuck in a small town with no friends, with cruel acquaintances who don't love any of the things that you do, who has been told for years that boys bully you because they like you.



Except that the Mary Sue is not bound by reality. She does all the things that you thought you could do if you allowed yourself a second to dream. To breathe. She goes to the coolest college, or learns eight different languages and can speak them all fluently. She's well-traveled. She's smart. She's beautiful. She's loved. She can be a doctor and a lawyer and a mechanic. There is no place where the Mary Sue cannot go because there are no paths that are barred to her by circumstance or fate; any setback is temporary. There is no world where the Mary Sue is not loved. Is not respected. Is not adored. At least, by the people who matter.

It's easy to dismiss the Mary Sue in discussion because she is not real. But in many ways, that is what makes her important to the development of a writer, and a lone teenager stuck in a place that they cannot leave. Escapism as a form of self-love. Because if the Mary Sue is the writer, then there's hope for the writer yet. There's hope that the writer will someday get to do even some of the things that the Mary Sue is able to.

The things that we all wanted to do when we were young.

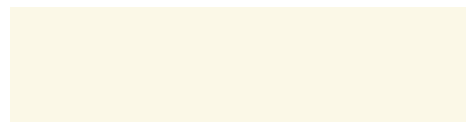
I've been thinking lately about fanfiction, not in the sense of stopping it because I'm "too old." I'm at an age where it's already horrifically uncool that I'm still both writing and

reading fanfiction. I'm prepared for the fanfiction geriatric home that teenagers believe I belong in (I am 33).

Instead, I'm thinking about the place that fanfiction has occupied in my life. I joined the fanfiction community as a teenager, writing alternative endings for *Fahrenheit 451* or *Reign of Fire*. I wrote and read my way through many communities, grew from fanfiction.net through LiveJournal and Tumblr and onto AO3. There's a consistency to fan communities even as they morph and change over time. A place to call your own, especially as a kid who grew up largely isolated. I wrote self-insert Mary Sue characters, though I didn't recognize it at the time, for *Firefly*.

I wanted to be cool and practical and sassy. I wanted to be needed. I was not getting those things in a semi-rural part of Kentucky. I did not get those things being a pasty nerd who played *Age of Mythology* and loved *Dune*. Fanfiction gave me, in a very small way, a community to belong to. Silently and from the sidelines. A community that let me change and grow over time.

This is my last, perhaps, column as Self Insert. It is fitting that it would be a self-insert itself. 🍷





THIS MORTAL COYLE | **DEIRDRE COYLE**

GOth FEMMES OF ELDEN RING

Six months ago, I became Elden Lord, ruler of the Lands Between and wielder of *Elden Ring's* titular bauble. But after emerging from the game's deep reverie, I found myself unable to write about it. Most games explored in this column have one or two characters that feel like friends, obvious foci for my mystical and macabre leanings. *Elden Ring*, however, boasts an overabundance of goth femmes. NPCs and bosses alike make cryptic statements while wearing medieval velvets and harnessing a general air of dread. On which character could I possibly focus without feeling I had betrayed the Gothic Fantasy of another?

So instead of doing that, I'm going to rank *Elden Ring's* goth femmes from "least" to "most" goth, although referring to any of them as "less goth" feels so immediately offensive that I'm already second-guessing and regretting my decisions. But if I can commit to ruling the Lands Between, I can commit to writing a list. Right?

10. Tanith, Volcano Manor Proprietress: This character rules a lava-filled

legacy dungeon, adopts a snake-child and eats the corpse of a demi-god who was also her lover. And somehow, I'm ranking her the *least* goth. You see my problem.

9. The Nox Swordstresses: The Nox Swordstresses wear veils covering their entire faces and can *still* one-shot you. They guard a clerical order known as the Night Maidens, whose sorcery involves a dense, life-sapping mist. The Nox Swordstresses and Night Maidens live underground, "under a false night sky, in eternal anticipation of their liege...their Lord of Night."

8. Demi-Human Queen Gilika: In silhouette, Queen Gilika looks like Mothman with her towering physique and glowing purple eyes. She's a personified shadow with antlers. I didn't want to kill her because she's so cool-looking, but it was self-defense.

7. Twin Maiden Husks: The Twin Maiden Husks are so goth they neither speak nor move.



6. The Finger Reader Crones: Finger Reader Crones are dark-eyed ladies of a certain age who hang out near bridges wearing cloaks and begging to read your fingers (as people in this realm read palms).

5. Sorceress Sellen: Sorceress Sellen, a.k.a. Graven Witch, describes herself as a “reviled, apostate witch” who was exiled from the academy. To be not only a witch but a reviled one is goth indeed.

4. Rennala, Queen of the Full Moon: It took me [42 attempts to defeat Rennala](#), and I didn’t even *want* to. She’s a moon queen who camps out in a library surrounded by legions of little worm-like acolytes. I would have preferred to be friends. Fortunately, defeating her does not kill her. You can continue visiting Rennala in the library every time you want to be reborn.

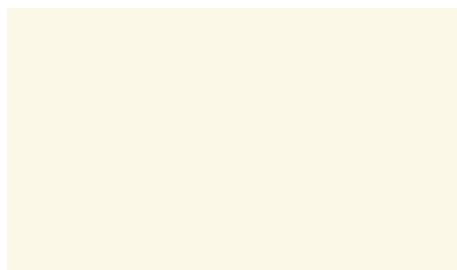
3. Malenia, Goddess of Rot: Born cursed, Malenia is afflicted by and afflicts others with the horrifying disease, Scarlet Rot. In the second phase of her boss fight, she appears mostly naked and surrounded by butterflies as well as the salmon-pink blooms of pestilence. One might argue that a pinkish color palette isn’t goth; I would argue that it is when it kills you.

2. Ranni the Witch: A ghostly spirit inhabiting a human-sized doll’s body (and

wearing a giant witch’s hat), Ranni’s power is symbolized by the Dark Moon. “I stole Death long ago,” she says, “and search now for the dark path. That I might one day upend the whole of it, and rid the world of all that came before.” I completed Ranni’s quest but neglected to touch her summon sign at the game’s conclusion, so never saw her ending. My personal failing is, itself, gothic in its tragedy.

1. Fia, Deathbed Companion: Fia is a black-cloaked woman whose job title is *Deathbed Companion*, making her, inarguably, *Elden Ring’s* most goth femme. “I am the guardian of Those Who Live in Death,” Fia tells you. “They call me a foul and rotten witch. Yet you still wish to be held by me?” Yes, Fia. If I didn’t want to be hugged by foul and rotten witches, by whom would I even want to be embraced?

Final note: some may be disappointed, shocked even, not to find Marika on this list. But she *removed* the Rune of Death from the Elden Ring. No goth would disrespect death like that. 🍷



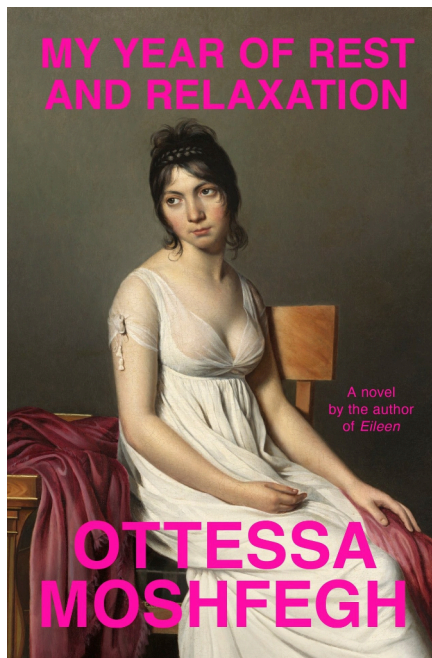


MIND PALACES | MADDI CHILTON

MOSTLY NORMAL PEOPLE

I found myself unsettled by how much I empathized with the narrator of Ottessa Moshfegh's *My Year of Rest and Relaxation*, a bored, lethargic, insular creature of expansive cynicism and casual self-absorption. Moshfegh's a great talent at making her characters both unlikable and relatable, which I feel like I see on the internet often talked about as being impossible: a character is unrelatable because they do things you don't agree with, or would make you feel uncomfortable, or that feel so divorced from reality that you can't imagine a person really doing these things. Her earlier book, *Eileen*, starred a dirty, lazy, judgmental woman whose unpleasant home life only

slightly softened the impact of her coarse worldview; *My Year of Rest and Relaxation* takes that to a concise extreme, as the narrator takes drug after drug in her quest to sleep for a year.



The idea of a woman manipulating a psychiatrist into giving her a nigh-unlimited supply of pills so that she can effectively hibernate is far outside the realm of what most of us encounter in our day to day life, and yet Moshfegh puts so much detail and thought into the mundanities of the narrator's life that it can't help but come off as potentially true: the specifics of her apartment, of her family life, of the laundry list of medicine she ingests in order to keep herself

dozing, of her obsession with Whoopi Goldberg, of her relationships with the Egyptian guys at the corner store, of the dramatic implosion of her latest job, and most of all of Reva, her best friend, who she doesn't particularly like, the truth and reality of whose character cuts like a knife through the story, as the narrator barely hides her annoyance that someone so real could come into her life and bother her like this. The narrator is not a *relatable* character in the way the term is often used, but the extent of her depiction, the total honesty of the nasty, selfish, lazy aspects of her personality and their frank presentation next to her deeply real tragedies and the slow decay of the world around her make her moments of being relatable even more shocking, more unsettling: could I, the reader, a normal person, be like her? Could all of us?

On the other hand, Sally Rooney's characters in *Normal People* are so pedestrian, so day-to-day, that their utter relatability becomes alienating. Reading her book directly after Moshfegh's was a mistake I made entirely on my own – the space Rooney occupies next to Moshfegh on the shelves of “sad girl fiction” or a more vague, marketable concept of millennialcore has more to do with the age of their respective protagonists and their existence in a version of the modern world than of their respective ethos as writers.

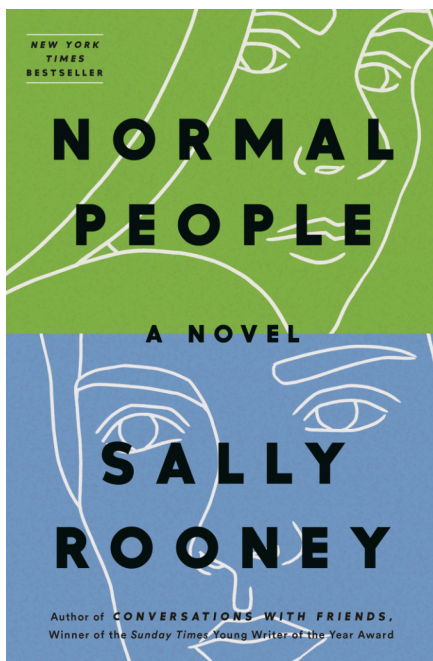
Rooney's characters are young people moving around in the confusing modern world, graduating from high school to college, having unfulfilling relationships and friendships, trying to figure out who they are, what they're doing, what was done to

them. The situationship (if you want to call it that) between Connor and Marianne is something great swathes of people in their early twenties can see themselves in, myself included, and Rooney's interest in exploring a relationship between two people that is genuinely complicated and indefinable is a noble goal. The problem that I found is that it was in fact the extreme mundanity of these characters – their overwhelming resemblance to parts of my own life, to parts of the lives of my friends – that made me lose sympathy for them, that made me feel like the choices they were making and the situations they were finding

themselves in were, in fact, intensely unrelatable. I found Connor's depressive passivity to be sympathetic at times, but Marianne's masochism to be almost absurd; I could see myself in the floundering confusion of their high school years, but when they came to college became almost insulted by their terrible, terrible communication. Every time I closed the book, I saw the cover and thought: are these normal people? Is this how the people I grew up with, that I went to school with, that I see as my

peers, are living their inner lives? It became shallow and repulsive in a way that even the grossest of Moshfegh's characters never reached for me; it was so close to something I understood that its ultimate difference made it incomprehensible.

I think, when it comes down to it, it's Moshfegh's removal from the context of ordinary lives that makes her characters chewy; the same was true of *Eileen*, whose eponymous narrator's self-aggrandizing internal life ended with the almost unremarkable murder of a woman she had only briefly met before.




Eileen wasn't as overtly satirical or as high-concept as *My Year of Rest and Relaxation*, but it still begged a great buy-in from the reader to accept Eileen's situation and perspective without question. In contrast, *Normal People* asks for absolutely nothing: it takes for granted that the reader will meet it where it is, never challenging anything beyond the construct of its increasingly contrived, specific relationships and the lack of any satisfying progress between the two main characters.

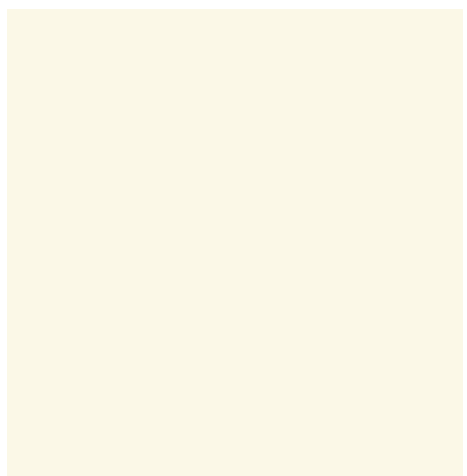
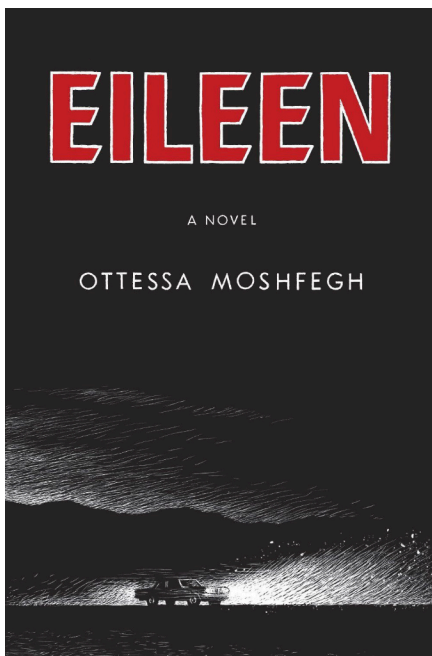
In the past few years of weird and superficial social media-based media criticism, a character's relatability (or, used not synonymously but often close to it, likability) is shorthand for how successful they are within their text. I'm not going to belabor the point that kids these days don't want to engage with anything mildly upsetting; I'm simply acknowledging my own participation in this scheme that I fundamentally don't agree with, as I sit here complaining that a book written by a woman with a life different from my own contained characters that I found irritating, unrealistic, and unsympathetic. But that sense of *assumed* connection between reader and story seems core to Rooney's project, which is why I find it so hard to shake off.

In the article "[Winning the Game You Didn't Even Want to Play](#)," Stephan Marche gives Rooney as a core example of "literature of the Pose," which he positions in opposition to "literature of the Voice." His analysis gives the impression of works intended to be perceptually vulnerable but technically flawless, incapable of being too heavily criticized due to the author's intense control; they give

"the impression of fundamental futility [...] language trying not to be language, with the combed-through feeling of cover letters in which a spelling mistake might mean unemployment." This comes off at odds with their intensely personal, almost memoir-esque content, which would seem at its core to beg sympathy from their human reader. He goes on to cite Moshfegh as well, though I would argue that she borrows from the grammar of this almost-autofiction to explore satire, which to me still feels much more Voice than

Pose – Moshfegh uses the language of the Pose, the precision and mundanity of a particular contemporary, hip style of writing, to lure the reader into an assumed understanding and then pull them into places they'd never voluntarily go. Rooney's Pose, in contrast, asks nothing more by the end of her work than the beginning – the equivalent of the girl who just go to the party and is waiting for someone she knows, and until then is careful about how she stands, how she holds her drink, about the resting expression on her face,

so that in the meantime the others will understand that she belongs in the room. 





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

LOADING THE GUN: SIMULATION AND REALISM IN HORROR MECHANICS

I've always been a massive *Amnesia* fan. From my first time playing *The Dark Descent* alone in my college dorm, I knew Frictional was really on to something. And the newest entry, *Amnesia: The Bunker*, is no exception. In particular, *Bunker* works really effectively to capture the anxiety of doing things in the moment through drawn out manual actions for basic in-game tasks – *Amnesia* has had its classic two-step motion to open a door since the beginning, but I was viscerally reminded of Frictional's tendency to make you work for it when I was trying to load the revolver in *Bunker*. Pulling out the revolver and opening the chamber is one button, and you load each bullet manually, making what is typically a rote millisecond action in other games into a protracted, nerve-shredding thing. So, I'm writing a whole column about it.

Well, okay. Not just about that. But it did get me thinking – we often think horror is about the monsters, or about the environment. But how can we bake horror into the very mechanics of something? How can we create horror at the level of procedure? I think mechanics, like loading the revolver, are an excellent breeding ground for increasing tension and enhancing the horror of any given moment within a game. But why is this so?

To go into my theory, I have to get downright professorial for a moment and explain a teeny little bit of recent philosophical thought, so bear with me. There are two terms I'll be using here, and I'm relying on the work of Jean Baudrillard for my definitions, should you like to look more into this. Fundamentally, I think horror in game mechanics arises from the difference in how we interact with things that are realistic versus things that abso-



lutely are not. Baudrillard believed that this distinction, of things in art that have their roots in reality versus things that do not, was important. He termed things that are attempts to replicate reality “simulation,” while things that are so removed from reality as to no longer accurately reflect lived experience are called “simulacra.” Baudrillard was afraid that most of our modern media, with its hyper-exaggerated features and melodrama, were all simulacrum, and that this eroding our ability to communicate and interface with the world in important ways.

While I’m not going to wade fully into the argument of “simulacrum as damaging to society” I do think that the difference between simulation and simulacra has an impact on how we react to something emotionally, particularly in regards to horror. To break down my argument, I’ll use two examples, one a simulacra and the other a simulation, and show how we can see a difference in our emotive reaction to the game because of the mechanics.


For my first example, let’s look at my Least Favorite Horror Game of all Time: *Resident Evil 4*. I know that coming out publicly as disliking this game is a big risk but hear me out. Whereas in prior *Resident Evil* titles, the player is relatively underpowered, and every encounter

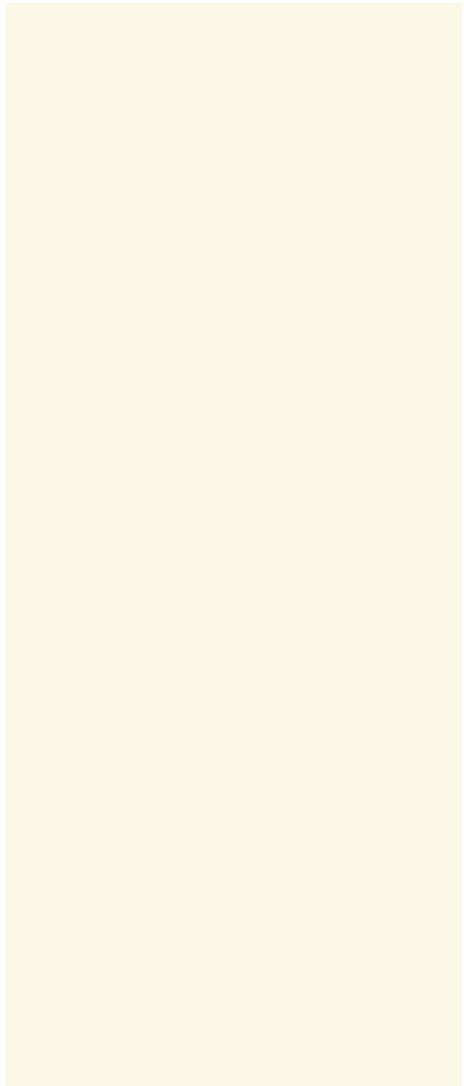
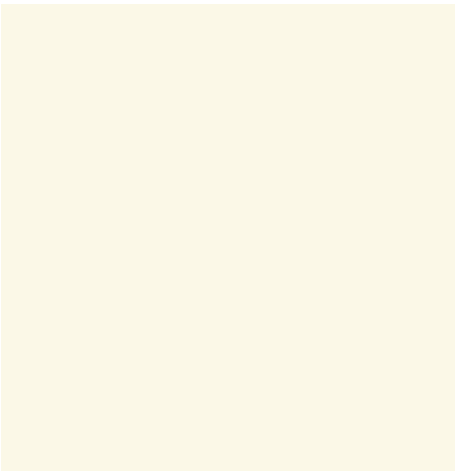
presents distinct risk, in *RE4* Leon is presented as a macho powerhouse, and there isn’t the same level of emphasis on ammo preservation and strategy. Simply put, in *RE4* the player is put in a position where they’re really good at killing things, which (for the vast majority of players) is a position that in no way reflects their lived reality and thus is a simulacra. And because you are so good at killing things, I argue that there is little to no tension or fear during play. The simulacra destroys the tension. For an even more exaggerated example of simulacra, you can think of *Doomguy* – essentially an unkillable God that no one could ever aspire to be.

For our other example, I’ll return to the revolver-loading mechanic in *Amnesia: The Bunker*. This mechanic is hyper-realistic, and effectively places the player in the same situation they would be in if they were truly in a life-or-death situation, fumbling to put in each individual bullet. This clumsy terror is, unless you’re a trained Navy SEAL, pretty reflective of how we all would engage with a scenario in real life where we were forced to defend ourselves. This realism is, I argue, why this franchise is so uniquely terrifying. It strips away many of the niceties (read: we’re once again talking about power fantasies) of gaming and forces you to engage fully with the minutiae needed to exist in the



world of the game, which is incredibly hard and scary when something is actively trying to kill you.

So, my ultimate point here is that it seems like simulations in game mechanics tend to be actively scarier than simulacra. And there is something to be said for the idea that things we know and understand are ultimately scarier than things we know not to be reflective of reality – it's part of why so much horror is inherently allegorical. The scary thing is never really the monster – it's systemic racism, being alone, or the passing of time. Stuff we deal with on a daily basis. And so, with things like mechanics, videogames are able to more closely access the lived aspect of being afraid through simulated realism, and thus terrify us all the more. 





INTERLINKED | **PHOENIX SIMMS**

NOW YOU'RE PLAYING WITH PRIVILEGE

When I sit down to play games lately, I'm aware of the paradox of experiencing an interactive, on-screen representation of agency whilst being idle and at my leisure (whenever I manage to have any). With times being as turbulent as they are in real life, sitting and appreciating a game's artistry feels distinctly useless at times. There's also a sense of guilt from seeking escapism, despite knowing that in order for me to balance my mental and physical health I need to have temporary moments of reprieve. [Keza Macdonald made a keen assertion](#) in recent years about how games are often reduced to objects of paranoia for society, when in fact they can of course be beneficial to our mental health. I believe wholeheartedly as well in playing more when you're down, as per the definition of "sad games" that Johnny Chiodini coined several years ago in his "Low Batteries" video essay series. After all, I cannot offer those in need my endurance if I have none left to operate with. And of course, there's nothing inherently bad about escapism or

nostalgia – it's about how we choose to indulge in either that's key.

What I struggle with most with regard to videogames as an art form recently is that it's a medium that centers agency, yet often only a privileged kind of agency. It's the agency of someone who's almost always in a position of power, although I'm happy to say that there are more games being released that center community narratives now than ever before. And games are slowly becoming more diverse in their representation as well. I've learned a lot from the philosophy of some of these games, especially indie titles like [The Archipelago](#), [Venba](#) or [Solace State](#).

Empowerment can be about more than privilege, of course. It can be about collective action towards an issue that those in authoritative positions of society are exacerbating or ignoring. This dynamic has been made increasingly more apparent in both games theory and narratives about gaming



culture, like Javy Gwaltney's excellent story collection [Into the Doomed World](#). Empowerment can be about using one's silence to amplify the voices of the marginalized, a transfer of privilege if you will. Empowerment can be about teaching people that they deserve to be autonomous and that consent is non-negotiable when it comes to situations that jeopardize your autonomy, bodily or otherwise. Empowerment can be about accepting that death is a part of life, as the rise in death-positive games in recent years posits.

Another facet to the tug-of-war my mind has been the idea that there are many who feel it is an attack for people to discuss the hesitancy to engage with escapism. I get it. Games are still a relatively young and often contested art form. They may have become a lot more a part of our everyday grammar, both figuratively and literally, but they're still something associated strongly with wasting time. But "wasting time" is such a constructed and capitalist notion. Playing games, whether at the AAA, AA or indie level, reminds us powerfully that it's okay to indulge in your inner worlds and that humans can just be.

I know it's rather inevitable for me to turn to this subject, as a game critic and a hobbyist game designer. Anything that flies in the face of the hustle can potentially cause me

guilt. Many people of the Western world like me have been indoctrinated from an early age with bootstrapping philosophy. As Tricia Hersey of The Nap Ministry asserts, rest truly is resistance, especially for the marginalized who have been positioned as lazy or unprincipled despite often needing to work three times as hard to remain stable. If they are even able to, that is. The toxicity of ableism is something that's often ignored in grind culture or even celebrated instead as a worthy trait.

Kara Stone, one of the game developers and scholars I admire the most, once gave a short talk on mental illness and making games for a [GDC 2019 indie panel](#). She is known in recent years for her titles *Ritual of the Moon*, *the earth is a better person than me* (a.k.a. Earth Person), *UnearthU* and is currently working on a solar-powered web server project. The latest is premised on developing low-carbon footprint games whose development cycles and play time is deliberately slowed down to a more organic and therefore unpredictable pace. Her GDC talk, despite already being half a decade old, is no less relevant to those in and adjacent to the games industry. Stone's philosophy regarding overwork or "crunch" in game development is that "productivity isn't worth the debilitation" and the process is worse for those suffering from mental illnesses or disabilities (visible or invisible).



Gracefully dovetailing with this philosophy is her statement regarding the unpredictability of access to her solar-server project, given to Guardian interviewer Lewis Gordon: “[Not everything has to be accessible to everybody at every single moment . . . Full access to every user is such a capitalist mindset.](#)” Her mention of persistent access as capitalistic entitlement strikes me, as I believe this is the underlying sentiment of what drives my guilt when I sit and binge an open-world escapist buffet like *Baldur’s Gate III*. In Stone’s GDC talk she also points out that a lot of games are modeled after capitalist notions of agency and progress. Endless checklists of goals, achievement trophies for said goals, tiered and often prejudiced experiences via difficulty levels, etc. I half remember a social media chat on the platform formerly known as Twitter, in which a game developer said only half-jokingly that the subtext of every narrative-driven game is the story of struggling as part of a game development team. Perhaps that sheer exhaustion bleeds through the narrative design and its attendant mechanics.

Escapism and nostalgia are not inherently ignorant or irresponsible, but I think there’s something to be said about resisting criticism about the rosier elements of games too. When we’ve never been more aware that collective action is necessary

for change, even within the medium we love to engage with, there’s such a railing against labeling games as anything other than revolutionary. But games cannot truly be called such if the people making them are treated the way they are in the development of them.

[No Escape](#) and others have been tracking the devastating layoffs that have been happening throughout the industry and adjacent industries like games journalism have been impacted too. But people don’t want to hear anything about the downside of games development. They also don’t want to be told that their current favorite titles (whether AAA or indie) are made often at the detriment of other people’s health and well-being. This well-researched and insightful piece, however, has drawn ire for simply stating the facts. Our escapist, agency-centric art experiences are often delivered to us at the cost of other people’s agency.

C.Thi Nguyen, a game studies scholar, believes that the strength of games as an art expression is this ability for game designers to offer us alternate forms of agency to submerge ourselves in. Nguyen claims that unlike practical everyday life and its social constructs determining our perspective as looking forward and justifying our goals and our means for reaching them, games invert this state of affairs. We are encouraged in



Keza MacDonald
@kezamacdonald

The chief reason that video games criticism seems to have no memory - why we see the same discourses repeating eternally with no sense of the vital context of what went before - is because games crit is so poorly respected and remunerated that people rarely last longer than 5 yrs



i'm regular gita @xoxogossipgita · Nov 27

Against my better judgement, I wrote about the interview with J. Robert Lennon and Carmen Maria Machado that made me very frustrated. aftermath.site/the-new-games-...

games to look backwards at our process of overcoming obstacles and getting intimate with our means of reaching our goals. “[We] can take up an end for the sake of the means”, Nguyen explains. I agree with this argument, but would add a caveat: only those who are privileged enough to access these alternate forms of agency. Whether that is financial access, physical access or cognitive access, etc. I do not mean to say that all games are experiences of arch privilege. But we are only just starting to scratch the surface of improving the interface of games and the market of games so that more people can experience this unique way of designing and expressing alternate agencies.

A lot of this has been knocking around my head because The Discourse™ is circular, like my ruminations, and the end of the year is often when I need to name things to tame them. Hopefully my venting isn't too selfish or performative in that regard. Feel free to call me out on this, though politely and constructively I should add; don't punch down on my neurodivergent brain, please. I'd like to return briefly to Keza Macdonald once more, as she continues (along with other veterans in games journalism) to drop wisdom this past year.

There's a quote-tweet (Post? Whatever.) of hers that struck me upon reading it. Macdonald commented on Gita Jackson's recent criticism of the interview with J.

Robert Lennon and Carmen Maria Machado about their game criticism anthology that presents itself as the first of its kind, explaining that “The chief reason that video games criticism seems to have no memory - why we see the same discourses repeating eternally with no sense of the vital context of what went before - is because games crit is so poorly respected and remunerated that people rarely last longer than 5 [years].” One only has to look at the current state of layoffs in games journalism/criticism due to AI technology and the gig economy grind to see that this tracks.

We need to analyze how our bodies are performing agency within and outside of the magic circle of a game. As well, as we move forward, we need to be keenly observant of whether we are allowed within that magic circle to immerse ourselves in alternate agencies in the first place. We talk of immersion constantly in games, but what if we applied that principle to our everyday existences? I'm not saying we “lean in” per say, as that's not possible for each and every one of us to do. There are many roads to revolution, as they say (usually they in this instance are trustworthy or at least earnest, “they” signifying those resistant to oppression). Perhaps at least partially because it reveals the lie baked into the constructed social narrative that creates and divides “us” from “them.” 🍷



ROOKIE OF THE YEAR | **MATT MARRONE**

MYSOLDA: RENEWING MY WEDDING VOWS ... WITH AN NPC

A little more than 13 years ago, I wrote right here about being [an Xbox polygamist](#). In it, I had a lot to say about Ysolda, my *Skyrim* wife.

Well, all these years later, I have married Ysolda again.

Yes, that's right. It's a new year. Time for new beginnings. Resolutions. Moving forward. For me, that means replaying a game I once loved because it was available, at a deep discount and with extra features, for the Nintendo Switch. In many ways, my exploits in *Skyrim* remain the greatest achievements of my pathetic little life. You can't go back to, say, high school, but you can most certainly go back to *Skyrim*.

So, where's the new beginning? For one, the Switch is portable, so I can play *Skyrim* on the toilet, if I so choose. Progress! The other new beginning would be that I would approach the game differently. There are so many ways to play that this goal should have

been a piece of cake to achieve. Somehow, though, I ended up as a Nord again. Ok, that's fine. I wanted to use "Einstok" as my name – go Icelandic beer! – and I love the burly, shaved head and beard look.

The big test, I thought, would be when it came time to marry. Not marrying Aela the Huntress was a regret from my original playthrough; when we first locked eyes at Jorrvaskr and she immediately insulted me, I could feel the sparks flying.

And then I went down to the Whiterun market and . . . I saw Ysolda again. All of our great times came rushing back – mainly her giving me gold from her store's profits and calling me "my love" over and over again. As a married man in real life, this unwavering devotion was a total turn-on. In a near daze, and more quickly than I had ever imagined, I found myself in Riften, making preparations for our wedding.



Oh no. I had to do something. I had to throw Ysolda a curveball. So, I adopted a girl. Lucia is a sweet thing, and she sat in the front row at our wedding. She was so excited to have a dad, and even more so a mom, to take her to the market and promise to teach her how to make pies. And one other thing: This time, humble Breezehome wasn't going to be enough for my new family. I went all out and bought Ysolda and Lucia the more expensive Tundra Homestead.

"This house . . . it's perfect!" Ysolda tells me every time I see her. Again, the devotion. Misplaced devotion. Because, let's face it, the house is quite often attacked by Cultists or Zombies or Dragons. For a time, there was a Zombie I'd slain lying face down next to Lucia's bed. Fortunately, he disappeared eventually. But it wasn't a good look.

And so, I continued my questing, coming and going as I pleased, with no questions asked. Ysolda was always happy to see me, excited that her love was back from another great adventure, happy to hand over my share of her profits. It was all too perfect. So, I figured it was time to throw Ysolda another curveball.

One beautiful Skyrim morning, I walked into Riften, strolled over to the Honorhall Orphanage, savagely murdered Grelod the Kind, and adopted a second child, Samuel. Lucia had a brother! Ysolda now had two kids to raise, essentially on her own, plus a business to run! And she was happy as ever.

The fresh air is great for the kids, she'd tell me, and repeat that the house was perfect. It was, clearly, time to move.

I'd bought homes in Riften and Markarth at this point, plus I was the leader of the Companions, a member of the Thieves Guild and a student at both the College of Winterhold and the Bards College, so I was basically able to sleep wherever I wanted, whenever I wanted. But after one particular battle, I'd won a pretty awesome bachelor pad called Hundraheim. If anything, it's more of a vacation home – like a hunting lodge – but I moved the wife and kids out there anyway. And guess what? The house is perfect, I'm told. And the fresh air is doing wonders for the kids.

Now, I'm back to questing across the countryside. I'm looking forward to buying new homes and moving the wife and kids around some more, perhaps. But even if I don't visit them for days, weeks, months – choosing instead to level up and behead enemies with Chrysmere, my current weapon of choice – they'll be just as happy to see me when I get back.

Aela the Warrior? I still have no idea what being married to her would be like. I assume she'd follow me into battle, which you'd have to give her credit for. But would that acerbic attitude go away? I'm not sure I'd want it to. So, again, we're just friends.

Ysolda, it's always been you. 



AREA OF EFFECT | JAY CASTELLO

THE CAL IS @MING FROM INSIDE THE @URTROOM

Courtrooms, especially in the UK, are spaces where ritual is given great weight. Rise for the judge, take an oath, stay quiet and respectful at all times.

They're also spaces of the truly absurd. The robes and wigs worn by barristers and judges are, quite literally, out of another era. Lawyers call one another "my learned friend." Sometimes someone cross examines a parrot.

Sorry, that last one is just *Ace Attorney*. But the games capture the tension between the performative solemnity of the law and the real strangeness beneath it. Of course, they also inflate it for their own wacky hijinks, but in doing so they build up, and then immediately cut through, the traditional assumptions of the courtroom as a hallowed space.

Criminal court, supposedly, is a place where innocence or guilt is determined. Maybe this is the reason for the pomp and circumstance; the system needs to appear authori-

tative. But poke around the edges and the [cracks start to show immediately](#).

This is something that also shows up in every *Ace Attorney* game. From Edgeworth's first conveniently updated autopsy report, the conflict continually comes back to this issue of justice and the systems that purport to uphold it. It is also constantly showing those systems as flawed and able to be manipulated.

Still, through most of the mainline games, the courtroom itself remains a space of justice, at least as far as we see it. By the nature of the game casting the player as a defense attorney, the good guy (almost) always wins. The battle across the benches ends up going Phoenix's (or Apollo's, or Athena's) way. Following the rules and rituals of the judgment chamber ends with a positive outcome.

Perhaps it takes a madcap twist or two; perhaps this disruption is actually crucial. But ultimately, the courtroom itself is still the



space where a not guilty verdict is declared. They even have confetti to celebrate. Even if we can extrapolate that the same isn't going on in other rooms of the same courthouse, we never experience those problems, or those spaces.


But *Great Ace Attorney*, the spinoff series localized in 2021 set in Meiji era Japan and Victorian London, manages to upend the sacred space of the courtroom. They're still presented as this juxtaposition of the authoritative and the absurd, with rules on who can speak when highlighted directly next to a jury system that involves throwing fire around. But they're also shown as spaces where justice fails.

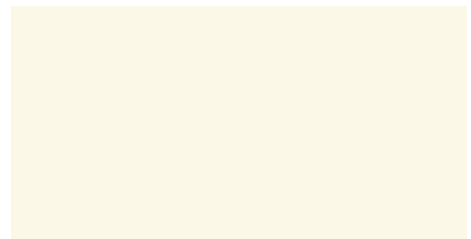
The first and second trials, set in Japan and England respectively, both see the culprit getting away with their crimes. Racism is shown to be pervasive, and directly targets player character Ryunosuke Naruhodo. In the latter trial, evidence is tampered with within the courtroom itself. Any pretense of a space that does its job is wiped away.

Great Ace Attorney takes different swings than its predecessors in many ways. While *Ace Attorney* has always thrown up issues with its particular fictional legal system, and the *Apollo Justice Trilogy* (the 4th to 6th games in the mainline series) continually try to enact reform and then narratively retcon

their own progress, *Great Ace Attorney* grounds its critique in something more historical – and systematic.

Although still fictionalized, *Great Ace Attorney* directly criticizes the power of the British Empire and how it puts pressure on the fledgling legal system of Japan, as well as protecting its citizens from facing punishment for their crimes. Money is shown to undermine the alleged fairness of the courts. Unlike other *Ace Attorney* games' contextless problematizing of their self-created worlds, *Great Ace Attorney* makes real connections.

In doing so, its peeling back of the farce of the courtroom as a space for solemn, ritualistic justice becomes much more powerful. I'm only three chapters (out of ten) into my replay (for analysis podcast [Turnabout Breakdown](#)), but I do remember that it **extremely does not stick the landing** on its approach to empire. But in undermining the performative sanctity of the courtroom itself, *Great Ace Attorney* already makes a more coherent critique than any of its predecessors. 





CASTING DEEP METEO | **LEVI RUBECK**

PAX UNPLUGGED 2023

“Y’all want to check out the world’s second-largest playable pipe organ?”

Why the hell not. For our renewed annual pilgrimage down to sunny Philadelphia, we opted to fly down instead of drive, so I would sadly not get the chance to stop by Stu’s clubhouse somewhere in the swamps of New Jersey, but we had a bit more time to take in the delights of the City of Brotherly Love. With a pilot program for regular street sweeping in wide deployment, the crooked concrete spiraling out from the convention center and beyond looked more inviting than ever. We got our breakfast tacos, wandered downtown, scooped some cloudy donuts, grabbed my badge and then Sam suggested that since we were close to the Macy’s we might as well pop in to see what the pipe organ has to offer.

Stumbling in, everything appeared as it should for a movie-set Macy’s – waves of decoration, a full house of discount percentages, columns, marble, stuff to buy. It’s a huge store, famously so, and it took a minute to get the center anchored by a

statue of a big-ass brass eagle and upon looking up several stories of pipe organ. I didn’t know what to expect, despite being familiar with pipe organs and impressively large stores as well as Sam’s previous qualifier for this particular musical instrument. And yet there it gaped, this vibrating maw, sheathed in shifting LEDs and surrounded by the devoted elderly and a handful of nerds.

Every fifteen minutes or so the world’s second-largest playable pipe organ located in this Philadelphia Macy’s store strikes up a jaunty holiday tune, leaving those inside feeling like they were stuffed in an angel’s trumpet. It didn’t play long for us, maybe a minute or two, and I’m not sure if this is because of the air or energy required or simply to spare our primitive fleshy brains, but I was left with a pleasant holiday vibration straight through my last cell. As Shoresy says in season 2, it set the tone. (Ed. Note, the Wanamaker Organ at the Macy’s City Center is the *largest* playable organ in the world. In fact, it’s the largest instrument in the world made entirely by humans. However, the Boardwalk Hall Auditorium Organ

has more pipes but has not been fully functional since 1944.)

Stardriven



Rock Manor is stocked with road warriors, with a spread of games in a variety of vibes, not the least of which is one of the few card games about lawyering that brought in that *Netrunner* energy I crave. For PAX Unplugged 2023, they were demoing a pre-Kickstarter version of their upcoming galaxy-exploration game *Stardriven*. It's a three-to-four player game about staffing up your star ship and getting shit done, with a whole host of intergalactic peoples including Space Bears and more. The point is to get that solid gold rep, shunting scoundrels and pirates while getting the right crew and other conditions to complete missions. I didn't get to playtest for very long but even my short time gave a sense of the churn, the turnaround, the zipping about and rolling and placement of dice in order to edge out the other players.

The game is kept on time by a certain number of missions and turns, limiting a session to about an hour as it spreads through a few different mechanical systems teetering towards too much but stepping back before crossing the line. Ultimately a cute and middle-complex game to step into after the gang tires of the initial Euro offerings and whatnot. Rock Manor says they've been working on this game for a few years now and the

upcoming Kickstarter is more of a formality, as is the longstanding trend. In the end, this is a long-term project for them – an interstellar IP with at least two other games in the works to flesh out the planets, solar sailors and cosmic stories for years to come.

Varia



The PR email on this one almost caught me but the number of *tete-a-tete* games haunting my shelves was so worrisome that I passed. But then I wandered by the booth and saw their new set was samurai versus ninja and I'm damned if I'm not an easy target in some ways.

The employee in charge of the spiel performed it with great gusto and gave the gist as follows: *Dark Souls* on cardboard, but like, the boss rush mode. Each player has their own deck, pre-constructed or with some rules for mixing it up, built around a single fighter, and they're dueling. Each round goes through moment by moment, with the attacker setting the pace and the defender responding in kind to either out-shield the damage or maneuver past it. This establishment of the timeline does a good job of breaking down the choreography of the fight while still maintaining the visceral feeling of exchanging blows, whether it's landing that big swing or slipping past with a pulled-down eyelid.

Varia is ultimately a finely tuned execution of this type of battling card game, while throwing in some d4s and d6s to paddle fate about and prevent any solved lockouts. The developers also insist on a wide range of balance

as part of their focus when releasing new fighters in their seasons, though I personally believe balance is more a matter of faith than science. Regardless, samurai fighting ninja remains cool as hell, and this one does the eternal skirmish justice.

Scram

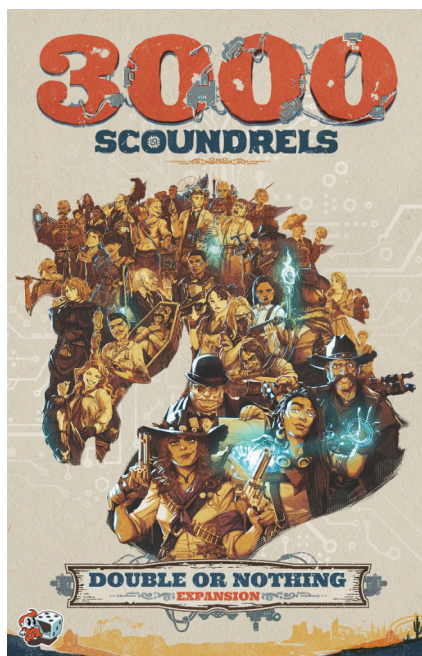


When your senses are blasted by so many games, booths, options, it helps to establish some priorities for browsing. One of ours is “games to make the holidays more interesting,” and usually this category requires some animal-based aesthetics. PAX Unplugged offers this in abundance, this year being no exception, and in our exploration, we came across *Scram*.

This is an adorable “fuck you” card game about shooing critters off your campsite, sometimes by making them the other player’s problem. Everyone is working through a hand that is partly face up and face down, and the face down cards stay that way unless instructed otherwise, so everyone needs to stretch the memory neurons a bit. Each card is an animal, numbered by potential disruption, with bears and skunks high on the list but chipmunks and otters much lower.

Best of all it teaches fast, plays faster and offers many opportunities to reverse some misfortune someone else’s way while you’re whittling down your own collection of adorable pests.

3000 Scoundrels



Before PAX Unplugged properly opened the gates, we hit up a couple of Philly’s finest board game communal spaces. The first was Philly Game Shop, a store with a ton of tables that’s happy to have you there to play, and we put some time in with *Betrayal at House on the Hill*. It was a delightful and comfy spot, but they didn’t serve drinks, so we moved on over to Queen & Rook.

This vegetarian cafe/bar has a truly overwhelming lending library, so we asked the staff for any new game recs, and they said that *3000 Scoundrels* was as fresh as it gets and has had people talking. This is a Western-themed (with some sci-fi garnish) bluffing game with some engine-building elements based around the titular number of possible “scoundrels” each player can hire to figure out which safes to steal. Each turn, the players draw some cards that determine which actions they can do. But this is somewhat limited, and may not allow each player to do what they want to do, so they play these cards face down in a slot. They do what they wanted, and then can have their perceived bluffs called by other players, which can be a bit of a nuisance.

From the shot we were into this one, mostly a group-solo affair as there isn't a whole lot of direct interaction unless one of the randomized scoundrels allows it, so players are left to their own schemes when they aren't accusing the other players of shenanigans. We were having a real rootin' tootin' time, and Nick declared that this game ruled and he had to get it. But as we cruised into the back half his mood soured, and despite not even being the person in last place he felt so abused and belabored that the game was officially dead to him. And then we hustled out because trivia was starting.

Coyote & Crow



We woke up so damn early to try and get a session of this d12-based role playing game in at PAX with an experienced referee, but as per usual with this type of endeavor, our luck did not hold. Still, the art is incredible, and the team behind the game involved three dozen indigenous writers, and I'm holding out hope to get some time with it soon. I mention it here because it looks so rad and there's a whole publishing ecosystem behind it, and maybe you'll pick it up and want to run a game for me. Also, d12s are the best dice and I don't get to roll them enough.

Unmatched Adventures: Tales to Amaze



The Vintage RPG Discord server had me hyped on this co-op expansion of the long-running popular tactics skirmish game *Unmatched*, the premise being that any character from any box can fairly fight any other. Again, balance is a matter of faith, but it is mechanically possible to square any two up. Up to this point it was strictly a player-vs-player affair, but *Tales to Amaze* brings in some of that *Horried* energy to press some friends together in a band of heroes to fight either the Mothman or some Alien Invaders and their gaggle of cryptid minions.

The demo presenter said this set was tough and they weren't lying. *Unmatched* already does not allow much room for error, with few if any options for regaining lost health for most characters, but the villains and their henchmen are not held under that same strict rubric. So, it's best to communicate and focus your attention, and some knowledge of how the minions work goes a long way in mitigating their card-eating abilities. You run around to divide and ambush these threats, with the randomness of draw doing that old work of calling your shots. The maps and the miniatures and the bits all shine though, and I hope to bring in my *Buffy* and *Jurassic Park* boxes to complicate the fiction, but mostly I'm glad to have a way to play *Unmatched* that creates a common enemy rather than increased household competition.



Mega Man Adventures

Caught some time with my bro Protoman as the expo hall was literally closing down. Three friends and me, a stranger to them, bumbled through our respective stages, sharing the dice we rolled and the cards we drew to survive as many stages as possible. Mega Man has a shrine in my heart forever, but the various board game incarnations never really sing for me, and this one didn't change the track, unfortunately. Running and jumping and shooting were all abstracted into dice rolls, lovingly and with great attention to the legacy, but it just didn't feel the same. It's a co-op puzzle solver, where the Blue Bomber is about moving fast and taking wild leaps. Maybe the next one will satisfy, like a cold E-tank. 🍷



NOAH'S BEAT BOX | NOAH SPRINGER

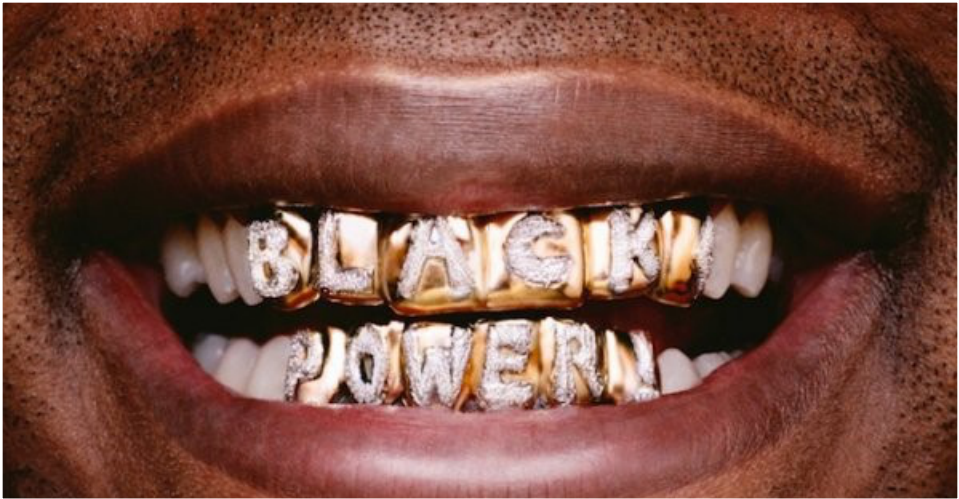
MUSEUM PIECE

With the entrance of 2024 upon us, the 50th anniversary of hip hop is officially over. But, before I let go of this momentous point in culture, I was able to go see an awesome exhibit at the St. Louis Art Museum (SLAM) called “The Culture: Hip Hop & Contemporary Art in the 21st Century” during its final two days of exhibition. Like the book on mixtapes I talked about last month, it was a really exciting opportunity to be reminded of the material manifestations in hip hop across the last five decades.

The exhibit was curated in a more interesting method than chronological though. As you entered, you were greeted with the famous photograph of “A Great Day in Hip Hop.” Referencing Art Kane’s photo, “A Great Day in Harlem,” XXL gathered rappers, graffiti artists, DJs and dancers from all over the city to show the depth of the culture after 18 years of effort. Now, reflecting back on those formational years, this photograph introduced the 50th anniversary with style and substance unique to hip hop.

Notably, this photograph was juxtaposed by two Jean-Michel Basquiat pieces, just to its right. Opening the exhibit with Basquiat makes total sense. The young street artist has been influential in the development of hip hop culture since the ‘70s. However, I have to applaud the curators as I feel like they made the right move with punting on Basquiat. I do feel like most museum patrons would expect a lot of Basquiat in a hip hop exhibit: he is perhaps the most well-known figure in the genre from the “high” art lens. But by including a couple of his works, almost as an aside, the curators seemed to say, yes Basquiat is important, and he offers a whole world to explore, but there’s also a whole other world to explore within hip hop and art outside of his work.

The exhibit proved just that by focusing on six different themes: language, brand, adornment, tribute, ascension and pose. In addition to standard art museum features, like paintings and multimedia works, the exhibit featured less traditional forms of “high” culture, including designer bags, classic wigs and gold chains and grills. You were



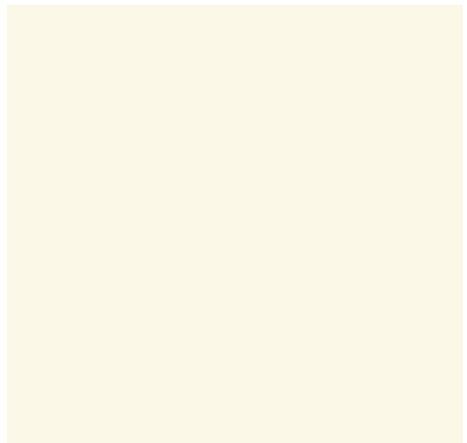
even able to scan QR codes and listen to an accompanying song to many of the pieces. I doubt I'll ever hear "Crank That" by Soulja Boy in a museum again. It was also strikingly contemporary and featured many pieces from the 21st century, including this awesome painting of a samurai riding across a graffiti tagged landscape by Gajin Fujita. They also featured some of the global aspects of hip hop, including a photograph of a Mongolian horse rider who has east coast and west coast tattoos on each arm.



found in hip hop. We are, after all, a country of gun loving patriarchs it seems.

By the end of the exhibit, the "high art" of Basquiat, while clearly still influential for hip hop, was at the back of my mind. Instead, I was elated by being surrounded by one of the defining American cultures for half a century. This showed that hip hop is more than just a genre, more than just a musical style – hip hop is Culture, American culture, and it is magnificent! 🇺

All around, the exhibit felt holistic, ably holding space for the positives of the culture. It did seem to miss a chance for some critique though, rarely delving into the poor treatment of women or its glorification of violence in the culture. However, given that this was meant to be a celebration of 50 years, maybe that additional critical stance wasn't required here. In fact, maybe by leaving those criticisms to the side the exhibit was showing how those are just part of American culture at large, and not a specific mode only





FORMS IN LIGHT | **JUSTIN REEVE**

PACIFIC PAETTES

The notoriously foreboding Pacific Northwest is filled with lush landscapes, towering evergreen forests and a vibrant cultural tapestry, a combination which is largely responsible for producing a rather captivating array of architectural styles. From the historic charm of Victorian homes to the sleek lines of Modernist architecture, the buildings of the Pacific Northwest reflect the dynamic interplay between nature and culture. I'd like to briefly explore this relatively underappreciated region, taking a look at the various types of architecture which have shaped the identity of this part of the planet, most notably given the recent release of *Alan Wake 2*, a game which takes place in the fictional town of Bright Falls, Washington. You can see some of the influences right in the level design.

The streets of cities and towns throughout the Pacific Northwest have been permanently marked by the timeless elegance of the Victorian and Craftsman styles. These architectural movements were all about the intricate detailing, especially in the woodwork. With gabled roofs, ornate trimmings

and vibrant colors, Victorian homes exude a strong sense of romanticism, echoing the aspirations of this ambitious period. Craftsman homes on the other hand emphasize functionality and simplicity, aiming for a harmonious integration with nature. Typical of the style are exposed beams, overhanging eaves and ornamental fittings. Spanning the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, both of these architectural movements contribute to the local charm and historic depth of the region. Seattle and Portland in particular have some beautifully preserved examples.

The later twentieth century experienced a wave of stylistic innovation driven by Modernism, thought leaders like Frank Lloyd Wright and Richard Neutra inspiring architects around the world to embrace clean lines, open spaces and a seamless integration between indoor and outdoor living. As can be seen in the sleek structures of steel, glass and plastic, Modernist homes in the Pacific Northwest frequently feature large windows framing the natural features of the surrounding landscape. The minimalism of



this architectural movement stands in opposition to the ornate styles of previous generations, appealing to the spirit of a region that was by this point in time no longer a distant frontier.

Northwest Regionalism emerged around the middle of the twentieth century. The movement was aimed at capturing the unique environmental conditions of the Pacific Northwest, architects including Pietro Belluschi and John Yeon attempting to create an architectural identity in seamless integration with the coastal climate. The style emphasizes the use of local materials like cedar and stone, often incorporating bay windows to maximize natural light, something which is almost always at a premium in the region. The various designs focused on blending into the landscape, resulting in buildings that appear almost organically rooted into their surroundings. Northwest Regionalism remains associated with an ongoing commitment to sustainability and environmentalism, both of which


are becoming deeply ingrained into the culture of the Pacific Northwest. In recent years, architects in the region have been focusing on sustainable building and operational practices. As this part of the world grapples with environmental concerns and a growing population, the aim has been to find innovative design features that address the challenges posed by climate change. Green roofs, energy efficient materials and passive design strategies will soon be the norm as opposed to the exception, as development projects go forward.

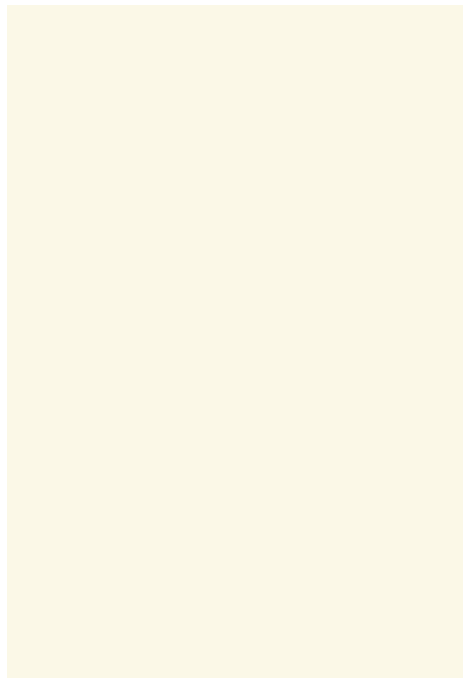
While the makeup of urban centers throughout the Pacific Northwest continue to evolve, the skylines of cities like Portland, Seattle and Vancouver have become increasingly dotted with residential towers and office buildings, reflecting a vertical shift in contemporary architecture. The challenge of limited space has inspired architects to think creatively, resulting in innovative designs following the recently defined best practices in terms of sustainable features. Adaptive reuse



has become a trend as well, industrial buildings being repurposed into apartments, retail spaces or studios. This approach not only preserves the character of the past but also contributes to the cultural development of these growing cities, notably Seattle. This commitment to architectural preservation will hopefully continue, repurposing rather than removing such historical structures.

The architectural landscape of the Pacific Northwest is a tapestry woven from the various threads of local history, culture and the profound connection to the natural environment which remains characteristic of the region as a place. From the timeless elegance of Victorian homes to the sustainable designs of the contemporary era, each architectural style contributes to the ever-changing identity. As the Pacific Northwest continues to evolve, architects will undoubtedly draw inspiration from the past while finding ways to break new ground, reflecting the dynamic spirit of this captivating corner of the world. Games along the lines of *Alan*

Wake 2 provide a glimpse into this peculiar place, allowing you to experience the multi-faceted architectural identity of a region largely untouched by modern media. 





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

GROWING PAINS

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.

Buckle up folks, because this is another one about toys.

One of my proudest accomplishments when it comes to my transforming toy collection comes from my unwillingness to set what my collection is or what I want it to be in stone from the very beginning. I get wanting to have an entire *Transformers* season cast represented in one place with a somewhat cohesive aesthetic and generally accurate scale. I understand why someone may feel the need to collect all of the versions of a specific mold or get ahold of every single toy for a specific character that has ever been released. But my approach has always been more fluid and flexible than that - with foci and interests changing and refining on . . . well not exactly a whim, but things in my head often change quickly and with little notice. Here's the thing, though: As freeing as it is to not limit

myself to one particular angle at any given time, it does sometimes make transitional periods a fucking nightmare.

It was simple when I first got back into this whole thing. Sometimes it was because of the nostalgia from owning the same figure when I was younger or having an attachment to the character, and sometimes I just thought it looked neat. I had a couple of empty shelves on a bookcase behind my desk so plenty of room to experiment. And then I did more digging into the things I'd missed over the years, and new stuff wouldn't stop coming out (still hasn't). Suddenly those couple of shelves weren't enough. Eventually the entire bookcase wasn't enough, either.

Expansion was possible for a while thanks to some reorganizing, furniture replacement and an extremely patient and understanding spouse, but the collection hasn't had any physical room to grow for a couple of years at this point. Which isn't a huge problem as I've long since gotten used to the idea of the gigantic mass of plastic being semi-transient



(i.e. I regularly sell things I've lost enthusiasm for to make more room . . . and money), but the occasional paradigm shift does cause some friction.

My most recent headache comes from finding out about more Korean toy lines that exist or have expanded, with a whole lot more tempting figures floating around out there. This is a problem because these kinds of toys are not small. In fact, the smallest one I currently own is larger than most regular Transformers toys that don't dip into the collector-oriented "Commander" or "Titan" price points. Everything was fine when I thought I was content with the Korean side of the collection staying as-is but now I have to account for at least a little bit of additional growth on a bookshelf that's currently being shared with several miscellaneous (and large) non-Transformers toys.

I can't simply move those miscellaneous figures, either, because my collection is displayed in a particular order: Transformers starting from the left (with a lot of sub-categorizations I won't get into), leading into Power Rangers and Super Sentai, misc. stuff, and finally Korean bots on the right. Moving any of those other non-Transformers figures elsewhere (except maybe before the Transformers start, like a bookend?) would completely throw off the flow. But I need to move them because I literally don't have the space for the two – yes, only two – new Korean figures that came in last week.

I recently went so far as to completely pull down every single figure from the display shelves in an attempt to figure out a way to completely restructure everything, only to

end up deciding that my current setup is the one that satisfies me the most and put everything back where it was. A good waste of 3+ hours. Okay, maybe it wasn't a total waste because I was able to clear out one shelf but it's just not enough to be helpful thanks to the sheer size of the bots I have at the extreme ends of my displays. An 18-inch-tall combiner isn't going to fit on a roughly 11-inch non-adjustable shelf.

The worst part is I've done this dance before and I know that even when I inevitably figure something out, I won't ever be completely finished. Something will change, whether it's my financial situation, our living arrangements, or my mind. Then I'll have to pull back and reassess, probably waste several more hours accomplishing nothing, and eventually start making sacrifices I don't actually want to make just so the new stuff can fit in a place that makes sense.

Ultimately, I know this is all in my head and I can just "decide" to do things differently whenever I want, but can I really? It took me literal years to hone my collecting habits down to something I'm really satisfied with and my current organization scheme makes my brain very happy. Every time I consider making surgical cuts to the lineup (like maybe "get rid of all the Blurr figures" or "cut down the number of Megatrons so they all fit on one shelf") I always talk myself out of it because it would mean giving up a particular figure I really like and know I would regret losing. I don't want to throw away all this work and get rid of things that make me happy, but I'm also not content to let things sit completely stagnant. For now, at least, all I can do is roll with it. 🍷



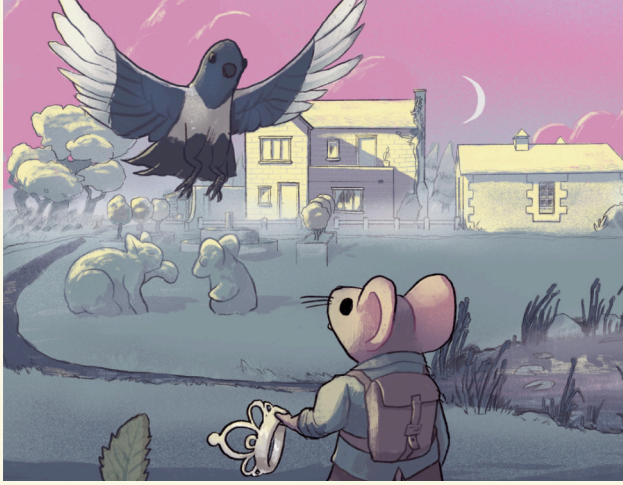
COLLABORATING ON MICROSMIC ADVENTURES IN MAUSRITTER

FEATURING ISAAC WILLIAMS

by Phoenix Simms

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.

Ser Belladonna White scampered up to the top of the hill, the dry grasses whistling about her and crunching beneath her paws. She had finally reached Bramletown, but the view she was rewarded with was far from what she had expected.



The place was the very picture of dereliction. Where there were supposed to be verdant fields and abundant apple orchards there were instead dusty, seemingly drought-ridden ruins overrun with giant snarled hedges of blackberry brambles fighting for real estate with virulent tangles of vines. In fact, the signature bramble hedges were the only thing that marked this forsaken place as Belladonna's destination. Any fruit the barren hedges or apple trees possessed had fermented, choking the air with their dank fragrance – it made her sensitive nose twitch – and littered the paths beneath them with their rotten spoils. As she surveyed the lands, her hind paw began to thump irritably and she found herself tapping her eyepatch with a single claw, both habits she was prone to whenever she grew annoyed or lost in troubled thought.

Supposedly Bristlewhisker, a rabbit farmer and an old friend of hers, had gone missing from his farmstead just beyond Brambletown. She had planned to skirt about the place originally, not one for small talk or becoming involved in whatever sidequests the peasants thought a disgraced noble paupermouse like her could be enlisted for. But the rumors she had heard on the way to Brambletown might be true after all: Queen Madriga had either gone mad with power or was punishing her townsfolk for letting her dear handmaiden Lucea suffer.

“Nasty piece of work, that,” Belladonna muttered to herself, checking over her supplies: just enough rations for a few nights, some perfume, some torches, her trusty yet worn shield and threadbare jerkin, 6 pips in case she needed to barter (that is, if there was anyone or anything left to barter with or for), and of course her trusty sling and a pouch of stones for ammunition.



Although it was a summer night, the foul winds that riffled through her patchy gray fur were as chill as mid-autumn, nearly snatching the felt hat from between her large ears. A distressed yelp echoed in the distance, putting Belladonna on high alert. A rabbit at the base of the hill was being chased by some sort of monstrous constructs made of the rotten apples of the orchard and gnarled branches for their clambering limbs. Applejacks. They gurgled malevolently as they pursued the poor peasant.

Belladonna sighed as she equipped her sling and took aim for the Applejack closest to the rabbit's tail. "It seems I have been called to a task yet again, by the will of the Moon," she let the stone fly without hesitation for the Applejack's head, "Through the muck it is, then."

Since its online publication in November 2019 as a 24-page zine, *Mausritter's* rules-light Old School Revival system and ridiculously charming Sword-and-Whiskers worldbuilding has spawned not only two beautiful print editions (published by [Games Omnivorous](#); Losing Games's first major collaborator) but a vast array of official and third-party adventures, available through Itch.io and Exalted Funeral. The Sword-and-Whiskers genre, if the name wasn't evocative enough for you, is about early D&D-esque fantasy meeting the anthropomorphic fantasy tradition. You create a brave mouse character and venture forth in an old world full of danger and untold treasure. In my conversation with Isaac Williams, head of Losing Games and the creator of *Mausritter*, what became clear about his design philosophy was emphasizing homebrew invention and allowing the GM and their players' imaginations to roam free.



My above vignette featuring my one-eyed noble pauper-mouse Belladonna White (randomly created by Losing Games handy [make-a-mouse generator](#)) is based on “Fruit of the Orchard”, an adventure by Madeleine Ember that can be found in *Mausritter*’s most current box set of adventures, *The Estate*. Everything you need, including hooks, enemies, bits of lore, etc. is concisely laid out in two pages. But between what was provided there and the equally succinct 44-page *Mausritter* rules PDF, I felt confident enough to immediately jump into a solo run of “Fruit of the Orchard.” I probably wouldn’t get that far, as *Mausritter* is made to be played with a group, but the vibes of Ember’s cursed lands overrun by vegetal magic and rotten creatures took my fancy enough that I was enticed to consider it anyway. Williams notes that while he sees roleplaying games as “primarily a way to spend time with friends,” there are “a few third-party rulesets (*Einzelmaus* by Matthew Morris being the most popular)” that he gathers are “quite [well-received] among solo players.”

The Estate comprises 11 beautifully illustrated and designed pamphlet-style PDFs, 11 postcard modules and attendant sheets with *Mausritter*’s signature punch-out item and condition cards for character inventory and more. A quick glance at the credits for each of these adventures reveals that while creator Isaac Williams of Losing Games is responsible for the slick formatting of the pamphlets, the illustration and writing of each of *The Estate*’s adventures is handled by many other well-known names in the indie tabletop RPG scene. Many of these creators are also partners or collaborators on Exalted Funeral-published projects as well, including [Diogo Nogueira](#), previously featured by Funeral Rites for his pulp-sci-fi with dinosaurs creation, *Kosmosaurs*.



Communal storytelling has been the lifeblood of the *Mausritter* project. When I asked Williams about how early he conceived of allowing his vibrant community to create third-party adventures, he enthusiastically replied that “*Mausritter* wouldn’t be the same without the fantastic community that’s grown up around the game. As a game fundamentally about adventuring into dangerous places and pulling out loot, Game Masters coming to the game for the first time will often look for adventures and inspiration to use for their own game. Being a mouse-scale game, you don’t have the benefit of 50 years of D&D adventures to draw on, so it was obvious that for *Mausritter* to succeed, it would need more ideas, locations and resources than I alone could provide. The [Mausritter Third-Party Licence](#) is the solution to that – as long as you make it clear it’s a third-party resource, and as long as it doesn’t contain hateful content, you can publish a *Mausritter* adventure. In the [fan-maintained Mausritter Library](#), there’s now more than 660 resources from hundreds of creators in almost a dozen languages, ready to be added to your game.”

With the third-party license in place, anyone can feel free to help expand the ever-growing world of *Mausritter* and not feel constrained by a rigid canon. Some of *The Estate’s* adventures take a more traditional fantasy tack while others are more urban, featuring museums or libraries full of clockwork creatures. However, as with some of the best stories featuring anthropomorphic mice and other small creatures in the past, there are often hints of the modern human world and its impact on the natural world. These hints come in the form of repurposed artifacts or junk, like plastic, sewing needles, toxic wastes, empty or human-occupied buildings which are perceived differently by their more diminutive inhabitants.

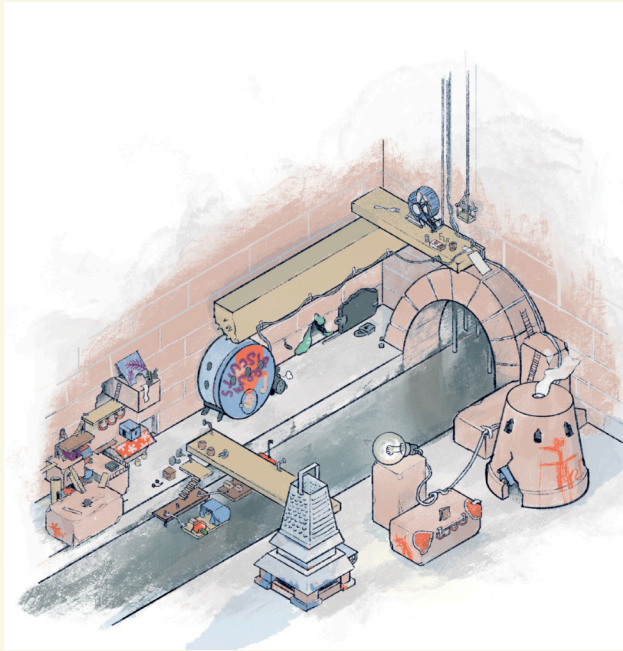


When I asked Williams whether the mice were aware of these hints of the modern world or interpret these phenomena through a different lens, his answer reminded me it was up to the GM and their players' discretion: "Many parts of *Mausritter's* worldbuilding exist only as subtle hints, to allow each table space to decide for themselves how it works in their particular game.

Personally though, I love to imagine that fantastic adventures are constantly playing out below our feet and above our heads, without us even realizing. It helps bring a little magic to the everyday, when you're looking at a tree hollow or an abandoned wardrobe on the side of the street and thinking, "Is that a *Mausritter* adventure?"


That's the elegance about TTRPGs, especially light-weight and adaptable ones like *Mausritter* that have an OSR flavor, rather than a strict framework, after all. One can choose to follow the game's adventures closely or, like Williams's original run of the game before it was iterated into *Mausritter*, combine elements they like from classics like D&D with more up-to-date board games like *Mice and Mystics* (thematically) and *Into the Odd* (mechanically).

That being said, there are some interesting natural world-inspired mechanics incorporated into rules. For instance, how your mice characters are named is matrilineal instead of patrilineal, resulting in inheriting matrinames instead of surnames, which suggests that the *Mausritter* mice have matriarchal societies. As well, the way mice communicate with other creatures (something that delights the budding conlanger within me) "attempts to systematize rules for a fantasy-talking-animals world by drawing on scientific taxonomy as a rough guide for GMs running the game. Player mice can talk to other mice, rats or other rodents with relative ease and



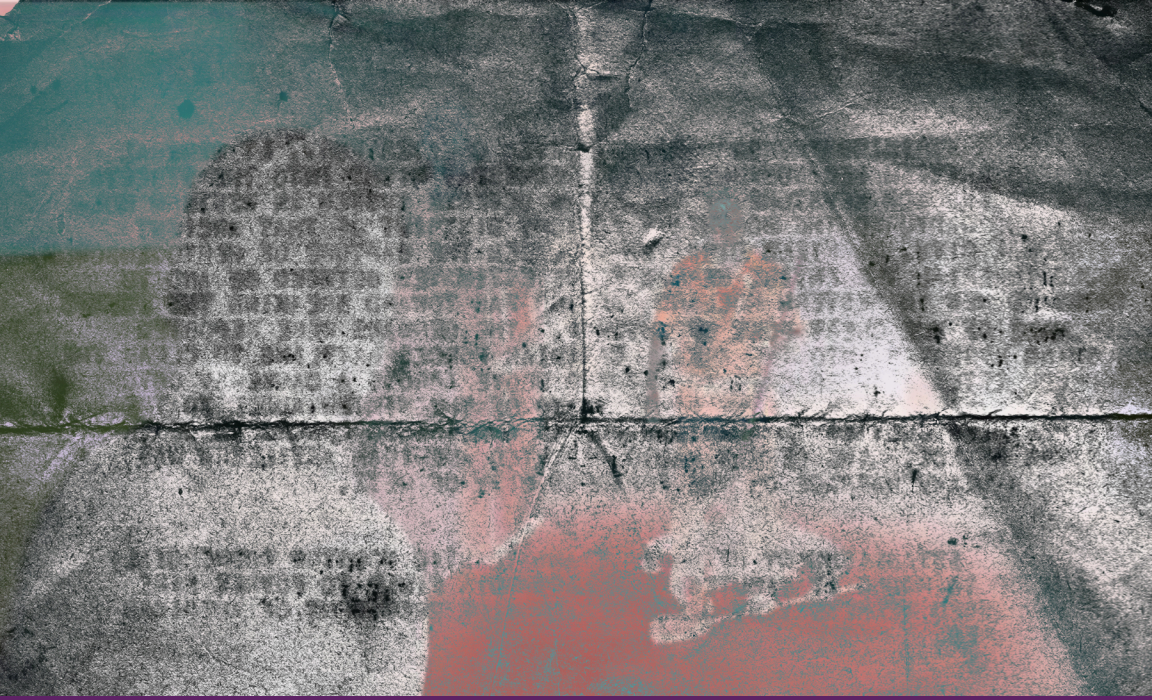
some difference in custom. Other mammals can be talked to with a little difficulty, but communication with non-mammal species is much harder.”

Mausritter has come a long way from its homebrew session and zine days. Williams explained that he’s already hard at work on another box set similar to *The Estate*, a project that will keep him busy for the remainder of 2024. His relationship with Games Omnivorous, who are responsible for publishing the TTRPG’s first print editions, is still going strong. “The publishing of the next print run of *Mausritter* “is a partnership between Games Omnivorous and Exalted Funeral – production is still handled by Games Omnivorous, but the game has gotten too big [for them] to handle distribution on their own and we needed to scale that up. Partnering with Exalted Funeral made a lot of sense for that, as they’ve got a fantastic distribution infrastructure.”

In other words, *Mausritter* will become more accessible to players globally. Considering the emphasis on daring adventures that are better experienced together, I’d say these partnerships are a fitting way to elevate such a unique indie OSR title. 

* * *

Buy *Mausritter* and *Mausritter: The Estate* on Exalted Funeral now! In addition check out their many *third-party Mausritter* products.



Solace and Play Within Games

by **ALYSSA HATMAKER**





When discussing videogames, a common critique is that some aspect “takes you out of the experience.” You are reminded, in a negative way, that you’re playing a game. For whatever reason, you’re suddenly outside looking in objectively, instead of fully immersed. It can be jarring when this happens.

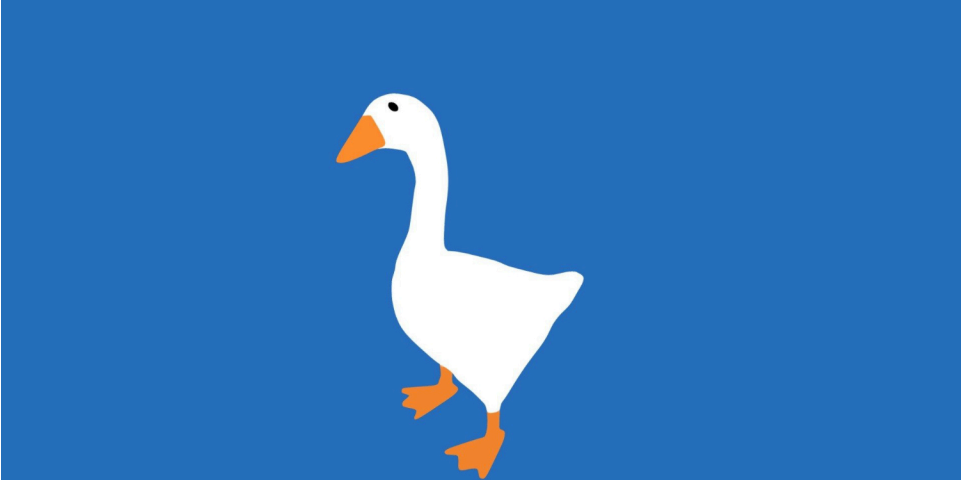
I recently played *Song of Horror*, an indie horror game by Protocol Games, and while I enjoyed it overall, there was a situation in its third act that pulled me out of the experience and left me feeling cold. One of the characters died, and no one had any sort of emotional reaction to his death. Not even his girlfriend shed a tear or raised an eyebrow at her partner’s sudden grisly demise. It felt unrealistic and inconsistent with the game’s core mechanic, in which characters can easily die if you make the wrong decision or fail to keep them safe.

Sometimes, though, being reminded that you’re playing a videogame is a welcome feeling. Sometimes you just need a break from the constant uphill climb, or you want a game to give you that gut-punching feeling of “hell yeah, this is awesome!” Being taken out of the experience is not always a negative aspect. It can remind us why we’re playing games in the first place: to escape or be distracted, to settle into an engaging narrative, to be given a view of what the world

could be. It allows us a moment to reflect and compartmentalize.

In Remedy Entertainment’s 2019 cerebral action-adventure game *Control*, we’re introduced to a character named Ahti. He’s the enigmatic janitor of the Oldest House, the Brutalist-inspired ever-shifting headquarters of the Federal Bureau of Control, a fictional government organization that deals with the nation’s more esoteric conundrums. Ahti injects his speech with Finnish phrases and guides you through the Oldest House with helpful, if vague, hints. He’s quirky and enigmatic. If he were a real person, you’d call him a character. Encountering Ahti often feels low-key and restful. When you turn a corner and see him up ahead in the hallway, you know you can breathe easy for a bit while you listen to his colorful turns of phrase.

Conversely, in 2019, indie developers House House unleashed a menace upon the gaming world, known only as “the horrible goose.” The titular character of *Untitled Goose Game* spends the entire game wreaking havoc on the world around it, making life difficult for the inhabitants of a mundane English village. In my mind, *Untitled Goose Game* is the pure, unadulterated spirit of play. It’s reminiscent of games like *Katamari Damacy* or *Scribblenauts* – at its core is a simple idea, and your job is to run with it. It gives you free reign not only to be a nuisance



without consequences but also to tap into that exhilarating feeling that you often get from side quests, or play within play. The entire game is one big childhood recess, and it feels *really* good. You are never quite fully within the experience of *Untitled Goose Game*, because you're often too busy laughing at yourself as you run around honking at villagers, or you're just basking in the delightfully satisfying experience of sowing discord.

Ahti and the horrible goose represent two different ways of pulling the player out of the game. Ahti is the reprieve, the calm between the stormy segments of *Control*. The horrible goose, on the other hand, is the silliness, the fun chaos that gives you something else to do for a while besides paying attention to the narrative or focusing on the typical gameplay loop. They're methods of unwinding, relieving some of the stress that often comes with the main campaign. Videogames often have one or the other – a reprieve or a fun sidetrack.

In Kojima Productions' *Death Stranding*, you spend most of the game paying close attention to your surroundings. Every step is deliberate, and a good chunk of your time is spent nearly holding your breath as you delicately wend your way through enemy territory and rocky landscapes while trying not to drop the cargo you're tasked to deliver. Every rock and hill you come across is a potential fall. Enemy territory forces you to

move even more deliberately as you try to avoid or eliminate the threats while maintaining your cargo. Even rain is detrimental to your journey, as it corrodes the containers your cargo is secured inside. The environment is hostile, and it can be exhausting.

But there are hot springs you can come across, scattered throughout the world. When you wade into one, the screen fades to black, and then a naked Sam sinks down into the inviting warmth of the water. Lou, your infant companion, floats and paddles while Sam relaxes. It's a reprieve that allows not only Sam but also the player to rest for a few minutes, to gather your bearings, to reflect on your accomplishments and the journey ahead. It's an Ahti-like situation.

Capcom's *Resident Evil* series is known for its tense gameplay, and *Resident Evil 4* takes it to another level, turning the franchise up to 11 in terms of heart-thumping moments. But the series as a whole, and especially *Resident Evil 4* (both the original and remake), knows when to tone it down or bring in some light-heartedness. *Resident Evil 4*'s save room theme is a haunting, ethereal soundscape that offers a welcome contrast to the action and horror. The mysterious Merchant sells you his wares but never tells you where he comes from, giving you pause to wonder while you rest.



The Merchant also offers one of the most fun escapades in my personal gaming history: the shooting gallery. It's a series of arcade-esque challenges, imparting that sense of play within play. If you want a break from *Resident Evil 4*'s campaign, it's open to you, giving you an entirely different style of action. Tango Gameworks' *The Evil Within 2* has a shooting gallery as well, which contrasts the atmosphere of the game even more than *Resident Evil 4*'s. At the end of a round of shooting, Sebastian will fist-pump the air and say something like, "Still got it!" These shooting galleries would be fully condoned by the horrible goose, the proponent of silliness.

Pathologic 2 by Ice-Pick Lodge is one of the most punishing games in existence. The environments gradually deteriorate alongside your morale as you play, as the Town-on-Gorkhon slowly succumbs to the plague. Nothing is meant to be easy for you, and everything gets harder as you go. But there is one small, singular moment when you're able to reach out from the abyss and touch a piece of solace. It's entirely circumstantial. You must have the right tool to accomplish it, and you must be willing to give it up in lieu of using it for something perhaps more beneficial to you, but if you do, you'll be rewarded with a bit of much-needed rest.

Within the Nutshell, the affectionate name for the meeting place of the Town's children,

there's a broken lantern. If you decide to use a resource to fix it, it will light up and display a beautiful projection on the walls of the abandoned house, showcasing the history of the Town in one shining image. The music that plays in the background is serene, and the kids in the Nutshell stare at the images in awe. Every minute is precious in *Pathologic 2*, but I needed the time that it took to simply bask in the light of the lantern. It gave me chills, and it's one of my most memorable experiences from that game – something so simple yet as profound as it is relaxing.

Control itself has a segment of goose-like chaos. Every time you encounter Ahti, he seems to be perfectly content amongst the dangers of the Oldest House. He can seemingly traverse the depths of the building at will, while you have to solve a series of complex puzzles to get anywhere. At one point, he gives you a portable cassette player, which enables you to travel a twisting, winding set of corridors called the Ashtray Maze. It's a bombastic, uniquely designed set piece that has you running through upside-down hallways and doors that open of their own accord, fighting enemies while a meta song by the in-universe band Old Gods of Asgard plays through your cassette player's headphones.

The Ashtray Maze absolutely pulled me out of the experience of the rest of *Control*, because it was so discordantly unlike any-




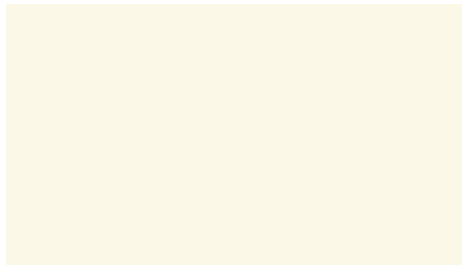
thing else. The closest comparisons I can think of come from other Remedy games, *Alan Wake* and *Alan Wake II*, which also feature dramatic musical set pieces. But it was awesome. It was exhilarating and purely fun, a wildly entertaining platforming sequence that kept me on my toes and reminded me that I was playing the game because it felt good to be in the strange universe of the Oldest House.

Whether it's *Final Fantasy VIII*'s Triple Triad, the ladder sequence in *Metal Gear Solid 3: Snake Eater*, the *Yakuza* series' side missions, or discussing films while cruising the roads in *Deadly Premonition*, these instances of reprieve and chaos – these breaks from the main game – are often some of the most memorable parts of the experience. They stick in our heads for years after we've played through the games in which they feature. Tonally distinct mini games can be traced back to games like *Final Fantasy VIII* and *IX*, and they've become a staple of modern gaming, implemented often because developers know we need a sense of balance.


In a Polygon article about the proliferation of “dark cozy” games, a developer on the indie game *Dredge*, Alex Ritchie, had this to say about why cozy horror works: “I think it boils down to this: You need proper contrast to make any experience meaningful. You can't make something seem loud if it's

never been quiet, and like in art, ‘complementary’ colors are the ones that contrast the most. A cozy game where you know it's not always cozy makes the comfortable parts even more meaningful.”

This concept can be applied to games in general. Striking the right balance between tense gameplay sequences and restful or light-hearted moments is an important part of pacing in games, and it's something that's unique to the medium. There are plenty of games that are made to offer an action-filled experience, like most platformers, or remain low-key the entire time, like farming sims. But for those that involve a long single-player campaign, little reminders that we're playing are often vital to ensure that we continue the journey. It's all about balance. And because we need that balance, it's okay for a game to pull the player out of the experience, whether it's overt or subdued, as long as it does so in a way that's true to the rest of the game. We remember those moments for a long time, sometimes as much as or even more so than the rest of the game, because those are the moments that remind us why we play. 



The Clue of the Whistling Bagpipes



Why I Played a 20-Year-Old Nancy Drew Game Over the Holidays

by **AMANDA TIEN**



NANCY DREW

The Silent Spy



In the basement of American military housing in southern Germany in 2004, my mother, sister, and I crowd around a bulky Dell computer. We have just installed *Nancy Drew: Treasure in the Royal Tower*, a birthday gift for me from someone who heard I was a nerdy, lonely kid.

We sit there, together, for hours. We guide Nancy through libraries, on snowmobiles, into hidden offices. We use pulley systems, decipher codes and learn about the movement of the stars. We interview suspects, occasionally upsetting them, and take more care next time. We take handwritten notes and, as we approach the finale, we pause and discuss who we think is the master thief. Together with Nancy, we solve the mystery.

* * *

HeR Interactive, a small studio in Washington state, began making Nancy Drew games in 1998, and in the early 2000s, hit a rhythm of releasing two a year. For my mother, sister and I, playing these games became a treasured ritual. We moved often, and the Nancy games became a touchstone of familiarity and comfort. Even when I went away to college, we'd stockpile Nancy Drew games for when I'd come back for the holidays and binge them together.

The “first-person adventures for girls” allowed for my sister and I, and other young players like us, to practice logic, exploration and collaboration. Some required reading in-game books to learn about real-world subjects. My sister was especially adept at

mechanical puzzles and my mother was a pro at taking notes, able to recall at a moment's notice what a suspect had said or how that key we just found might be useful in the greenhouse. I was, admittedly, probably annoyingly bossy. I loved being the main “clicker” with the mouse. My specialty was remembering every explorable location and how to get there.

The games, and the way we played them, challenged each of us to think outside of our comfort zones. I have memories of my mom printing out screenshots of particularly challenging puzzles and having the three of us do it separately by hand.

Besides just being productive spaces for us as young learners, the Nancy Drew games were a special reprieve for another reason. My father was active-duty military, and he was often away for field rotations, and later, deployments to the Middle East. We were often worried about him, and sometimes struggled to make sense of our rhythms without him. For the three of us, the Nancy Drew PC games invited us into what board game analysts Katie Salen and Eric Zimmerman call “the magic circle.”

In their 2003 book, *Rules of Play: Game Design Fundamentals*, Salen and Zimmerman describe how “the space of play is separate in some way from that of the real world,” both psychologically and physically, so much so that “the frame of a game creates the feeling of *safety*.”



Crowded around the computer, the troubles of our real lives faded away. Together, we were able to laugh, sigh, get frustrated (with the game and, occasionally, with each other), discuss, and cheer at resolutions. In the games, Nancy Drew was a hero come to life. And even better, we were her.

* * *

Nancy Drew debuted in *The Secret of the Old Clock* on May 1, 1930.

Growing up, I was often surrounded by mysteries. *Murder, She Wrote* was (and is) always on my grandmother's television. I relished sick days because it meant I got to watch *Miss Marple* specials on PBS with my mom. But when I got that hardback, yellow-spined book, I finally had a mystery just for me. Even though it's been almost 100 years since her introduction, Nancy has remained relevant.

Nancy's ephemeral nature as a quintessential contemporary American woman is intentional. Researchers noted that the writers, illustrators and makers of Nancy Drew always prioritized this sense of being a "modern intellectual," whatever that meant at the time of her portrayal. Nancy Drew made it through the Depression, World War II, the women's liberation movement, all while maintaining values of helpfulness, a sense of justice and thoughtfulness (Melanie

Rehak, *Girl Sleuth: Nancy Drew and the Women Who Created Her*, 2006).

As an investigator, Nancy is a consummate professional. She's strong, but not rude. Smart, but not a know-it-all. She uses technology, but she's not reliant on it. Some characters will remind Nancy she's young or relatively inexperienced, but Nancy knows she's got what it takes. Nancy was an early role model for me on how to be brave, how to stand up for what was right and to hold strong to an idea of my own self-worth.

The characterization even inspired the woman who voiced her in the games. "I grew up reading Nancy Drew books and loved them," Lani Minella, who voiced Nancy in 31 of HeR Interactive's games. "I feel very fortunate to have been Nancy's voice for 16 years."

* * *

Mystery videogames usually follow a certain formula of receiving a case, investigating for clues and interviewing suspects, then finding the "right" answer. There is a special kind of synergy between the genre and the medium; the act of playing is also one of inquiring, which naturally lends itself to the investigation process.

Empowered by crowdfunding, digital storefronts and social media to reach audiences,



independent developers have created a variety of exciting investigations. Giant Sparrow launched the gloriously painful ancestry exploration, *What Remains of Edith Finch*, to critical acclaim in 2017, winning the BAFTA Award for Best Game and the Game Award for Best Narrative. When Apple Arcade launched in 2019, colorful locked room murder mystery *Tangle Tower* by brother-duo SFB Games was a flagship title.

I've [written previously](#) of my love for mystery games. Two indies stand out for diverging from the formula while still honoring the hallmarks of the genre.

In their 2021 game *Overboard!*, inkle subverted the norm by having players take on the role of a murderer who's trapped in a time loop as they try to get away with their crime. Jon Ingold, narrative director at inkle shared, "In a traditional story, the protagonist's actions are supposed to be motivated the whole way along, and the writer's job is to ensure there's a link in every step of the chain. We like to aim for that – gameplay where the protagonist's actions and the player's align, without one doing anything that the other doesn't care about – and mystery is a fantastic way to solve that design problem."

Paradise Killer, the 2020 debut from Kaizen Game Works allows players to accuse any suspect substantiated with any

evidence, challenging players to consider their power, justice and truth.

"For me, the biggest treat when making *Paradise Killer* was creating the [fantasy] world that the mystery could live in," Oli Clarke Smith, Co-Founder of Kaizen and Game Director of *Paradise Killer*. "We started with the outline of the mystery and then the outline of the world, shaping the world to fit the mystery."

Surroundings are integral to giving higher stakes to an investigation, much less something interesting to explore. In the *Nancy Drew* games, players travel to far flung locales as Nancy to investigate strange circumstances – hauntings in Korea, ghosts in Texas, a kidnapping in Scotland. Games often featured lovingly rendered digital versions of a local traditional game, like *Scopa* in Italy. Each title was thoughtfully researched, and I often learned more interesting things about the world through these games than in my own geography classes.

Nancy's worldliness inspired me about my own life as a frequently on the move Army brat. I didn't get to see friends or family that much, but neither did Nancy, and she was doing just great.

* * *



From 2001 to 2014, HeR Interactive released two Nancy Drew games every year.

In later years, I felt like we were finishing the games faster. At first, I wondered if it was because we were getting older, but we started discussing sloppier plots and one-dimensional characters. The once-regular release schedule began to slow; only one game was released in 2015, and nothing else came out for another four years.

We didn't know it at the time, but HeR Interactive went through major lay-offs in 2015. Production was further slowed by switching, for the first time, from their proprietary game engine to Unity. In 2018, journalist [Elizabeth Baillou reported for Kotaku](#) that the studio was "a shell" of its former self.

Without those games, the three of us didn't know how to connect in the same way. The social fabric of our family was already struggling with changes after I had gone to college and changes to my father's schedule; losing the Nancy Drew games meant another piece of our rhythm was missing.

In 2019, the 33rd game was released, with a new voice actress as Nancy Drew, to mixed reviews and was riddled with bugs. We couldn't even get the game to run past the first five minutes. In April 2023, HeR Interactive teased a 34th game [on \(the website formerly known as\) Twitter](#). Some fans

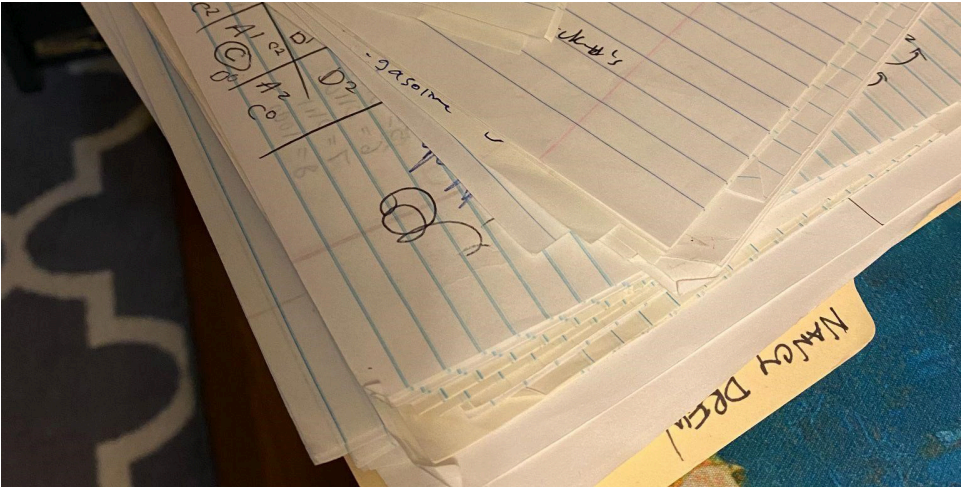
responded with frustration after years of silence. Others responded with hope that the game would come to Nintendo Switch, which I'd personally love to see.

Not only has Nintendo been [highly supportive of indies](#), but the platform's intuitive controls and mobility lend themselves to echoing the feeling of binge-reading a mystery book. Perhaps most significantly, Nintendo consoles have [long made gaming more accessible](#) for femme gamers. Since women are massive consumers of mysteries – women are [twice as likely](#) to listen to true crime podcasts than men, and [2/3 of the readers of mystery books](#) in the U.S. are women – the Switch could be a natural choice for ports of the impressive Nancy Drew catalog, much less new releases.

When asked to comment, HeR Interactive was not able to respond in time for publication.

* * *

In the lack of insight about the future, at least we can look to the past. A few years ago, my sister began downloading old games for us to play. We don't always remember who the bad guy is, and if we do, we promise to keep it to ourselves. Now, we take more breaks for coffee and I don't hog the mouse (as much). My mom uncovered an archive of




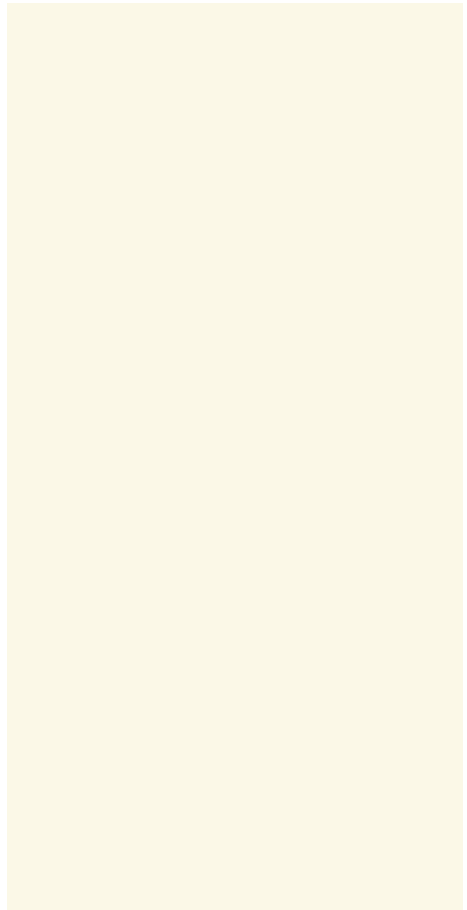
our notes from the past twenty years, and we were thrilled to add to it.

HeR Interactive's Nancy Drew games have had a lasting legacy on my family. They deepened my nascent love of videogames and strong female characters, inspiring me and giving me the confidence to game and even begin writing about them. The three of us have inside Nancy Drew jokes. If one of us starts humming the main theme to *Curse of Blackmoor Manor*, the others will chime in.

We're not alone in our love of the series. There are [hundreds of fan testimonials](#) on the website. Old games are getting new hype on the [CozyGamers SubReddit](#). Comments on [a 2021 Refinery21 piece](#) and the aforementioned [Kotaku article](#) are filled with people's personal stories of how the point-and-click adventures impacted them. HeR Interactive's Nancy Drew [has been lauded as a feminist icon](#). There's [even a blog](#) devoted solely to the games' concept art. Minella reflected, "I was so surprised to find out how beloved [our incarnation of Nancy] was worldwide, and how the games brought families and friends together to play them."

Videogames are a unique form of storytelling in that they allow us to be interactive, creating different kinds of powerful memories and experiences. Played together, the effect is spectacular.

We are all getting older. Life's problems become more complicated. But when I gather around that computer with my mom, sister and Nancy Drew, the world melts away, and all that remains is a mystery to solve. 



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