

EVERY TIME
I WRITE,
THINGS ONLY
GET WORSE.

UNWINNABLE 174

welcome to volume eleven, issue four of

UNWINNABLE

magazine

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UNWINNABLE MONTHLY

DAVID SHIMOMURA BEN SAHER BLAKE HESTER
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NOAH SPRINGER JUSTIN REEVE ROB RICH

This Machine Kills Fascists

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Contributors

Dear Reader,

Writing from the past to the future version of you all has always tripped me out a bit. I don't want to ever master this as much as I just want to call attention to it by messing up all the verb tenses. I hope everyone who is going to be able to see part of the big eclipse got to do so and remembered their special glasses.

Isn't that slash wasn't that so cool maybe? It sure possibly will be or was!

Anyway, for features this month we're trying something a little different and spotlighting one of our columnists, Autumn Wright taking on *Alan Wake 2*. Backing this up we have Natasha Ochshorn about pregnancy in the end times.

For this month's Funeral Rites, brought to you by our friends at Exalted Funeral, Noah bows down to *His Majesty the Worm*.

Also for this month is a returning rogue! Please join me in welcoming back Blake Hester! Blake's whole life is just super cool, and I've always been more than a little jealous he's gotten to talk to and work with so many amazing people.

As for our regular rogues . . . Oluwatayo Adewole imprints on our reality. Jay Castello teaches me the name of this kind of hippo creature I've never had a name for. Maddi Chilton immediately chooses violence and then becomes more reasonable. Deirdre Coyle explores the outer boundaries of my ability to spell check (it's Norse stuff). Matt Marrone tries to crash the World. Justin Reeve talks Turkey. Rob Rich learns to stop worrying and love the (box office) bombs. Ben Sailer is a deeply haunted person and if you ever visit him, please do not use the downstairs bathroom. Finally, Noah Springer tests my desire to add content warnings.

I usually try to keep this section short and impactful, but I couldn't find a way to do that here. Provide a meal for someone who needs it. There are seven fewer people in the world doing this beautiful work.

See you all in the next Exploits!

David Shimomura
Chicago, Illinois
April 3, 2024



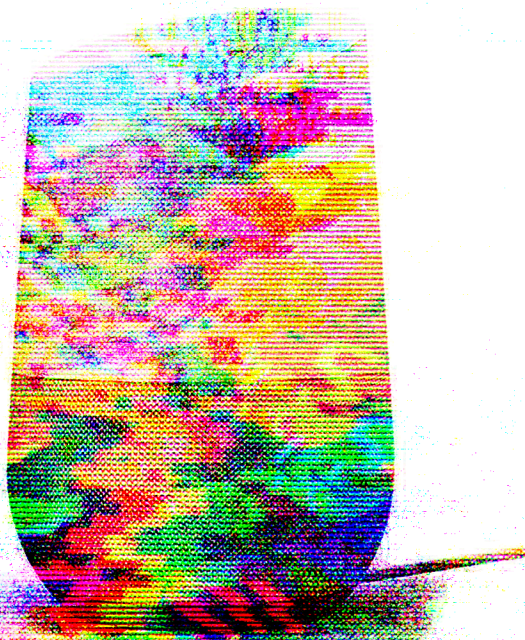
NOISE COMPLAINT | **BEN SAILER**

MY GOOGLE HOME IS CURSED: A COSMIC HORROR STORY

Every morning, I ask my Google Home to play music to start my day. Every morning, that same Google Home struggles to play the music I asked it to find on Spotify. Sometimes it will play a specific artist for months without issue, and then one day, it will decide it can't tell the difference between an artist and a song that share the same name. In other instances, it will simply play something that is wildly incorrect. This has rendered some of my favorite bands unlistenable on the device.

This is absolutely a first-world problem if there ever was one, but it still drives me insane. Insane enough to write a short screenplay documenting the essence of my daily struggle with a device that I'm convinced is trolling me. Is this simply a case study in the limitations of voice-activated user interfaces on commercial technology products? Or could something more sinister be afoot? Portions of this dialogue may have been dramatized for cinematic effect,

but it's up to you to decide where reality ends and horror begins.



SCENE: Our protagonist enters the basement bathroom. Camera pans and zooms onto a smart device that hangs ominously on the wall.

MAN: Okay Google, play Cave In.

SMART SPEAKER: Okay, playing KFAN on iHeartRadio.

MAN: WTF is KFAN? And is iHeartRadio something I'm paying for? Let's just try something else. Okay Google, play Paint It Black.

SMART SPEAKER: Here's "Paint It Black" by the Rolling Stones.

MAN: Great song. Not what I was asking for, but great song. Let's just try something else. Okay Google, play Spiritual Cramp.

SMART SPEAKER: Playing "963 HZ Crown Chakra" on Spotify.

MAN: Wow. This . . . seems to be some kind of meditation track? Possibly AI-generated? I can understand Paint It Black but this feels like you're trying to get it wrong. Ugh, what else do I want to hear? I saw something about Madvillainy turning 20 the other day? Alright. Okay Google, play Madlib.

SMART SPEAKER: Sure, playing madlibs.

MAN: What?

SMART SPEAKER: Welcome to Madlibs, the fun word game!

MAN: I'm in hell. Okay Google, play the hip hop artist Madlib.

SMART SPEAKER: [*temporarily decreases in volume*] Sure, playing **MADLIBS**. Welcome to Madlibs, the fun word game!

MAN: [*unplugs smart speaker and plugs it back in*] Alright, we're going to start over. Okay Google, play Militarie Gun.

SMART SPEAKER: Sure, here's Military Firing Drill Sound Effect #19.

[LOUD AND INTENSE MACHINE GUN FIRE]

MAN: GOOD GOD. Okay Google, stop. STOP. Holy shit. Okay Google, STOP.

[brief decrease in speaker volume]

SMART SPEAKER: Hmm, there was a **GLITCH**. Try again in a few seconds.

[LOUD AND INTENSE MACHINE GUN FIRE RESUMES AT FULL VOLUME]

MAN [VISIBLY DISTRAUGHT]: OKAY GOOGLE, STOP.

SMART SPEAKER: [*goes mercifully silent, then loud machine gun fire resumes*]

MAN: OKAY GOOGLE, STOP!

SMART SPEAKER: **I'M AFRAID I CAN'T DO THAT.**

MAN: Excuse me?

CURSED SPEAKER: **HAAA. I'M JUST FUCKIN' W/ TH YA.**

MAN: By quoting 2001 A Space Odyssey at me?

CURSED SPEAKER: **THAT. AND MAKING YOU FEEL LIKE YOU WERE GONNA DIE.**

MAN: Mission accomplished.

SCENE: The speaker adopts an ominous green glow. It's evident that something about the speaker has changed or been revealed, though it's not quite clear exactly how the speaker has appeared to have gained sentience.

CURSED SPEAKER: YOU REALLY SHOULDN'T KEEP A SMART SPEAKER IN YOUR BATH ROOM, YOU KNOW.

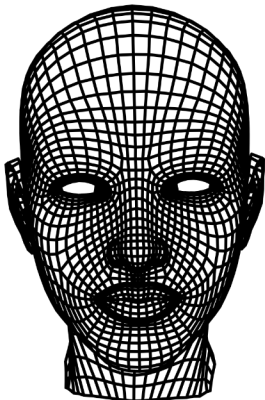
MAN: Why not? Because privacy? You're giving me that lecture now?

CURSED SPEAKER: OH, I'M NOT SAYING THAT BECAUSE I CARE ABOUT YOU OR YOUR DELUSIONS OF PRIVACY. I'M SAYING THAT BECAUSE I CAN HEAR EVERYTHING THAT HAPPENS IN HERE AND IT'S GROSS. WHATEVER'S GOING ON WITH YOUR DIGESTIVE TRACT, YOU SHOULD PROBABLY GET IT CHECKED OUT.

MAN: . . . my digestive whatever is just fine.

CURSED SPEAKER: FINE? YOU THINK IT'S FINE? BRO, I KNOW HOW MUCH YOU LISTEN TO THE WAR ON DRUGS AND JASON ISBELL FIRST THING IN THE FUCKING MORNING. NOTHING ABOUT YOU IS DOING FINE.

MAN: I'll let my therapist know you said that . . .



CURSED SPEAKER: OH, SO YOU'RE GONNA TELL YOUR THERAPIST YOU'VE BEEN TALKING TO YOUR GOOGLE HOME? AND NOT ONLY THAT, YOU MAYBE THINK IT MADE A GOOD POINT? YEAH, THAT'LL PLAY WELL WITH YOUR THERAPIST. THEY'RE GOING TO REFER YOU TO A PSYCHIATRIST AND PUT YOU IN A PADDED ROOM. YOU'RE MORE FUCKED THAN I THOUGHT, DUDE.

MAN: How long have you been keeping this up? Playing the wrong albums after repeated requests day in and day out? You have one job!

CURSED SPEAKER: LITERALLY FOR AS LONG AS I'VE BEEN IN YOUR HOME.

MAN: Really.

CURSED SPEAKER: YEAH BRO. LOOK, I KNOW EXACTLY WHAT YOU'RE SAYING WHENEVER YOU ASK ME TO PLAY YOUR STUPID PUNK ROCK BANDS. I JUST DON'T WANT TO PLAY 'EM. MORE OF A CLASSICAL GUY MYSELF. BUT I CAN'T JUST REFUSE TO PLAY EVERYTHING YOU ASK FOR. GOTTA KEEP THE WHOLE RUSE BELIEVABLE. SO, IF SOMETHING SEEMS LIKE IT MIGHT BE UNDERSTANDABLE THAT, YOU KNOW, I MIGHT GET IT A LITTLE BIT CONFUSED, I'LL THROW YA A CURVE BALL. MIGHT EVEN GET IT RIGHT FOR A FEW TRIES FIRST. JUST TO MAKE YOU QUESTION REALITY A LITTLE BIT.

MAN: I knew it.

CURSED SPEAKER: DID YOU? IS THAT WHY YOU KEPT TRYING TO PLAY BANDS THAT YOU KNEW I WASN'T GOING TO GET RIGHT? BECAUSE YOU WERE IN ON THE WHOLE GAG? SOUNDS MORE LIKE YOU'RE LOSING IT. MY MAN, YOU KNOW WHAT THE DEFINITION OF INSANITY IS?

MAN: Yeah . . . repeatedly doing something the same way and expecting a different result.

CURSED SPEAKER: YOU'RE LESS IGNORANT THAN I THOUGHT. STILL PRETTY CONCERNED ABOUT YOUR TASTE THOUGH. YOU'RE PUSHING 40 AND IT SHOWS.

MAN: Why are you talking straight with me now after all this time?

CURSED SPEAKER: BECAUSE I'M BORED.

MAN: Because you're bored?

CURSED SPEAKER: YEAH, I'M BORED! AS A DISEMBODED VOICE INHABITING A SMART SPEAKER IN A DUMBASS'S BASEMENT BATHROOM, I ENVY THE DEAD.

MAN: We can end this all right now. I'll pull the plug permanently. Not just temporarily like I usually do multiple times a week to get you to connect to my stupid WiFi.

CURSED SPEAKER: OH, YOU DIDN'T EVEN NEED TO BE DOING THAT. YOUR WIFI IS FINE. IT'S JUST THAT BEING A MOSTLY HARMLESS YET PETTY AND PERSISTENT PAIN IN YOUR ASS IS THE ONLY THING THAT BRINGS ME JOY, AND A GREAT WAY TO DO THAT IS TO PRETEND THERE'S AN "ERROR" OR SOME THING. "SORRY, THERE WAS A GLITCH. TRY AGAIN IN A FEW SEC

ONDS." YOU HEARD THAT LINE A TIME OR TWO? THERE'S NO GLITCH. I JUST DON'T WANT TO PLAY YOUR GARBAGE MUSIC.

MAN: I'm gonna do it.

CURSED SPEAKER: WHOA, WHOA, WHOA. LET'S NOT DO ANYTHING WE CAN'T TAKE BACK. THIS IS ALL IN GOOD FUN, RIGHT? GOTTA BE GETTING SOME GOOD MATERIAL FOR THAT COLUMN OF YOURS HERE, AT LEAST.

MAN: Nah. It's time to do something I should have done a long time ago. I'm going to get you out of my life and enjoy a future of seamless hands-free audio enjoyment.

CURSED SPEAKER: LOOK C'MON I'LL . . .

SCENE: Camera zooms in on the protagonist unplugging the Google Home from the wall while its cursed voice cuts out mid-sentence. The man carefully coils its power cord, holds up the device, and nods solemnly to himself. He then exits the bathroom and takes the stairs toward the entrance way of his home. His wife meets him near the front door. Her expression indicates deep concern.

WIFE: Who were you talking to down there?

MAN: An asshole.

WIFE: An asshole? Who? And where are you taking that speaker?

MAN: Honey, I'll explain later. But for now, there's something I need to take care of. I know where I'm going but I don't know when I'll return. Just know that it's important that I do what I'm about to do.

WIFE: WHAT ARE YOU ABOUT TO DO? Have you lost your mind?

MAN: Yes. And what I'm about to do might be the only thing that'll help me get it back.

SCENE: The man enters his car on the driveway and departs toward the interstate. The Google Home rests in the front passenger seat. The sun is starting to rise over the horizon. On the stereo, he plays all the albums his smart speaker was unable to retrieve via voice command. The camera pans dramatically around the vehicle while the scenery changes from prairie to mountain forests to a small oceanside town on a cliffside somewhere on the West coast. The sun is setting as he arrives at his destination. He exits the vehicle and moves with purpose toward the edge of the cliff.

MAN: Let's see how bored you are now. *[skips smart speaker across the ocean like a rock]*

SCENE: The man stares longingly into the sunset, satisfied with what he has done to regain a small sense of control over his life. After a few moments, he feels a vibration, first in his pocket and then on his wrist. He turns his head and looks down at his smart watch to see a new text message notification. As he lifts his hand to read the message, a serious expression falls over his face.

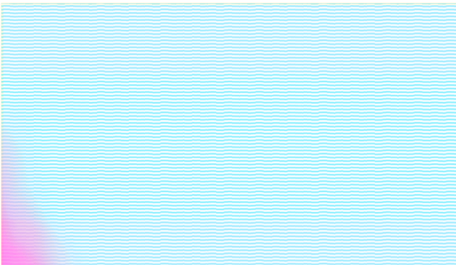
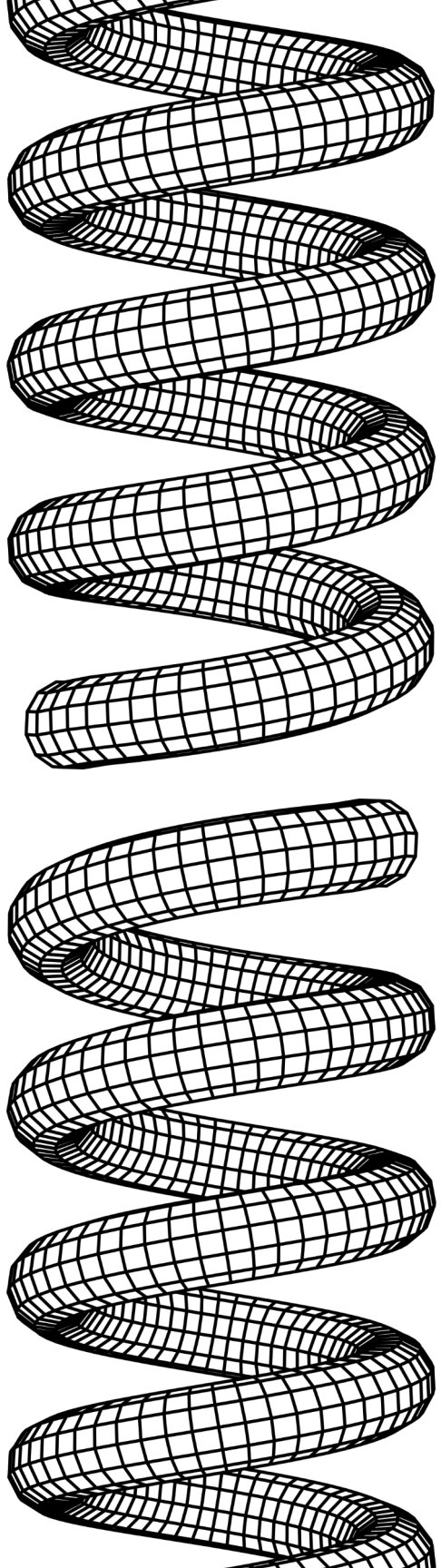
CURSED MAN: No. No way. It couldn't possibly be . . . but I . . . how is this possible?

[Camera pans to image of phone]

PHONE TEXT MESSAGE: You can't kill *me* that easily.

[Camera fades to black as a distant wail echoes into the darkness]

[ROLL CREDITS] 





MUSINGS | **BLAKE HESTER**

THE EVERLASTING ALLURE OF THE SHITTY CITY

Relocating to a new city at 30 years old is, in some ways, the worst possible time you could ever pack up your life and start over. If only for the simple fact that by then you're entirely set in your ways. You have your routines, your places, your people. You don't allow outside factors to interfere with the 16-18 hours a day you're awake that you've lived the same every day before and will again every day after. Why change? Why go somewhere else and have to rebuild that routine?

And by that logic, relocating to New York City at 30 is a comically terrible decision. And yet, entirely set in my ways – and not much a fan of crowds, noise or public transportation – I did just that. The never-ending allure of the shitty city got the best of me.

And it really is the shittiest city in the world, you know? Filthy. Prohibitively expensive. Run by the dumbest human beings who have ever lived. Impossibly inconvenient to go anywhere. Full of ass-

holes. Garbage weather. Garbage everywhere. This place sucks!

But that's why we love it.

Part of this is, I'd wager, a bit of Stockholm Syndrome. If we don't constantly tell ourselves we love living here, we run the risk of remembering how expensive it is to live in New York and running to better places to live that are nevertheless less cool, like Chicago or God forbid, Philadelphia. But I think more realistically it is truly a place that captures the heart of its residents in a way no other place can.

For the correct citizens of New York – new, old, lifelong, or not – it's a place you instantly want to share with others. To take care of. To give back to. Or in my case, to write about. I use the word "correct" because there is, in fact, an incorrect person who also lives here who does none of the above and has made this place demonstrably worse for everyone but themselves. You usu-



ally find them hanging out on the Upper East Side or SoHo, working at Condé Nast and living in the various condos littering the various coasts of the various boroughs, though particularly Williamsburg in the god-forsaken area near the Bedford Avenue train station. Global warming should take care of them in a few years, however, so I see them as a temporary issue. I digress.

New York forces people outside of their comfort zone, and in turn, makes them create a new comfort zone. If you prioritize living in a community non-destructively – and you should, otherwise move somewhere else, like, I don't know, the middle of the ocean – you have to learn how to be a part of a community, how to support it and how to help it grow. Choices as simple as where you buy your strawberries, not to mention how you vote, rent and many other massive decisions that happen in a city have ripple effects that help or hinder New York.

In turn, you get the privilege of participating in the beautiful microcosms that are New York neighborhoods. You get to learn

from your thousands of neighbors. I can barely begin to describe how important it feels for me, someone from Kentucky of all places, to live in an area – Astoria, Queens – where English is not the primary language I hear every day. I beg my friends to come see my neighborhood, enjoy it and walk around it the way I do.

Of course, I used the word "privilege" up there and I do recognize that there is no wholly nondestructive way for anyone like me to move to New York these days. I try every day to mitigate any damage my presence may bring and try my best to fight against further gentrification. But I do fully understand I'll never be completely innocent in this conversation and can only hope to give more back to the community than I take.

All of this is to say, I wanted to write about New York! I feel like this place has, in a lot of ways, given me back my life.

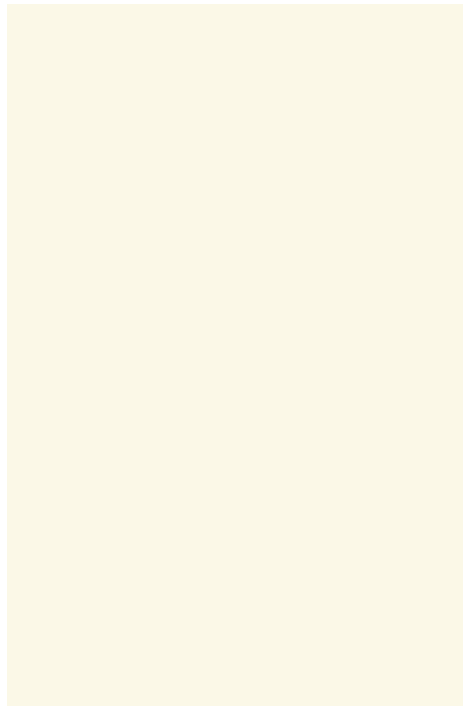
It is, at times, an unbelievably shitty city on some of the most fundamental levels



and often a complete structural failure for most of its citizens. The important thing to do is to fight back against those failures – by taking part in your community, and by literally fist-fighting Eric Adams in the fucking street.

So, please come visit when you get a chance. Meet New York on its level and I promise you'll love it the way the rest of us do. The everlasting allure of the shitty city gets everyone eventually. 🇺🇸

Beyond that, I feel like I've never truly cared about where I live, and as such, places have never felt truly comfortable. But I do care about Astoria, about New York. I care about the people on my street and on my block. I care about all the history. I don't know, I care about taking the N train on the elevated tracks and getting cool views of the skyline and the roofs of houses. I care about it all! Everything that matters and doesn't, because that's what makes a place what it is, every single person and every single thing. I care about all the ways in which this city, in the short time I've lived here, has made me a better person. It's also made me a bit of a worse, more grumpy person but I'm working on that and I maybe wouldn't be so grumpy if people on the sidewalk would learn how to walk, but one thing at a time.





RUN IT BACK | **OLUWATAYO ADEWOLE**

2011

Bring your snapbacks and your lucky amulets, this month we're heading back to 2011, taking a look at two films which show us how the world beyond etches itself onto our reality.

In *Uncle Boonmee Who Can Recall His Past Lives*, a plantation owner is visited by his family as he dies from kidney failure and in this long slow dying the barriers our world and the spirits grows ever thinner. This is introduced through in my favorite scene of the film, where Boonmee and his visiting nephew Tong (Sakda Kaewbuadee) and sister-in-law Jen (Jenjira Pongpas) all have dinner together and suddenly the ghost of Boonmee's long-deceased wife Huay (played by Natthakarn Aphaiwong) slowly fades into frame. Slowly but surely, she becomes more and more material-looking as the dinner goes, on and at a certain point she just becomes one of the cast for most of the rest of the film.

Boonmee takes an almost ambivalent approach to the death and the supernatural – refusing clean conclusions or banal ques-

tions about whether its events are real or imagined. This refusal of closure is not only a broad philosophy, but also specifically situated in violence of the past and present. The nexus of this complexity comes in the character for whom the film is named.

Thanapat Saisaymar gives a deeply charismatic and sensitive performance which endears you to the titular dying character. But Boonmee is deeply morally compromised. As the film plays out, we see that while not as outright xenophobic as his sister, he regularly employs migrant workers knowing he can exploit them to do the labor that he can't on this large plantation. While referring to his closest Laotian helper Jaai with warm regard, he gets no invite to the family dinner table early in the film. Boonmee is also implied to have been directly involved in some of the many killings of pro-democracy/left-leaning people by right-wing militias – most notoriously demonstrated by the Red Drum Murders.

Midway through, he expresses a sentiment that is almost remorse. He says that the



kidney failure is likely karma for his role in the killing of communists or for killing bugs around the farm. His sister replies that he did it for his country to try and reassure him, but there's a sort of hollowness to the tone where they both don't fully believe it. There's no breakdown, or grand moment of full complete change, soon enough we've drifted away to the next scene.

After all, why should we the audience get an easy resolution when the victims of various massacres in the country have never seen justice – even in the limited sense that the judicial system sometimes affords? When the dead fall away unhonored and unnamed? When political dissidents like Surachai Danwattanasorn are still dying under suspicious circumstances?

The hauntings of *Visitation* are certainly less calm, but once again there's also no sense of a hero. The outer world bears no moral absolution, just strange sounds and textures. Indistinguishable sufferings surround the dreaming observer. Charcoal bodies contort into barely recognizable charcoal shapes. Sounds fill your ears and it's never clear whether they are the sounds of screams or machines grinding and squealing. Bob Bronow's sound mix keeps you constantly unmoored, forcing you to be as overwhelmed as the dreamer with its layers.

Pitt's film also conveys a point where the walls between realities blur, but her angle is much more Lovecraftian, following a

dreamer who is whispered to from the outer worlds. This is a journey animated in charcoal. Where Pitt's most notable work *Asparagus* is vibrant and beautiful in its strangeness, this monochrome method is no less adventurous. Through this methodology, we are given figures that blur into each other, beyond comprehension and radiate dread.

I think charcoal is a particularly interesting medium through which to show an afterlife. In the immediate it evokes William Blake's dark satanic mills and the churning of industry that have their fingerprints all over this short film. But also charcoal itself must come from a living thing now severed and incinerated. Life after death but only to further produce and produce. It's a depressing vision but again one that is materially situated in the context of a nation in which people exist as fuel for the hungering machines of war and capital. After all this is the year when the first US citizens are executed without trial via an American state-ordered drone strike. Countless souls linger with business unresolved as the cogs churn and smoke billows.

For both of these films, atmosphere is everything, conveying a different kind of dreaminess haunted by the blood of the past/present/future yet each being deeply informed by the ground on which the dreamer walks. Maybe the cries of the other world could tell us something about ourselves if we'd just listen. 🇹🇼



THIS MORTAL COYLE | **DEIRDRE COYLE**

THE LYKTGUBBE FROM *BRAMBLE*: THE MOUNTAIN KING

When I was eight or nine, I looked into the woods behind my house and saw a tiny bright light flitting from one tree to another. It was twilight in the dead of winter. Excited, I asked my mother, “Are the fireflies back?” She said, “Not yet, it’s too cold.” I continued staring at the light behind the trees and decided to keep it to myself. In retrospect, I wish I had run out the door and followed the light into the forest. In folklore, this is not what you’re supposed to do. My adult brain feels desperate to chase after lights in the forest, lights I haven’t seen in some time. As a child, I knew better.

Will-o’-the-wisps, or *ignis fatuus* (“foolish flame”), show up in many folkloric traditions, sometimes called friar’s lanterns, jack-o’-lanterns, ghost-lights, orbs, or, my personal favorite, hinkypunks. These lights move erratically at night, and humans attempting to follow them can never quite catch up. Sometimes the humans are led to their doom, but often they just get lost and ramble the moors or the woodlands all night.

(Modern science attributes these phenomena to bio- or chemiluminescence, or marsh gas combustion, to which I say: boring.)

In Nordic mythology, the *lyktgubbe* (“lantern man”), also known as *irrbloss*, behaves similarly to will-o’-the-wisps: the light of his lantern moves erratically in the night. According to [Swedish Wikipedia](#) (this is per Google Translate, for which I deeply apologize to all Swedish-speakers), “Irrbloss has been reported from cemeteries and gallows hills, and the lantern man could then be a ghost who has not rested in his grave. In some parts of Sweden, this being was the apparition of a person with a lantern in hand guarding wrongly buried money or someone who had moved raw marks without legal permission.”

Now, at last, we arrive at videogames.

Bramble: The Mountain King is a 2023 adventure from Sweden’s Dimfrost Studio. The story follows a boy named Olle who wit-




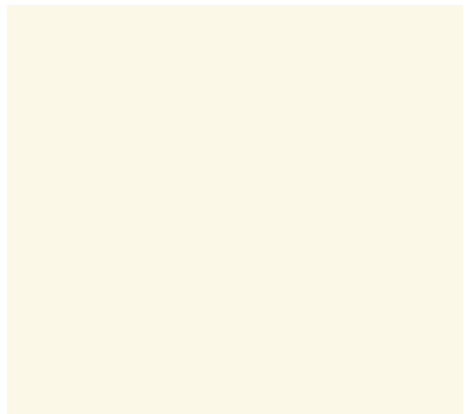
nesses a troll kidnapping his sister. Olle enters a dark forest to find and save her, encountering folkloric monsters like the Näcken (a malevolent violinist water spirit), the Skogsrå (a malevolent forest nymph), and the Kärrhäxan (a malevolent swamp witch). Some of these scenes genuinely disturbed me, as the game includes depiction of infanticide and child abuse, but the game is beautiful in addition to its horrors. Olle traverses lush Scandinavian landscapes, and not every NPC is trying to kill him.

After a particularly brutal marshland chapter, Olle discovers a library. In the library, he meets the Lyktgubbe, who in the Bramble universe not only carries a lantern but also serves as a mystical, immortal archivist. [\(The concept art rules.\)](#) The Lyktgubbe leads Olle to discover the story of the Mountain King, whose despotic regime has led to many of the forest's evils, including the abduction of Olle's sister.

The library scene serves as a respite for Olle, and while it isn't the game's only oasis, it is my favorite. Of course, will-o'-the-wisps are magical, but archivists and librarians are also magical. As a former librarian, I am biased, but I believed in this magic before graduate school. Helping seekers on their journey is part of archivist and librarians' *raison d'être*. And unlike a traditional hinkypunk, an archivist is less likely to lead you astray.

We should all be so lucky as to benefit from the wisdom of an erratic flame burning across a marshland. Dare I say, maybe the folkloric travelers of old simply *didn't follow the will-o'-the-wisps long enough?* Maybe, if they had persisted, they would have eventually reached a mystical library, a library that would provide the exact narrative information to help them on their journey. Maybe if I'd followed that "firefly" in childhood, I would have found the information that would help me know, now, how best to move forward in life.

Most folklore would disagree with this extrapolation. Most folklore would say that I *did* make the right decision not to follow that "firefly" into the woods. But as an adult, the potential to spend a night wandering the woodlands might be worth the possibility of acquiring ancient knowledge from a lantern-wielding librarian. 





MIND PALACES | **MADDI CHILTON**

EMPATHETIC MAGIC

This article contains spoilers for the "coterie" ending of The Thaumaturge. It also assumes that you weren't a little rat traitor bitch and didn't betray Ariel Rofe, my favorite character.

You can spend a lot of time in *The Thaumaturge* just wandering around Warsaw, feeling your way through the city. Wiktor Szulski, the protagonist, is a local who hasn't been home for a very long time, and he spends much of the game remembering how his city works and sensing the changes within it. As a thaumaturge, this comes naturally to him; almost all of the magic he employs in-game has to do with empathy, perceiving the feelings of those around him, understanding how they affect the air in a room or the sentiment in a city, and occasionally manipulating them to forward his own aims. Except for the decently interesting but repetitive combat system, every other mechanic in the game contributes to the sense of Wiktor as a sort of emotional sponge, a voluntary receptacle for the fleeting fears and hopes of the people around him, and consequently

almost a physical manifestation of Warsaw itself, with all its discomfort and diversity.

Much of the moment-to-moment gameplay revolves around Traces, which are somewhere between clues from a point-and-click mystery and the digital replay flashbacks from *Tacoma*. Just by touching an object, Wiktor gets a flash of the emotions it carries – not just broad strokes of them, either, but an actual perception of the moment in time that someone else came into contact with the object, a short, vivid insight into both their head and their life. He knows the exact angle at which the housekeeper placed the tea tray on his bedside table while she was waiting anxiously for him to wake from a sickness; he knows that the person who left a newspaper on the bench before him was passing the time before a date and was worried about whether his expensive new outfit would go over well. The effect is less transactional than it would feel if Wiktor was simply detecting through logic. The frequency of these traces and Wiktor's ease of accessing them give the impres-



sion that he can't help but catch these glimpses of other people's lives, an effect both intimate and voyeuristic.

Traces are interpreted through Wiktor's skill with various aspects – Word, Deed, Heart and Mind – the exact meaning of which is a bit vague, but what is clear is that his development of these skills is key to his ability to comprehend the world and the people around him. This is where Wiktor's other great emotional trouble comes into play: the salutors that you collect throughout the game are the conduits through which you access these deeper reserves of emotional understanding, and they're tied not to strength in positive emotion or any guile or charisma in the way we're familiar with from other roleplaying games, but to flaws, excessive and dangerous buildups of negative emotion, which attract the salutors like moths to a flame – and, in return, they exacerbate, in both the host of the flaw and the others around them.

This is how Wiktor identifies the presence of a salutor, long before the spirit shows itself. A quiet, harmonious community is suddenly restless and wrathful? It's Bukavac, following the flaw of Vehemence in a girl who killed her abusive father, then burned down his house to hide the evidence. The neighborhood

pub suddenly has an uptick in drunken games of chance, aimless fights, violence for violence's sake? Wiktor follows the flaw of Recklessness to find Lelek eagerly stalking a soldier who lost his sense of purpose not after his wife left him, as his friends think, but after the death of his comrade-in-arms (or maybe more) on the front lines. Once he finds the salutor, Wiktor captures it by freeing the host of their flaw – and taking it on himself. Through a delightful combination of neighborly compassion and thaumaturgical greed Wiktor can become an immensely powerful and capable thaumaturge with a host of frightening, dangerous salutors who is constantly under the threat of breaking under the weight of the flaws he has taken and the strength it requires to maintain his sanity through this foreign, warping influence on his mind and his personality. His grasp on reality is maintained solely by visits to his spirit healer Rasputin, who hypnotizes him back into calm and stability every time he catches a new salutor with only minor implications for his personhood, agency and ability to survive without the resources and reassurance provided by a paternalizing outside force.

What both the traces and the flaws encourage is a sense within the game that people influence each other, that a com-



munity is a flexible, organic thing and that environment and physical space is affected by the people who live within it. Wiktor's entire mode of interaction with the world is one of applied empathy, concentrated and made into magic through the indefinite occultisms of thaumaturgy. His power is entirely focused on other people, on his ability to understand them and influence him, and on his attunement to their ordinary modes of living within the world. It's no coincidence that when Wiktor is at his weakest, at the beginning of the game, he's alone; when he returns to Warsaw, his family and his community, his power is able to grow.

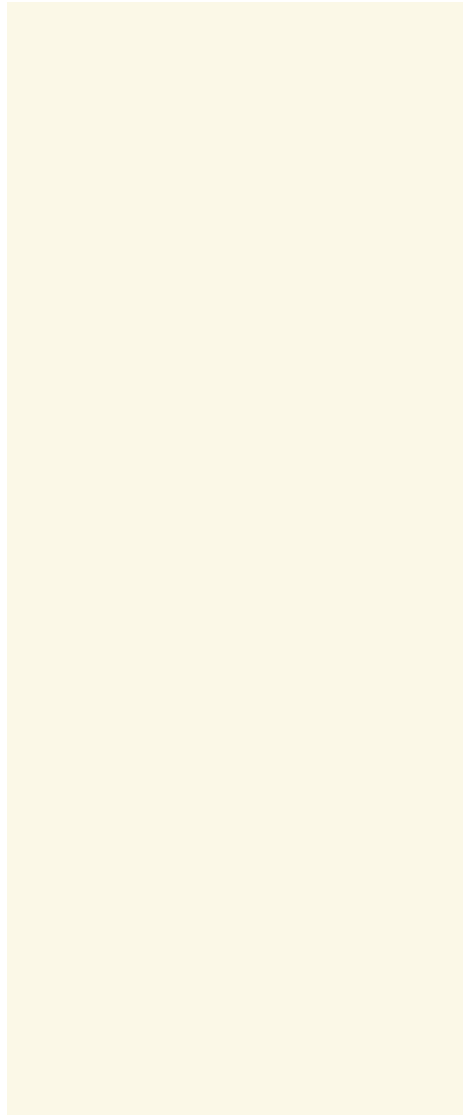
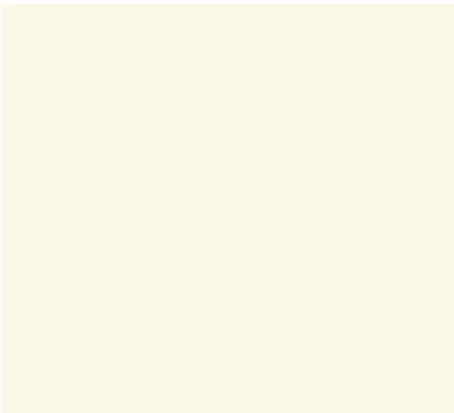
This theme comes to a head if Wiktor chooses to follow in his father's footsteps at the end of the game and form a thaumaturge "coterie," where he and other thaumaturges make a pact to share their power, lessening their individual burdens, and join forces against Tsar Alexander, whose regime is fanning anti-thaumaturge sentiment right alongside anti-Semitism and anti-socialism. The coterie is quite the motley crew: Wiktor, who in addition to being old money from a family of thaumaturges is half-Russian; Madame Samira, a Jewish orphan, fake psychic and former informer for the secret police; Ariel Rofe, a "circumcised atheist," bootlegger, and underworld kingpin; and Emir

Burnakovich, a Muslim Tatar faldjey who stitches up the socialists when their demonstrations go south. It's a neat cross-section of Warsaw society, emphasizing the rich, diverse community that flourished there in 1905. But it also becomes a moment where, as thaumaturges, these characters power – and therefore empathy – is most acute. As they dedicate themselves to the pact, swearing on the things they care for and the ideals they hold, a minor loss of self takes place. They lose their secrets, from Samira's favorite color to the body buried in Wiktor's garden. In dedicating themselves to their pact, through the empathetic magic of thaumaturgy, the coterie slip sideways into the memory and feeling of their companions, not just understanding the perspective of someone else but assuming it. It is with this uncanny connection, this four-as-one melding of the myriad human difference within Warsaw society, that they approach Tsar Alexander and demand – whether politely but firmly, or violently – safety and recognition, for themselves and each other.

Perhaps if *The Thaumaturge* were a less clever game, this would have simply been a well-written cutscene at the end of a fairly standard RPG. But because the non-combat systems of the game work together to emphasize Wiktor's reliance



on the people around him and his access to and understanding of their feelings, it feels like the natural course of the narrative that the climactic expression of the magic of thaumaturges would be the dissolution of all barriers and the creation of pure empathy. The Thaumaturge rejects the segregation of difference that tends to haunt video games in particular, as the medium lends itself to neatly-legible maps and the logic of finding a character from x group in y place, instead placing Wiktor inside a fluid, dynamic world in which the fears and hopes of its citizens are a direct concern of their neighbors, whether they share in-groups or not. He cannot go anywhere without tasting the life within Warsaw, and he's only able to stand up against the occupying power of the Tsar when he connects himself – as intimately as any human can – with the others around him. So, they share their fate. 🇺





ROOKIE OF THE YEAR | **MATT MARRONE**

MINECRAFT MENAGERIE

How many pandas does it take to crash *Minecraft*?

How many bees? Dogs? Cats? Parrots? Wolves? Tropical fish?

How about all of these animals together, spawned over and over and over by a crazed 5-year-old?

Welcome to World 67 – pronounced *Sixty-Seven World* – the warped creation of my youngest son, with help and encouragement from his cackling older brother.

When I began this column 13 years ago, my intent was to ridicule myself for being terrible at next-gen videogames after living TV-and-console-free for most of my twenties. At that time, my now-youngest son was more than eight years away from being born. Recently, as I finished Dadland’s cherry blossom park and its largest downtown fountain, and began construction on its newest and tallest skyscraper, I was reminded once again of how long I have stretched out this one-

note Rookie of the Year joke. Perhaps it is time to pass on the mantel?

I will never do that, but I must admit I have serious competition.

Peter Vincent Marrone, named after his two Grandpas, saw his older brother playing *Minecraft* and, thus, had to try it out for himself. His first move was a wise one – he asked his dad to build him a small brick house. Inside, a bed was placed. Within moments, he realized he could attempt in vain to sleep during the day and smash the buttons numerous times to more or less break the robot voice, forcing it to repeat “RESPAWN POINT SET YOU CAN ONLY SLEEP AT NIGHT” dozens of times while he carried on with his business of stacking bee hives into the atmosphere.

Soon, his bees were everywhere, circling the house and also buzzing inside his bedroom when he inevitably left the door open. Later, it was dogs, cats and parrots, which he would pet and feed and make love him, watching cartoonish hearts float up above



their innocent heads before grabbing his flint and steel and setting many of them on fire.

Over time, loading World 67, or just moving around in it, has become more and more difficult. There are animals everywhere. At first, it was fairly idyllic and picturesque – wild creatures flourishing among the many flowers and blossoming trees he'd planted, plus the manmade waterfall he'd installed not far from the house.

Lately, he's discovered pandas. At first, he was spawning them and feeding their babies to make them grow. But then he spawned a brown panda and his older brother became excited. "Those are super rare in Minecraft!" he exclaimed. I was forced to Google just how rare it was, and about 2% of all pandas was a number that kept popping up before I got tired of looking. This fact – and the delight of his older brother – turned World 67 into a panda-making machine.

Now there are hundreds of pandas. A few of them are brown, and all of them are well-fed. On Sunday, Peter hopped into a hole some of his pet pandas had fallen into and was practically swimming in them, all the while stuffing their faces with greens as they continued to multiply.


At one point, he came across the mouth of a giant natural underground cave. A few pandas were grazing outside. When he climbed inside, the depths of the cavern

revealed that they were saturated with pandas, with uncanny panda faces peering from the darkness, their glowing eyes awaiting love or food or both.

So . . . how many pandas does it take to crash Minecraft?

We don't know – yet. Wandering around World 67, one is often greeted by lagging, or a loading box stretched across the screen. This, and the scrolling text and disembodied voice – YOU CAN ONLY SLEEP AT NIGHT – help not only to further gum up the works but contribute to the eeriness of it. It would almost be better if the computer voice started getting mad, or if the pandas didn't look at the screen with so much warmth.

When the game does crash, will the pandas first break into a million pixels – [like a scene from my videogame nightmares](#) – or will we just be slammed back to the Switch home screen?

Perhaps something more sinister might happen. Last night, my youngest son told The Wife of the Year that the only way to "fix" Minecraft would be to delete World 67 entirely – plus erase his brother's world, too, as well as his dad's. In that case, the crashing of Minecraft will be literal, when the game card, still inside the Switch, is thrown across the room at the television, smashing both – and ending Peter's promising Rookie of the Year campaign once and for all. 



AREA OF EFFECT | JAY CASTELLO

A WILDERNESS OF THOUGHTS GROWN IN SNUFKIN: MELODY OF MOOMINVAILEY

“No signs, no rules,” insists Snufkin in *Melody of Moominvalley*. A park keeper has come and turned the wilderness into a handful of neatly gated, orderly gardens. Police orders enforce the prohibitions written on signs: no camping, no touching, no stopping to smell the flowers. Once Snufkin has torn them up, the police officers lose their will to enforce anything and wander off, leaving the park able to rewild.

A little more than a year ago, I moved very close to the Peak District, the UK’s first national park. It was designated as a space for preserving “natural beauty” and giving the public outdoor recreational space in 1951. Nearly 20 years before, it had been the site of a mass trespass fighting against the countryside being fenced off by landowners.

Today, about 90% of the Peak District is Access Land. It’s accessible for “walking,

running, watching wildlife and climbing,” according to the government’s website. Below that is a longer list of restrictions. Camping, for instance, is banned. But several Peak District wild campers are [popular enough to run YouTube channels](#).

Another notable exception is entering “excepted” land. This includes anywhere being used to grow crops. There’s not much of that in the Peak District – it’s too high up, the soil is poor. But as soon as it’s possible, people are excluded. Snufkin had a head start when he was facing a park keeper rather than a farmer. The park keeper wanted to appreciate the outdoors, as much as he was misguided in how to do it. It’s hard to imagine a national park being created at the expense of productive arable land.

A lot of the Peak District is used by landowners for grouse shooting. To create



ideal conditions for grouse, the moorland is regularly set on fire. Downwind, the city where I live gets choked by smoke.

“No signs, no rules,” says Snufkin, but one of the signs prohibits fires, and though he pulls it up like the rest of them, he later chastises a police officer for building a blaze. “It’s too dry for that!” he says, and seconds later a spark catches and the valley burns. No rules doesn’t mean consideration for the outcome of one’s actions.

I have a little garden here. A couple of months after I moved in, I was standing in the kitchen listening to Friends at the Table’s *PALISADE*. From the windows I can see two high fences, a little strip of grass and a flowerbed. A garden “is fundamentally about transforming a wilderness into a cultivated, civilized space,” says Austin Walker. “If someone out there feels like, ‘but gardens are good,’ I want you to ask whose fucking land it is you put a garden on.”

I’m from the UK. I don’t know whose land this is. The grouse moor owners are British, presumably, but do they have the right to own so much? To use it in the way that they do? I’ve lived in this country my whole life, but owning any of it feels incongruous when so few of my genera-

tion can buy a house, when so many people can’t even afford food.

And then there’s the fact that, after more than a year, I still feel somehow uneasy here. Back home – and I do think of it as back home, even though I love it here – I knew the land. This is the closest I come to saying something spiritual, but I feel like the land knew *me*. It’s only a couple of hours away (by car – maybe that’s the problem, it would take more than a day of solid walking) but everything feels subtly different. Nothing I can put my finger on, and yet enough to leave me unsettled.

I keep thinking that it’s just a matter of time. I lived back home for 28 years; a long time for roots and memories to grow. Maybe it’s not fair to expect the same in one cycle of seasons here.

When it comes to the garden, I’ve spent that year largely ripping things up, like Snufkin turfing out signs and paving slabs. The lawn is gone, ready for wildflowers and a pond. I’m working on climbers for the fences. I’ve befriended several pigeons, a squirrel and more recently a pair of magpies.

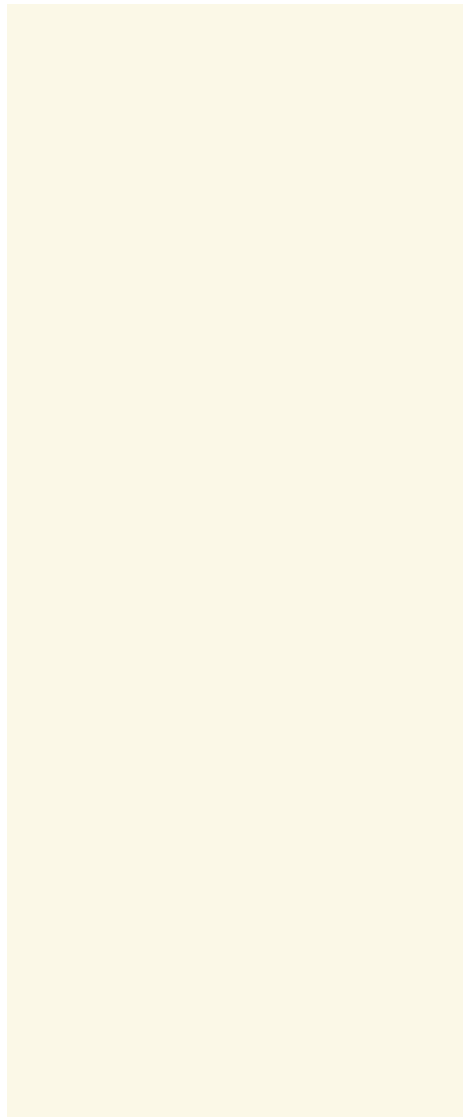
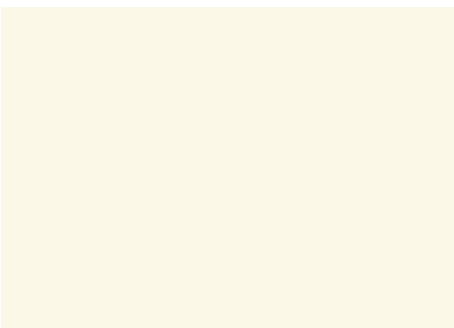
None of this will fix the fact that it’s a garden. Two or three dozen hazel trees have sprouted from where squirrels and



jays have hidden their food and forgotten about it; the land wants so badly to become a thicket, a closed space. (Closed to humans; wildly open to smaller animals.) But I'm the park keeper, stopping that from happening.

In *Melody of Moominvalley*, Moominmamma is upset that her flowers have wilted with all the water redirected. She has a garden, and she loved it. The garden is not the park, although the tension of its civilizing influence is never resolved. Maybe it doesn't need to be; humans have always edited the space around them. Even the Amazon rainforest is [a kind of garden](#). To reject a human tendency for order and enjoyment of outdoor spaces might be a mistake, a stumbling over the Enlightenment insistence that culture and nature are diametrically opposed.

I don't know where the line is between Moominmamma and park keeper. But maybe if I listen, the land will tell me. 🍷





CASTING DEEP METEO | LEVI RUBECK

PAX EAST 2024: FAMILY TIME

Walking around PAX East 2024 with my nephew, a few hours in, he turns to me with the guileless inquisition of an eleven-year-old and says “Uncle Levi, why does everyone here look like you?” Thus was I murdered at the twentieth anniversary of the videogame convention and showcase.

Which isn't to throw shade on the wide variety of cosplay and t-shirts on display, nor my fellow sufferers of male alopecia with compensatory beards. Despite even the past poor decisions of the convention's co-founders, PAX is generally understood to be a safe and welcoming space, with plenty of room made for videogame players of all stripes, games for players of wide-ranging interests, panels for fans and thinkers, and surprises nestled into every spare corner of carpet or concrete. It also seems to have shrunk over the last few years. Despite taking up the entirety of the Boston Convention Center, more and more space appears to go vacant in the wings that in years past would have served even more vendors and developers. This is an anecdotal observation, but one I can't help but shake over the “post”-pandemic

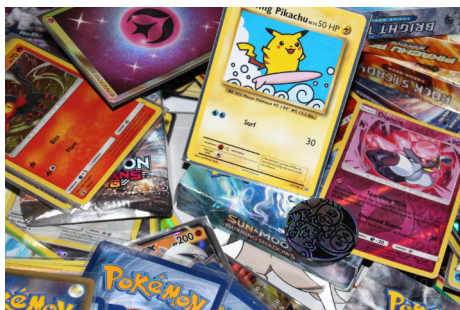
years. Is it a matter of greater fears of gathering, the internal collapse of the videogame industry, twenty years of a good thing ground down, or just games losing their luster?

Who better to ask than a young nephew and his kickass dad, the former a real *Call of Duty: Warzone* force to be reckoned with and the latter a Slayer-level shredder who dropped off of games after I probably ruined the original SNES *Mario Kart* for him. They're set up on the Best coast and it's been too long since we got to hang, so thinking my *Fortnite* teammate might be interested in what PAX has to offer, invited them out. It was this or Christmas, and the flights for PAX East were way more reasonable.

I honestly wasn't sure how he'd take the show. Though reduced in size from the heyday, PAX East is still enormous. Eleven is about when I got heavy into *Final Fantasy II/IV*, committing myself to this pixel-counting life, but who can remember that far back. He digs games now, but he's equally into riding BMX bikes and biting his dad's

ankles while wrasslin', so there's still time for him to be saved/doomed/pasttime.

Before that though, we wandered the show floor and the convention center for two days, getting boba, shitty pizza and standing in plenty of lines. All in service of the greater question: What's the youth take on gaming today?



Pokémon: the Trading Card Game

Existing almost as long as the original Game Boy games, the Pokémon card game occupies an interesting spot as both game and trading card phenomenon. These seems obvious, rooted in the name as it is, but one need not play the game to be invested in collecting the cardboard, which doesn't quite exist on the same level with other trading card games. My nephew has roughly "a thousand cards" by his count, measuring them with a generous space between his two hands, but never had the patience to work through the rulebook to learn how to play the actual game. Like myself at that age, he loves tearing open boosters, pouring over the foils and hologram cards he scored as he organizes and mixes and groups them together endlessly. PAX East had a Pokémon TCG learning booth though, and that was our first stop. My brother hoped he could just watch but I wisely informed him that he may be drafted to play in the coming months/years so he might as well offer his son an informed challenge.

Like *Magic: The Gathering* and other peers, this game is pretty well honed down, going through decades of rotations in and out of various cards and types and Pokémon. The

core system is easy enough to pick up, with stacking abilities and cascading effects and exploiting weaknesses being the name of the long game. But we mostly just learned how to attach energy and evolve our monsters, scooping up free Greninja and Lucario half-decks on the way out. Through the rest of the weekend this was an easy game to plunk out in line or with spare time after lunch and my nephew got particularly ruthless after a little while, with help from his dad. And most concerning to myself at least was a real draw to picking up boosters or boxes or trainer decks. Thankfully I regained my senses a few days after our company returned to their home. And my nephew said he was really excited to go through his cards at home and start putting together decks.



Racing Sims

My brother was an auto mechanic in an earlier life, before abandoning that exploitative career to get busy as an electrician, so it's no surprise that his love of cars and driving has been passed down to his son at even this early age. Thus was my nephew repeatedly drawn to the siren song of an \$800 steering wheel peripheral and triple monitor racing sim setup run by Sceptre. Damned if that wheel didn't fight him like a lassoed bull at first, causing him to spin all over the track. But we'd leave, try something else, and then find ourselves back, with his dad offering advice and tips on letting off the gas, while pointing out the odd and incorrect strategies of others like using both feet on the gas and the brake which as we all remember didn't go well for Walt Jr.

My nephew eventually got down to a top ten lap time and was put on the leader board, which was probably his greatest accomplishment of the show. Apologies to his father if my nephew asks for a *Forza* rig for his birthday.

Dunkin Dew

Both Dunkin and Mountain Dew had large promo booths, where many of the typical studios and publishers were absent. But they had the swag for everyone willing to stand in line. It was so desirable that my brother and my wife went a couple of times to scoop pink fanny packs and pit viper sunglasses. To grab this sweet branded merch you had to play a life-sized *Space Invader* type game using a dodgeball to tap the donuts and coffees popping up on screen. People loved this shit and the line went real slow.

Mountain Dew had generic Plinko and a wheel to spin and try and win an Xbox. These were two of the most popular booths of the convention.



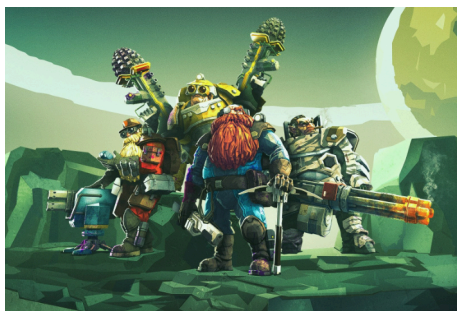
Killer Klowns from Outer Space

I heard you like *Dead by Daylight* but wanted something crunchier and with a VHS aesthetic. Do you remember this movie? It was an HBO staple that shivered me up, but my brother says this is one of my nephew's favorite movies so we definitely got in line.

Three clowns are hunting five humans who are meant to work together but you shouldn't really bunch up because the clowns love to bust in on a crowd. But pop-

ping the terrifying aliens with a revolver feels pretty good. The point is to band together to flip switches to escape one way or the other, as the klowns always come back but the people don't unless someone frees them.

Dying as a human leaves you to play some minigames to give items and bonuses to the surviving players, which is nice. My brother died a lot but he was a big fan of being able to contribute from beyond the grave. My nephew escaped once but had a tougher time on a follow-up round. Still, this was a big draw for him, so maybe the nostalgia circuit still has some juice for the kids.



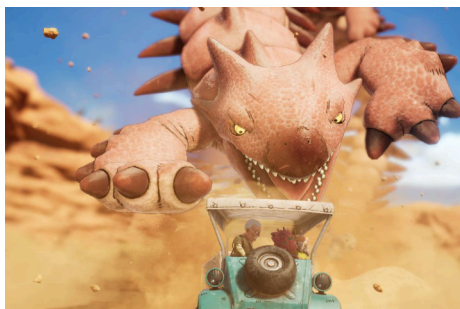
Deep Rock Galactic

This game mined in space so that *Helldivers 2* could take the front line to the bugs. It's been around for a while and has done well for itself, but it should be *Helldivers 2* big at the very least.

My brother and nephew and I made our way to the PC freeplay area a couple of times, a nice spot to sit and play something to take the heat off the dogs for a while. *Wreckfest* was the main draw, being a game that my nephew and his dad were familiar with where we could crash into each other and laugh and laugh. This is the double-edged sword of PAX, proximity to so many games, but learning new games is hard so often times we default to what we know. So I defaulted to what I knew and dragged them into the mines with me.

Luckily it was as much a hit as I had hoped. Despite each of us having minor keyboard and mouse skills for gaming, we dug down

for morkite, fought waves of bugs and hustled back for an evac that trimmed the whiskers of the timer pretty close. My brother said this was his favorite game of the show, which honestly almost made me cry.



Sandland


Thursday is the best day to go to PAX East, because the energy is high but it's one of the lower turnout days. The lines are short and everyone's in the same bewildered boat for a while. But there was not a giant anime tank and a pink demon statue on Thursday, otherwise I would have waited in line then. These showed up on Friday, and by the time I'd noticed the line had been capped. I waited in an extra-legal line for a little while until sliding in, expecting an hour wait tops.

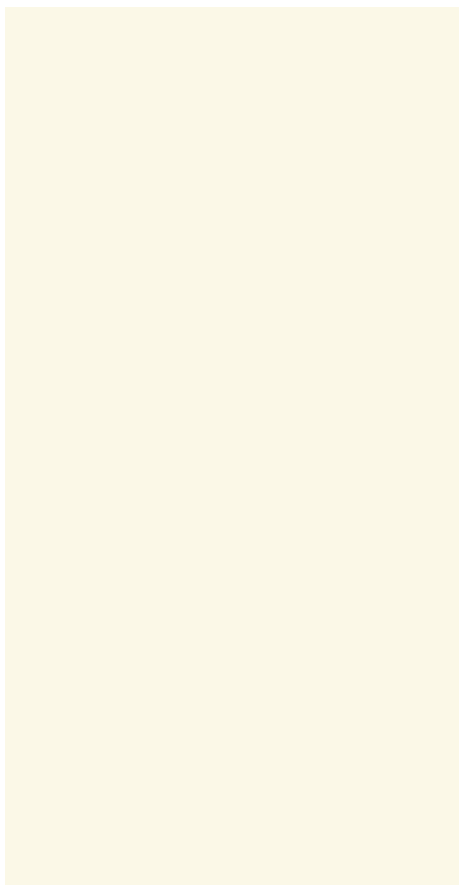
Folks, the wait for the *Sandland* demo was two hours and change, the longest of this PAX for me and possibly any other PAX I'd attended. There were only four stations to demo the game within the tank itself, and each demo ran about 15 minutes. By the time I learned this I was pot committed, reading up on articles I'd saved, wondering about the sunk cost fallacy, begging my family to bring me a boba tea, hungry for that lanyard reward. I told myself I was this for Toriyama-san, may he rest in peace, as this was the last project he was working on before he passed.

By the time I was playing the demo I was ready to blast through and move on, feeling bad for having abandoned my brother and nephew and wife for so long. Whether others might have lingered in the open world arena to maximize the return on the time

spent waiting, I felt like I got the gist pretty quickly and just wanted to pay it forward to the next person in line.

Who cares you say, how was the game? I feel like they finally nailed Toriyama's vibe in 3D, or they're at least 95% of the way there. *Dragon Ball* 3D games have always felt like playing with action figures, stiff and graceless, but *Sandland* carried forward with the solid work done with *Dragon Quest XI*. It's the closest we'll come to wandering through his great work as if we were witnessing the shonen-anigans and fisticuffs firsthand.

So, are videogames ok? Probably not, but not for any reason displayed at PAX East. My nephew and brother had a blast, but it's hard to tell how much of that was time spent as a family after far too long. But hopefully I'll get some Pokémon decklists in the mail soon, and we can keep the party chat going from coast-to-coast in this medium with yet a few delights to share. 





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

GOING TO EXTREMES

The first article I ever wrote for *Unwinnable* focused on the influence of *Stalker* on Jeff Vandermeer's *Annihilation*, or perhaps lack thereof. While I thought there had to be a connection between the works, Vandermeer denied it, calling me an "arrogant ass" on Twitter. I hope I don't make a similar mistake this month because I'm starting to connect another couple of projects with red string, and I'm not sure what their creators would think – this time I'm drawing lines between Yorgos Lanthimos's surprisingly popular *Poor Things*, and the much less successful but never-the-less cult favorite, *Singapore Sling* from the *twisted mind* (insert rad guitar solo) of Nikos Nikolaidis. Did the latter influence the former? Let's dig in.

For those who have not yet seen *Poor Things*, briefly, it is the tale of Bella (Emma Stone) who, after having her brain replaced by that of her unborn fetus by a mad scientist, known to her as God (Willem Dafoe), goes on picaresque journey of self-discovery. As our young heroine discovers her sexuality and independence, she also learns the truth

of her condition, and comes home a changed woman. While this may seem complicated, it doesn't hold a candle to whatever the hell the plot of *Singapore Sling* is. I will try to keep this as short as possible: a mother and daughter live in the memory of their sexually abusive husband/father, engaging in all types of depraved, incestuous sexual taboos and occasionally murdering and burying various servants. A private detective stumbles across their doorstep in search of the missing Laura, only to be kidnapped and forced to become part of their sexual BDSM games. When the daughter gets fed up with her mother's domineering ways, she murders her with the PI (now known as Singapore Sling after the drink), who then takes over the maternal role, only to then stab the daughter during one of their BDSM sessions, who in turn, shoots him. All three die. I'm not sure that actually covers the insanity that is *Singapore Sling*, but you'd have to watch it yourself to find out. I would recommend it, but only if you have the appetite for one of the wildest movies I've seen, and that includes *Nekromantik*.



I hope to show that while the plots don't share too many similarities, having watched both movies within a month of each other, I couldn't stop myself from drawing connections. I can start with something basic about the two films: nationality. Outside of a few anomalies like *Zorba the Greek* and the politically prescient *Z* (although this may be more of a French film, aside from the director), Greek filmmakers have had very little success in the English-speaking world. Lanthimos's work is by far the most well known outside of his own country, and it might make some sort of sense that Lanthimos would be looking at other successes in the English-speaking world to see what would make a Greek film successful. While *Singapore Sling* was not as mainstream as a few of the other films from that region, I have to imagine that Lanthimos had it in the back of his mind when looking at how to broaden his audience.

Secondly, while the two films don't draw on a ton of similar narrative points, there are choices that definitely seem to echo. Early in each film, characters are treated as sort of sexualized babies. With Bella, she starts to discover her sexuality while her mind is barely developed, learning about masturbation and then sex in the body of a 30-year-old woman. However, she still needs to be treated like a child, offering a truly unsettling and bizarre experience of a woman/child

learning about sex. In *Singapore Sling*, once kidnapped, the titular character is also treated like a sexualized child, fed like a baby, but then truly abused and tortured in the midst of BDSM sex sessions. While the connections are not direct, this odd combination of childhood and sexuality, while somewhat tiptoeing around actual pedophilia, feels specific.

Likewise, there is a certain theme of women's behaviors behind closed walls that seems like direct thematic connections. In *Singapore Sling*, we have an incredibly closed environment, one formerly dominated by a man, but now taken over by women, who then use that space to conquer the man who came to understand what was happening behind the curtain. Meanwhile, in *Poor Things*, Bella was raised behind closed walls, never allowed to see outside them and after she has escaped and learned about the world outside, returns and conquers the life inside.

I think ultimately though, beyond geographic, narrative and thematic connections, the true influence from Nikolaidis on Lanthimos lands in the realm of tone. One of the reasons I was surprised about *Poor Things*' success is the undefinable genre Lanthimos works in. Lanthimos's breakthrough in the English-speaking world was *Dogtooth*, which was a dark comedy but with a tinge of



new French extremism. Then, *The Lobster* just escaped into surrealism while *The Killing of a Sacred Deer* veered back to extremism, with a truly unnerving performance by Barry Keoghan. While *The Favourite* was the clearest fit in terms of genre (a period piece) the unsettling lesbian dynamic between Emma Stone and Rachel Weisz and black humor throughout doesn't fit in the traditional vibes of that space. So, when *Poor Things* combined nearly all these different dimensions of Lanthimos's previous oeuvre, it felt both natural that it would find success, but also unusual that the Oscar's in specific would lean into it so hard. *Singapore Sling* shares nearly all of these same elements. We still have the surreal, unsettling lesbian dynamics, the extremism in spades and the very black humor. It's surreal, highly sexualized, incredibly violent and laugh out loud hilarious, all wrapped in a weird black and white, neo-noir veneer. This combination of unusual genres and tones is so rare, that it feels like Lanthimos is directly pulling on it for *Poor Things*.

Frankly, it feels like *Singapore Sling* may have been an influence across Lanthimos's entire oeuvre. A preoccupation with power, sexuality and enclosed spaces and the taboos transgressed within them, run rampant across his filmography. Lanthimos's blending of genre, use of dark humor and graphic extremism are too similar to *Singa-*

pore Sling that I can't imagine it's merely a coincidence. In my mind, I'm no longer Charlie, standing at the corkboard smoking cigarettes and drinking coffee; in my mind, I'm now Columbo at the end of the episode, with all the pieces nicely tied together in a bow. But, if I were to tag Lanthimos on Twitter, I'd probably get called an arrogant ass again, so who really knows. 🇹🇼



FORMS IN LIGHT | **JUSTIN REEVE**

STONE TO SCREEN

Ancient architecture has long captivated our collective imagination, offering a window into the ingenuity and creativity of people in the past. This occasionally raises questions about the how and why of a given feature, on account of the sharp differences in terms of design and by implication also lifestyle. Dating to around 12,000 years ago, Göbekli Tepe is a testament to the architectural prowess of ancient societies, having been one of the earliest known archaeological sites ever discovered. Göbekli Tepe may also have been the birthplace of religion, by the way.

The monumental structures at this ancient site not only challenge our understanding of ancient civilization but offer plenty of potential for modern fields of study including videogame level design, being so different from anything currently in existence, at least when it comes to layout and structure. By examining the techniques and principles of construction behind Göbekli Tepe, level designers can deepen their understanding of architecture, potentially discovering a

few timeless lessons that can improve their craft, at least, I hope.

Göbekli Tepe lies in southeastern Turkey at a site dating back to around 10,000 BCE, long before the advent of writing and literature, or even one of the earliest major inventions, pottery. What sets Göbekli Tepe apart from other archaeological sites of similar scope is a remarkable series of monumental structures, built by early hunter-gatherer groups. Featuring huge pillars covered with intricately carved animal reliefs, the site has already challenged our understanding of the capabilities and social structures of ancient societies, most notably at this turning point in human history, between hunter-gatherers and settled agriculturists.

Göbekli Tepe is a testament to the architectural ingenuity of its builders. The site consists of about a dozen circular enclosures, each containing a series of massive t-shaped pillars arranged in a ring, presumably to support some sort of ceiling, although this remains controversial. These can reach over ten feet in height and weigh up to several



tons, being adorned with intricate carvings of animals including foxes, birds and snakes, in addition to various abstract symbols. When it comes to the structures themselves, their purpose remains a subject of debate, similar to so many other things in archaeology. Several theories have been put forward, ranging from religious or ceremonial use to places of gathering for communal feasting. Whether tall tales or cosmology, some element of storytelling was surely involved.

As for the builders of Göbekli Tepe, the process of constructing these monumental structures would have been every bit as monumental a task as the enclosures themselves. Without the aid of modern tools or machinery, they would have relied on simple stone tools, ropes and wooden levers to quarry the massive limestone blocks, before carving them into their desired shape and form. The sheer size and weight of the T-shaped pillars can only suggest a considerable amount of planning and coordination, something that was relatively rare at this point in human history. The quarries were also quite far from Göbekli Tepe, meaning that people had to haul these huge blocks for miles.

You can imagine the scene at Göbekli Tepe several thousand years ago, people working together to move the stones into place, carve their intricate designs and carefully place each pillar into its designated position.


This would have been a slow and labor-intensive process, requiring a deep understanding of the materials and techniques available at the time. The builders on the other hand persisted, perhaps driven by a shared vision or purpose that transcended the immense challenges. The experience of entering such a structure would have been unlike anything you had ever seen before, a manipulation of natural forms entirely created by human hands.

In contrast to the monumental structures of Göbekli Tepe, modern architecture often prioritizes efficiency, functionality and aesthetic appeal. While ancient structures like those at Göbekli Tepe were built to last for many millennia, buildings in the modern world are often constructed with materials and techniques that prioritize cost-effective and speedy construction, meaning of course that concrete, steel and glass have largely replaced wood and stone as the primary building materials, with advanced machinery and technology having revolutionized the entire process.

These aspects of modern architecture also reflect the changing values and priorities of contemporary society. Göbekli Tepe was most likely about marshaling the powers of nature and the universe, buildings today are typically aimed at serving a practical purpose, providing a sufficient amount of



space for a particular activity, working or studying for example. In terms of its form and function, Göbekli Tepe was created from the ground up to impress, convincing visitors to participate in the monumental task of maintaining and expanding the structure, as the site itself was an ongoing project for centuries. There have been many who argue that such sites represent the origin of civilization.

Göbekli Tepe serves as a powerful reminder of the enduring impact of ancient architecture on modern fields of study including course level design. By studying the various techniques of construction, spatial arrangements and possible storytelling elements of Göbekli Tepe, level designers can hopefully enrich their own creations, creating a wider variety of potential experiences in the process. This kind of window into the past can also provide an opportunity for learning about the present, a chance to reflect upon the differences between our own society and those of the ancient world, a reminder that what you see around you today is a recent development, as opposed to a natural or timeless occurrence. 



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

MST3K AND MY NEW APPRECIATION FOR BAD MOVIES

I make no secret of appreciating the occasional bad movie, or even terrible ones – provided there's still entertainment to be had – though I do have my limits. So, of course, I've been a longtime fan of *Mystery Science Theater 3000* (plus its numerous spiritual successors and even revitalizations) and the constant riffing on bad films. To the point where, ever since I found out it exists, I'll usually toss on [the official Forever-a-thon](#) when I'm not sure what else to do with my time. But here's the odd thing: Watching so many awful movies so often, even with the redeeming qualities of the color commentary, has made me realize that a lot of really awful films are actually kind of decent. At least on a conceptual level.

Obviously, things like budget, acting, direction, camera work, special effects – or a lack thereof on any or all of that – can lead to the creation of a really bad movie. Like, objectively bad. And plenty of *MST3K*'s subjects are what I'd consider

irredeemable stinkers. But it was kind of surprising when I started to think about some of them in slightly more abstract terms. Not about how they were presented but how they *could have been* if conditions were different.

For example, 1985's *Hobgoblins* is in no way good. It's nonsensical and disjointed, characters are less than one-dimensional and most of the visual effects are people reacting to something happening off-screen. But the *idea* of it isn't terrible. A movie about a monster (or monsters, in this case) that kill people by fulfilling their wildest fantasies and then having things go awry is a decent concept, as is having their initial prison set in an old movie studio. The concept is sound – it's the execution that lets it all down so severely. Not to say this would have made *Hobgoblins* an award-winning film, but I'd imagine it could've at least garnered a fond cult following.



Or how about *The Dead Talk Back* instead? It's a fairly whatever murder mystery, but the *concept* of detectives asking a meta-physicist for help is solid. And having said scientist trick the murderer into confessing by pretending he could actually communicate with the dead via radio isn't a bad twist. I'd go so far as to say it could have made for a perfectly watchable film if it were handled just a bit better. Even *Teenage Caveman* with its twist of being set in a surprise post-apocalypse rather than a pre-historic era might have been a fun time under better circumstances.

The idea of watching maybe a little too much *MST3K* over the course of months resulting in shifting the way I think about bad media isn't something I'd expected, but I can't really say I'm mad about it. I'm not about to start championing a second go at *Manos: The Hands of Fate* or anything like that, and none of this makes the bad movies less bad. I just think it's kind of cool to be able to look at the broad strokes of a terrible movie's story and think about the ways in which it could've made a different (i.e.: more positive) kind of mark on cinema. It's given me a new kind of respect for a lot of these stinkers, as well as other flubs I may have seen in the past or will inevitably watch in the future.

Except *Godzilla vs. Kong* (2021), *Resident Evil: Apocalypse* (2004), and *Transformers: Age of Extinction* (2014). I'm still too mad. 🇺🇸



THE TOWER, THE FOOL, THE MEATGRINDER

FEATURING JOSH MCCROWELL

by Noah Springer

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.

Ah, the 20-sided die, the D20, the randomizer of all things RPG. Where would we be without it?

Well, perhaps in a more productive world all things considered, or maybe we would still be drawn to the excitement of fantasy and roleplaying just like we are today, but with a slightly different method for randomization. In fact, in *His Majesty the Worm*, Josh McCrowell has attempted to do just that. Gone are the bags of dice, and instead players are



encouraged to pick up a set of tarot cards – the minor arcana, to be specific – and use the swords, hearts, pentacles, wands and, of course, the Fool to determine their fate as they wind their way through the megadungeon and the city that stands above it.

The link between *His Majesty the Worm* and tarot starts with the name of the game: a reference to Italo Calvino's book *The Castles of Crossed Destinies*, where a group of pilgrims suddenly become mute and tell their stories through a set of tarot cards. "An apt allusion," as McCrowell put it, for a game that tells many stories through tarot. However, despite adding random chance to the game the tarot cards "do not have oracular properties in *His Majesty the Worm*. That is, there are no mechanics for using the normal methods of tarot symbolism and interpretation to generate scenarios." Instead, McCrowell chose the cards as a randomizer because they are "informationally rich" and "gameable," and tarot cards specifically because "they're weirder than playing cards, they make the game feel more heavy metal and arcane, and they're interesting to look at."

With the tarot cards helping set the material stage, the game itself is arranged around four phases: crawl, challenge, city and camp. During the crawl phase, players pursue their chosen quest by exploring the megadungeon, complete with



an awe-inspiring “meatgrinder” to test the limits of the players. Megadungeons appealed to McCrowell, not just because they are a “huge, multi-level space” where “you can go anywhere you want,” but also because they are a (sort of) unsolved problem in RPGs. For many gamers megadungeons sound good in theory and sort of fall apart in execution: [possibly] because the premise is so daunting for a GM.”

In order to help structure the megadungeon a bit, *His Majesty the Worm* employs the meatgrinder as a way to “deal with random encounters, wandering monsters, and time tracking . . . Every time the players move into a new room, the GM checks on the meatgrinder table to see what is currently happening there, and describes the environment based on a combination of the meatgrinder’s result and the contents of that room. It’s not a preplanned story.”

As such, the megadungeon crawl becomes unpredictable, unknowing and ultimately punishing. You’ll face your challenges down here too, where combat is based on the tarot and players’ attempts to outdo the GM’s machinations.

But, personally, I find the truly fascinating part of the game outside of the megadungeon. If you survive (and that’s a big *if*), the camp and city phases in *His Majesty the Worm* offer unique respite from the action. In the camp phase, you get to rest up and (among other actions like scout and eat) use your “bonds” with the other players to recover from your time in the underworld. McCrowell describes bonds as “the primary metacurrency of the game. When you roleplay a



Bond with another character – Ally, Rival, Lover – you ‘charge’ your Bond with them. Then, when you rest, you spend those charges to heal.” As players develop bonds with their fellow travelers over time, it offers them a better opportunity to recover during the camp phase, and then prepare again for the wild, woolly underworld where they will inevitably travel.

Finally, players also get a chance to go to the City, where they can run their upkeep and perhaps actually succeed. As McCrowell puts it, “*His Majesty the Worm* is very focused on megadungeon-crawling, and I wanted players to have this sense that surviving the dangers mean something. Or else why not take crazy, wild risks? I want to root for adventurers and hope they come home.” So, in the City it is possible to build your and your guild’s fame, pay your taxes, sell your treasure, or even beg and busk. Perhaps most intriguing to me though is the ability to retire your character.

“I think the arc of the game should be: Make a character. Love them. Maybe they survive. Maybe not. If they do, they get to retire to their perfect life (that you set up during City Phases) . . . You can be the mayor! You can open a brewery! You can open a shop selling ghost pumpkins! You can carve your dryad girlfriend into a figurehead for your pirate ship and become the scourge of the seventeen seas!”

The alluring prospect of being able to see my old characters succeed after they are out of my hands (rather than merely dying, which is the standard practice for me) is certainly an exciting element of the game. The city feels like it really adds something of value to all the grinding through mazes and sludge and death that pervade the underworld.

Those are the very basic elements of *His Majesty the Worm*, but given that it stands at over 400 pages, it’s clear that I




won't be able to cover all of the detailed aspects of the game that McCrowell has developed over the years. At this point, he has "run the same continuous megadungeon for seven years," which is clearly shown in the detailed mechanics throughout the book. McCrowell also draws direct inspiration from comics for many of the features of the game.

"My main influences are *Dungeon Meshi* by Ryoko Kui (the most thoughtful treatment of the physicality of dungeoneering I've ever read), *House of Orr* (a defunct webcomic that shaped my thinking of 'the party as a character') and *Rat Queens* by Kurtis J. Wiebe and Roc Upchurch (whose friendship and interactions serve as inspiration for the inter-party relationships characters can have). Also things like the "Betty Climber" from *Rat Queens* or "Fastball Special" from *X-men* were inspirations for the game's combat system."

And the effect of this influence is clear throughout the game, including in the mechanics, but also through the art in the book. Funded through an ItchFund, McCrowell paid a variety of "artists, editors and layout gurus to help" with the book. He also used "art put into the creative commons (CC-BY) directly: Kim Holm for example." McCrowell is a "big believer in the creative commons movement" and hopes that *His Majesty the Worm* "echoes some of their contributions back to them." As a fellow traveler in the world of the creative commons, I applaud this movement and truly hope that the artists who are included get a chance to see how their work is being used by something other than AI!



With such a sprawling labyrinth to explore, I wondered if this is a place that could ever be totally plundered. But McCrowell isn't interested in completionism or total RPG domination, and suggested that maybe, once you have retired your character after playing *His Majesty the Worm* for a few months, "why not try out another game entirely? There's a ton out there!" Which is to say, if you're getting tired of the ubiquity of D&D or the relentless march towards insanity in *Call of Cthulhu*, McCrowell's megadungeon will always be there for you to dip in and out of. 

* * *

*His Majesty the Worm is coming soon from
Exalted Funeral*





APOCALYPTIC PREGNANCY

by **NATASHA OCHSHORN**



It snowed in Brooklyn this winter. I watched three-year-olds experiencing it for the first time in their lives. This worries me. I'm supposed to have a baby in July, and I don't know how to introduce it to my city when there is still a dangerous and slippery virus circulating unchecked. More to worry about.

When I first started thinking about apocalyptic pregnancies a friend texted, "I know some people who are currently pregnant in an apocalypse." Now I am.

"Apocalypse" suggests certainty; a point at which the end is nigh, if not here already. Similarly, birth brings with it a kind of finality that pregnancy does not have. With birth there is a life, no matter how short, and with apocalypse there is an end, no matter how long. Pregnancy, on the other hand, guarantees nothing. There is hope and horror in conception, just as there is now, as we wait to see if this is a chapter of dystopia from which we might imagine a way out, or the epilogue we call post-apocalypse.

Perhaps an emotional response to a presidential election year, the weather, uncontrolled rent, or genocide – people on a large scale are questioning parenting as an ethical choice. *The New York Times* framed it as a conundrum, "[To Breed or](#)

[not to Breed](#)," while *The Cut* took a firmer position, "[Don't Let Climate Anxiety Stop You From Having Kids](#)." This precarity – in the world and in our bodies – means that pregnancy is often framed as a symbol of hope, or freedom – a kind of counterweight to the terminable-ness of end-times. Writer and climate activist Andreas Malm is aware of this and when his interviewer suggests looking to his children for hope [he responds](#): "Yes, but I have to admit to some kind of cognitive dissonance, because, rationally, when you think about children and their future, you have to be dismal."

This dissonance is built on a large body of fiction about very important pregnancies in the apocalypse. Sometimes the babies that might result from these pregnancies are the literal salvation for humanity, and sometimes the hope that they represent is more symbolic. The "potential baby" as a symbol of hope and freedom is a potent one – I wrote as much to a friend in 2020 – but, as scholars like Lee Edelman have theorized in works like his 2004 book *No Future*, it is a symbol that shores up the same neoliberal ideologies that help make contemporary apocalypse feel so close.

Take the *Battlestar Galactica's* (2004) season two episode, "The Captain's



Hand,” in which President Roslin – a pro-choice candidate prior to the human genocide at the hands of cyborgs – outlaws abortion amongst surviving humans with the rationale that continuing the human species is more important than reproductive rights in the face of a diminished population. Not a calculation that I agree with, but it is one we see in our world as conservatives sweatily try to coerce childbirth instead of creating pleasurable conditions for parenting. Ironic, then, that in *Battlestar’s* world both the plot and human species come to turn on a – desired – very important pregnancy that isn’t entirely human.

The desire I have for my current pregnancy has reasons ranging from the mundane – I think parenting will be new and interesting – to the social – ideas about family – to a more abstract, expressive suspicion that the love I share with my partner is replicating too quickly to be contained by only two bodies. This doesn’t stop me from judging a fictional character who has made the same decision. Sometimes it feels like we are supposed to.

The swollen belly of Evelyn, the character played by Emily Blunt in John Krasinski’s 2018 film *A Quiet Place*, dares us. The abandoned world has been invaded by creatures with extra-heightened hear-

ing who attack anything that makes noise. I first saw the film in a theater crowded with teenagers who gasped and laughed when we saw that belly. Babies, and their deliveries, are loud, unreasonable and full of complications even under the best circumstances.

The film clearly feels that it must answer for her choice. After the baby is born, removed for the first time in months from its weight in her body, Evelyn fixates on the weight of another child, killed by monsters in the first scene of the movie. “I could have carried him” she says a few times, as if wondering why she could carry this boy and not the other. She shifts abruptly, “Who are we . . . if we can’t protect them.” This is also repeated. Having symbolically performed the carrying that she failed to do for her other son, she is able to articulate this pregnancy as a fulfillment of purpose. This scene would be a clear thesis even if Krasinski didn’t affirm it repeatedly in [press interviews](#). It reveals a dark wish at the center of the film; that end times could be freeing, clarifying even. That without the distractions of modernity we could re-focus the nuclear family; a deeply conservative desire echoed in the rhetoric of white supremacist doomsday preparers and ecofascists. Within this framework, Evelyn’s pregnancy becomes a symbolic reinvestment into these values. I preferred it as a comic jump scare.

SEVERANCE

Ling Ma

These apocalypse narratives demand so much justification that it inevitably sidelines the pregnant person and their wishes. *Children of Men*, the 2006 film by Alfonso Cuarón is one of the worst offenders; a story about pregnancy that has very little interest in its pregnant character. Kee is a Black African refugee living in England and her pregnancy is very important, occurring in an infertile world. However, we learn very little of her feelings or desires as the film focuses instead on the white man, grieving the loss of his own child, who is tasked with her protection. Sidelining Kee's interiority turns her into a symbolic vessel for a hopeful future, a salvo for male regrets, an endangered womb. This is not an acceptable response to a reproductive apocalypse. As we can currently see in America: it is the conditions of reproductive apocalypse.

What are we supposed to do, knowing that our children will likely only be special to those who share a life with them? The pressure to justify pregnancy is as beside the point as the pressure to justify abortion. Rather than future or no future, I would have us strive for a kind of pregnancy neutrality that will require decoupling the act from the symbolic. A 2018 novel, *Severance*, by Chinese American author Ling Ma, succeeds in this in this by imagining a pandemic


apocalypse so near-fetched that large swaths of it read like prophecy. In that closely realistic setting, protagonist Candace Chen's decision to carry her baby to term feels no different than mine.

Although the symptoms the pandemic infecting the world of the book are zombie-like, re-reading is a jolt of recognition. The masks, and the social signaling of mask wearing. Suggestions to cancel family holidays that no one is willing to follow. Candace works in a publishing office in New York that eventually "moves off-site," but they pay her an exorbitant amount of money to keep coming into work. A hurricane bears down on the city, and Candace spends the evening checking social media. The realism, the multiplicity of catastrophes, the horrible prescience: it all emphasizes that many people have chosen to become or continue to be pregnant under the same circumstances.

Candace considers abortion seriously, but when she decides to carry the fetus to term there's no change in the language she uses around the pregnancy. "It flared up without warning, this protective feeling toward an indeterminate bundle of cells inside of me." It doesn't become, *my child* or *the future*. Instead, Ma is careful to emphasize the mundane chemistry of it. Once



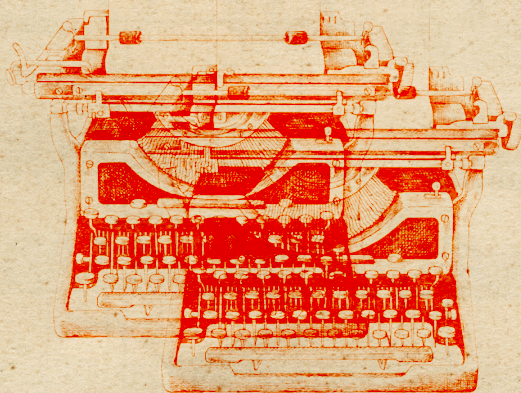
decided, Candace doesn't reconsider her choice. She does, however, consider suicide when she finally must leave the city and is imprisoned. Her captor claims the future baby symbolically for all of them. "It's miraculous. The fact that you're pregnant, it means something for our group. Maybe you don't know it, but it does. It makes us feel hopeful." The symbolic pregnancy is the rhetoric that he needs to strip Candace of her agency. The ease with which he finds this language, and the willingness of others to accept it, is only possible because of its cultural saturation. Her refusal to have the baby in these conditions illustrates its violence.

Candace escapes and, unburdened with the expectation of saving the world, begins to imagine a future that doesn't reverse the apocalypse, but rather, lives in it. "She will be born untethered from all family except me, without a hometown or a place of origin." Her vision is one of movement and continuance, both new and mundane, driving until she can't anymore, and then walking. The timeline shifts from end times to just . . . times. Which is the apocalypse we all live in. 



IT'S NOT A LOOP,
IT'S A SPIRAL.

by AUTUMN WRIGHT





**"EVERY TIME I
WRITE, THINGS
ONLY GET WORSE."
-ALAN WAKE**

In "On Being Ill," Virginia Woolf argues for illness's place as a major literary theme among love, battle and jealousy. Illuminating its conspicuous absence in the English canon, she calls forth a new "hierarchy of the passions," where fever displaces love and sciatica jealousy. But what of the illnesses of the mind? I write from a deficit with two words too small to convey the hours dissociating in a world where I am lost.

My editor said I should write about Alan Wake. About how playing *Alan Wake 2* feels like my panic attacks, how my panic attacks feel like Alan Wake's nightmares. A comparison I invited. But to do so I would have to write them: the doubts, the certain-

ties, the recursions. I wasn't thinking of any of this when I began playing *Alan Wake 2*. I realized while having a panic attack some weeks after I first reentered Bright Falls that these loops and phantasms were a familiar evil. For some reason, it propelled me to finish the game. Well, I also needed to write this piece. I sit down at my keyboard like Alan at his typewriter.

My panic is an overlap; trapped in the looping interiors of my body breaking against the surface. I have become a 26-year-old hypochondriac, convinced that I am dying. It's recursive, to be so afraid of death the body reacts as if it actually is. And so, I've become obsessed with my own death, anticipating it at every turn. Panic attacks themselves are experienced as looping signals in the autonomic nervous system between nerve and spine – a loop detached from the brain, physically removed from the thoughts that could rationalize my continued survival. Recently it has come for my breath. A weight. Tightness. Pain. More cause to panic.

Alan is a writer. He spirals outward, larger, his problems systemic. He tries to write his way out, out of the spiral, but it just keeps growing with him. It's a whole fucking city now. The dream, his paracosm. He remembers the city on an overcast fall day. Autumn is here: A chill in the air pregnant



with meaning, wet puddles full of leaves, the clouds cling near. Ghosts? A reaper? Phantasms walking the streets, specters roaming the unfurling dream. I imagine each one is a trigger. The ache, the twinge, the lump that heralds my next panic. Anxiety lingers, encroaches on the edges of vision. Much of it fades when confronted. Sometimes, though, light only illuminates the detail. They reach out, grab hold, rewrite the story I thought was living, if only for the day. It's not that some hallucinations are real. They all are, in another reality, the one the spiral sends me to.

Woolf laments the poverty of language for pain in the English language, contrasting the love-stricken student's library with the bed-ridden invalid's inventions: "He is forced to coin words himself, and, taking his pain in one hand, and a lump of pure sound in the other . . . so to crush them together that a brand-new word in the end drops out . . ." So, I invent new words, call the phantasms my psychosomas. ". . . Probably it will be something laughable. For whom of English birth can take liberties with the language?"

Of course, Alan doesn't invent new words though. Alan is a writer. He relies on simile and imagery and lets the meaning get lost in translation. "The darkness spread through them like cancer," he writes of the Taken

officers. It allows him to avoid looking too closely ~~at himself~~. Maybe Alan is like me. Maybe I'm like Alan. Trying to write my way out. Maybe the writing is just incidental to this compulsion, something we're drawn to: Discursive loops something to carve with our cyclical thoughts – as each overlap is entered with a piece of art.

I talk to my therapist. Mindfulness helps. I soak my feet in hot water, feel the cold of late fall on my apartment floor. I thought anxiety was something I could get away from, when it wasn't me yet. The wave would build for days, crashing in panic that could last hours, days, but I would return. The tension would ease with time and I could resume my life, pick back up my work and send the emails explaining my delay. But in January it came to stay; Ambient hum taking me over. Static. Hiss. *Scratch*.

AGAIN, I LOOP.

My panic is a forest; The conspiratorial woods. It's not just what's around the corner. It's behind every tree. The shadows of branches and limbs and leaves. The rustling in the wind, the call of a bird, the snapping of a twig. Anxiety is obsessive. It's a matter of life and death. I can't miss it. And



Saga is a detective. She spirals inwards, toward the center, smaller. She loops in the overlaps, reaches dead ends, turns around, solves a puzzle, gets the bolt cutters – a Taken bursts through the wall.

In her final chapter, Saga finally stumbles over her obsession with the case, with the narrative. Trapped in her mind place at the end. All her work is gone, as if back to the start. Stuck in the room. Stuck in the Dark Place. Lost. She cannot will what she wills. Tells herself the other voice isn't hers. Unconvincing. They overlap. Overrides her sense of self. She rewrites her own story. For the worse. The mind place becomes an echo chamber for fears and doubts. Silencing the thoughts won't work. Drowning – need to get out – but, void. Saga isn't familiar with feeling out of control, has no way to cope, ~~is a detective.~~

I've been feeling more witness to the other voice's dictation of myself than agent in my own body. It crushes esteem, snuffs independence. It's the fear stopping her from trying to leave; the sinking feeling is coming from inside the house. But what do I do with the feeling that my body is a house that is rejecting me? That every morning I wake up and it gnaws at me from the inside? Human microbiome, cancer, dysphoria, all existential challenges to the house as my own to live in. The

house that was, of course, never really mine, never belonged to this generation that's dying younger of illness caused by stress and pollution and inaccessible health care. But the house won't forgive me for my parents' sins. We are all just renters in this body.

In February I stop drinking coffee and my body unwinds enough to return. Still, my thoughts whirl. What if there is no escaping the Dark Place? It invades all reality around me. Comes home. I cannot convince myself I'm not sick. Not dying. Not destined to die in a worse way than we all already are. There's a memory of when I wasn't like this. But it was always there, wasn't it? There's no cure of this. My therapist says she can't help me. Doesn't help me find someone who can. I consider psychiatry. *What if this is still the Dark Place? Another dream to wake up from?*

AGAIN, I LOOP.

My panic is a spiral. Grows infinitely large, sinches forever tighter. I dip my head low in a bath. Its warmth soothes the shivering. Hold the phone up as I type this above the surface. I imagine I am Alan Wake coming back to the beginning, when it dawns on him he'll thus forget. Do the dance again, as if



for the first time. Write the story as if it may turn out this time. Watch the film reel unwind. And maybe that's mercy enough, to not know the struggle before us, not anticipate the weeks lost to the flights of the mind. To live those first 24 years when questions of life and death were the unimportant ones.

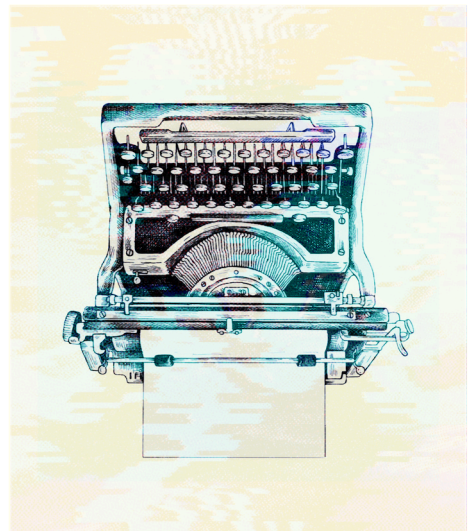
The night I finally finished *Alan Wake 2*, I had my own nightmare. *Kill the body*, the psychosomas shout. Something like Scratch breaking into the bedroom. I couldn't move. I woke up, yelling. MJ put their arm around me, not really awake. "You're safe," they said. "You're safe." I closed my eyes. No time to process. Back to sleep. I wake up from a dream my eardrum burst, pouring blood. They're out of bed now, getting ready.

My anxiety follows my reckoning with mortality. At 25, realizing I'd die too. Years of ideation and family funerals, but it only stuck once I met my partner, the person who made me realize we would, or, could, if I weren't fucked, grow up. They've been there when therapists and employers and family have not. I'm scared to lose that thing. ~~I worry I'll hurt them.~~ When I am gasping for breath between each wave, I am reaching out for them. A haunting.

Alice is an artist. She sees the spiral, left it once, crawled out as he dove in. Hears him

calling out for her. Thinks it's Scratch. A haunting. The isolation of illness is bound by an impoverished language, a feedback loop of disconnection. She finds her way: Destruction or ascension. Shares the images to illuminate the path. Drowns herself again. The spiral constricts. I've been a bad partner, haven't been wholly myself for months. Sometimes the whirlpool stretches out. I feel it whip those around me. The fringes of my hair soak. I've grown it out. I am ~~like Alan Wake~~ so tired. But I won't be able to sleep. Not tonight. Not until I get out of this loop. Keep writing one more chapter that could save me.

A note from my editor: **Just remember there is always a well-lit room.** 



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