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CHILD OF LIGHT

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DAVID SHIMOMURA BEN SAILER OLUWATAYO ADEWOLE DEIRDRE GYLE MADDI CHILTON DR. EMMA KOSTOPOULUS PHOENIX SIMMS MATT MARRONE JAY CASTELLO LEVI RUBECK NOAH SPRINGER AUTUMN WRIGHT JUSTIN REEVE ROB RICH

This Machine Kills Fascists

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Shortform

Presented by Exalted Funeral

Longform

Contributors

Welcome sports fans!

I am of course assuming that some of you out there do a enjoy sports, something that sometimes it feels like only about three of us in the Unwinnable offices seem like.

One feature this month and it's timely: ten years on, Luis Aguasvivas looks at *Child of Light,* a game that would absolutely never get made in the way it did now.

For this month's Funeral Rites, brought to you by our friends at Exalted Funeral, Maddi Chilton has *Tephrotic Nightmares.*

As for our regular rogues . . . Oluwatayo Adewole goes to the heart of true crime. Jay Castello goes to the underworld. Maddi Chilton reads books from a list. Deirdre Coyle taps out. Emma Kostopolus has a tiny electric enemy. Matt Marrone finds authenticity in an unlikely place. Justin Reeve digs up the oldest timey place. Rob Rich takes on cinema's favorite policeman. Levi Rubeck connects to some distant beats. Ben Sailer is late to the issue but not to the party. Phoenix Simms is not talking about Alice in Chains. Noah Springer finds the beef. And finally, Autumn Wright looks to fall…of civilizations.

See you all in the next Exploits!

David Shimomura
Chicago, Illinois
May 7, 2024

NOISE COMPLAINT | **BEN SAILER**

MAY 2024

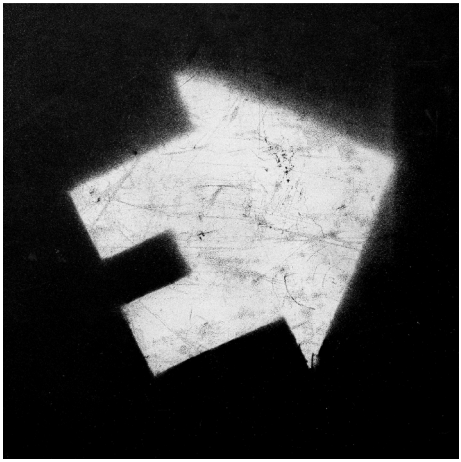
Once in my early college years, I was loading in my gear to play a show with my band in a VFW basement. A patron on his way to the bar upstairs stopped me in the entranceway to ask a few questions about what was going on downstairs and what kind of music we played. Before we went our separate ways, he told me, "I used to be in a band but now I'm creatively stagnant. Have fun down there."

That quote still haunts me two decades later. As a recent father who is approaching 40 years old, I understand that priorities change with age, and I don't look back at that exchange with any sort of judgement. There will come a time where I write my last piece, play my last show, or discover the last new record that moves me so much I have to tell someone about it. Yet I also wonder whether people leave punk rock behind not because they have outgrown it, but because they didn't realize that growing with the form was an option.

When sorting through recent releases to cover in this space, I noticed a pattern of bands from various areas of the punk landscape putting out new and vital work well into their 30s, 40s and 50s, proving its possible for punk (in its various strands) to allow not only for nostalgia past your teens and 20s but for lifelong growth and reinvention. What follows is a selection of records in my current listening rotation that have served as a collective reminder that even though your relationship to music might change, there's no reason to believe there's some sort of age cutoff where your place on stage has to be replaced with a seat at the bar.

Restorations – Restorations

When I spoke with Restorations frontman Jon Loudon for a small music blog in 2013, I asked how the band managed to balance being in a touring band while holding down careers outside of music. The answer was that they don't make the band their number one priority. This would become a common response any time I'd ask the same question to other bands in their 30s and 40s that had spent most of their 20s staring at the inside of a van. Making space for music to fit



around other priorities can be the difference between breaking up the band and having a slow but sustainable career.

This approach means that new releases from Restorations are somewhat few and far between – their recently released self-titled fifth album marks the band's first recorded output since 2018's *LP5000* – but it's also what allows them to release music at all.

They've shared across social media that this was a difficult record to make, but if that's true, it doesn't show in the final product. Imagine the lead guitar lines from *Caution*-era Hot Water Music fused with the distorted bass stomp of Torche churning underneath The Hold Steady's brand of cinematic storytelling, and you might have an inkling of what Restorations sound like.

The lyric "You're still a kid to the grownups / And you're still a cop to the kids" on "Someone Else's Dream" is perhaps the best summation of feeling stuck between worlds as an aging punk and a young (or not that young) professional, and if that feels in any way relatable, your anthems are waiting for you here.

J. Robbins – Basilisk

Despite being a legendary name in punk and hardcore circles both as a performer and producer with a resume that's far too long to do justice in this space, I've never made myself familiar with much of his solo work until now. Basilisk offers off-kilter alternative rock-inflected post-hardcore that should feel familiar to anyone who's spent time with albums from Jawbox or Burning Airlines (perhaps his two best-known prior acts).

In a better world, this is the sound from the '90s that would become synonymous with radio rock. It's experimental enough to avoid predictability and yet catchy and accessible enough to immediately grab and hold your attention. "Exquisite Corpse" stands out as a single that could have been, if singles were still something that mattered like they did in the mid-'90s.

C. L. S. M. – Infinity Shit

I'm not exactly sure what the story is behind Coliseum adopting the C.L.S.M. moniker for Infinity Shit, their first new album in nine years, but I couldn't be happier to see them back in action. The last time we heard from the Louisville three-piece, they were leaning into melodic mid-tempo rock on 2015's *Anxiety's Kiss,* disbanding shortly after its release.

The world has offered ample fodder to inspire devasting D-beat infused hardcore punk since then, which is exactly what vocalist/guitarist Ryan Patterson and company have delivered here with little-to-no advance warning. If anyone was wondering where their collective heads

and hearts are at after nearly a decade away, the title of the opening track "Dehydrated Flesh of the Bourgeoises" should serve as a suitable vibe check. They're pissed. And that's great news.

For the most part, Coliseum (C.L.S.M.?) spend most of the record's 21-minute runtime righteously spitting bile over riffs that rip as hard as anything they've ever released since their self-titled 2004 debut and its 2007 follow-up *No Salvation*. Yet while *Infinity Shit* treads across well-worn territory, they haven't abandoned experimenting with new sounds and textures by any means. The saxophone lines that appear mid-album on "Behind the Sheltering Sky" could be seen as a gimmick if they didn't work so well to accentuate the track's ominous tension.

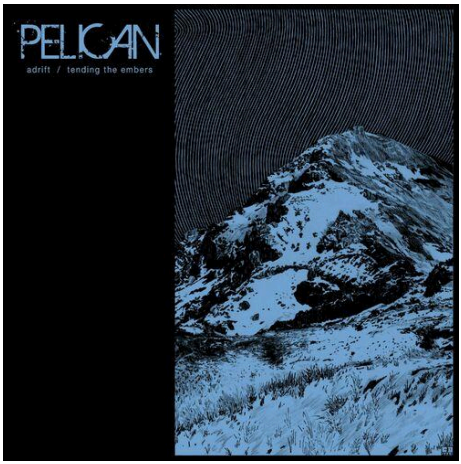
Her Head's On Fire – "Why Are We Alone"

While it seems like every '90s emo and hardcore band has been getting back together for reunion tours lately, Her Head's On Fire is instead an all-new project that includes scene luminaries from Garrison, Small Brown Bike, Saves The Day and The Bomb. While their second full-length *Strange Desires* (which follows up their 2022 debut *College Rock and Clove Cigarettes)* won't be available until July, I've already listened to the first teaser single "Why Are We Alone" they've shared more times than I can count. This is energetic post-hardcore that feels like

a continuation of the band's considerable collective legacy rather than an attempt to recapture former glory.

Hot Water Music – Vows

Between their main band and various side projects, I don't think any of the members of Hot Water Music have taken a substantial break from music since their formation in the early 1990s. While the full record is still four days away from release as of this writing (which, yes, is past my deadline, if you were wondering), they've shared enough tracks on streaming platforms to get the sense that this will be another banger in a deep catalog with no misses. This will be their second record with Chris Creswell from The Flatliners as a full-time member and that combination still feels like the punk



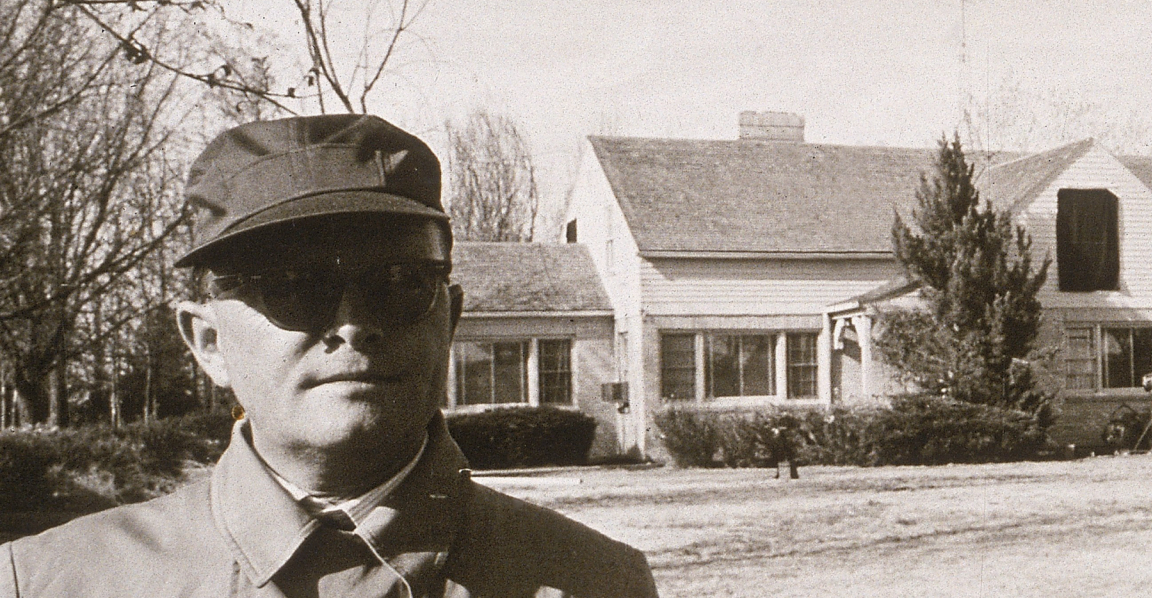
equivalent of Lebron James traveling back in time to join Michal Jordan and the '96 Bulls. I'll leave this blurb there.

Pelican – Adrift/Tending the Embers

Pelican have been a model of consistency since their formation in the early 2000s and the pair of tracks on this EP do not disappoint. Heavy, atmospheric and seeing no need for vocals, this is a band that sells T-shirts reading "post-emo stoner deathgaze," a genre descriptor that is both absurd and on point. Their 2005 breakthrough *The Fire in Our Throats Will Beckon the Thaw* was a fixture in my listening rotation as a college sophomore, and even after all these years, it's possible that their best output may still be ahead of them. There's something both comforting and motivational about that.

Paint It Black – Famine

I've already written an entire column this year about this record, but they fit the premise of this piece too well not to mention them again. Paint It Black embody not only the ethos of releasing records on their own timeline, but of refusing to compromise your values and ethics. This is 16 minutes and 17 seconds worth of urgency and anxiousness about a world that gets a little bit darker every day. Words like "Not everyone is free / And that doesn't feel safe to me" function not only as an expression of despair, but as a reminder not to settle deep enough into middle-class comfort to forget that a better world is possible.



RUN IT BACK | **OLUWATAYO ADEWOLE**

1966

Come one, come all, this week we're swinging our way back to the '60s and to the progenitor of modern true crime – Truman Capote's *In Cold Blood*.

In this book, written at the same time as the events it follows, Capote writes about the surprise murder of a family in a sleepy town in Kansas and the eventual prosecution of the perpetrators: Richard Eugene "Dick" Hickock and Perry Edward Smith. The book posits itself as an immaculately true work of journalism; later testimony and writings seem to suggest that Capote fudged at least some of the details for dramatic effect. In any case, it was a tremendous financial success which launched the true crime non-fiction novel into being.

No-one really understood how hard she worked on this stuff and it was beginning to really get on her last nerve. She could ruin these people! She caught every stutter, every blue joke, every little side-bit about how badly they wanted to see what was in the pants of the latest killer or chief of police or whatever. She had the power of life and death in her hands and yet she was still getting snippy slack messages about the audio issues caused by her bosses not knowing how to use a mic! Why couldn't she have found a different internship?

This is one of those books where it could only have been written by a gay guy. And it's not solely because of the text's dripping homoeroticism that comes through every description of these killers who are constructed with a dark charm. It's also not just because of Capote blatantly having a thing for Perry Edward Smith, fixating on him with a fetishistic lens we will explore later. No, the real gay touch of the book is the incisive outsider perspective.

Much like Isherwood, Capote's writing relies on a gay fly-on-the-wall positioning. He's non-threatening enough to be allowed in these spaces to explore the interiority of everybody's lives, but still detached enough to see the constructs for what they are. In the general news coverage of the murder of the Clutter family, the shock lies in that the

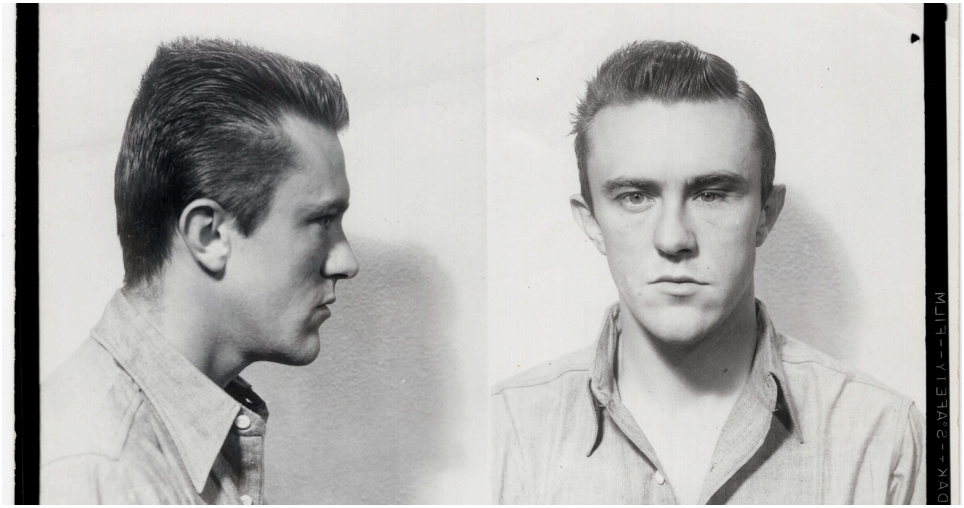
greatest institution of American Christian life has been desecrated – the nuclear family and their land are no longer a safe haven. To unpick the cultural moment happening here requires someone for whom the promise of safety in the American Protestant family unit has never been guaranteed. In this, I also end up thinking a lot about the work like James Baldwin's *If Beale Street Could Talk* or Evelyn Waugh's *A Handful of Dust,* where gay writers take the scalpel to normative social relations and explore the fractures that lie within.

For this outsider position to be key to the novel which functioned as the genesis for our modern era of narrative True Crime, makes it more fascinating that the focus has now moved away from the outsider and to work being created people who are very much inside. Instead of having an uneasy relationship with the Normalities foisted upon us, they are fully embedded in them. Instead of getting deep insights into what happens when a fantasy crashes into the daily realities of violence, we are told that there is something real to be mourned that goes beyond the lives lost. Made by the insiders who most benefit from the myths of safety in Property and Family, these bastard children narratives become paranoia machines, instilling the panic that there is a killer round every corner, reinforcing the swirl of emotions and worship of securitization rather than interrogating it.

These men had come before. She bore the marks, they bore the bullets. The warning call had come so now she had 15 minutes. 5 to dress herself, pull gloves over calloused hands and make cloth stretch over heaving power. 5 to get armed to the teeth. 2 to look at herself in the mirror, trace the lines of ache from her brow to her chest. Half a minute to wonder why these men wouldn't just stop. Another half with a war cry to shout the desperation away. 2 to slot into position.

It is important to this book that the killers are darkly romantic figures of a uniquely American variety – drawing on the outlaw narratives that are central to the country's masculine ideals.

One of the killers, Dick Hickock, is a man who in another life could've been an all-American hero. However, through a mix of a debilitating car accident and a long series of subsequent bad decisions, he became increasingly violent and cruel. In a different book, the writer would focus on this fall from grace as a grand tragedy. He could be the lead of one of the spaghetti westerns that were contemporaneous to *In Cold Blood*'s release – a charming white outlaw but for Capote, Hickock is essentially the

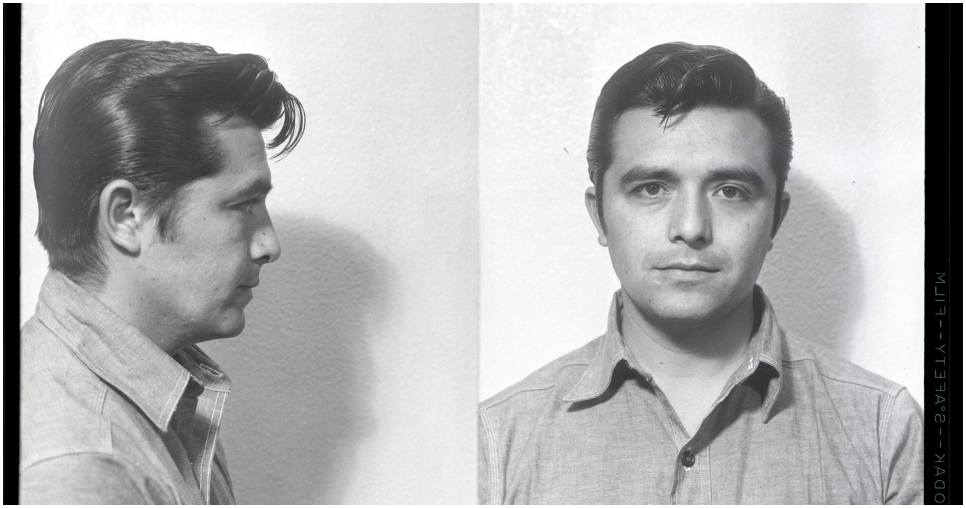


devil – and not quite in the semi-sympathetic Miltonian sense. His silver tongue is not a thing of roguish charm but pure evil. At the same time, the author still finds an eroticism in their dynamic.

It is clear Capote is more sympathetic towards Perry Smith – through a mix of outsider kinship, racial fetishization and the lure of cosmic tragedy present in both his writing and his own life. When describing Smith, the text is often florid and dreamy. For Capote, this is a dreamer ruined by the harshness of reality, ravaged by war and trauma. What also can't be ignored here is how much he is pulling on the racial position of Smith for this characterization. Capote fixates on the texture of his hair, the tone of his skin, persistently highlighting the mixed nature of his heritage and constructing his general disillusionment as a racial one. While it is certainly true that Smith's Indigenous heritage complicated his life and relation to society, it is also fairly clear that Capote far too heavily overidentifies himself with Smith's lonely outsiderness in a way that veers into fetishism. Specifically, he pulls on ideas of the noble savage to paint a portrait of Smith where he is a being of impulse and strong feelings with noble morals (notably emphasizing him saying "I despise people who can't control themselves." and being disgusted at his co-conspirator), manipulated rather than ever really deciding to do something terrible.

Having these two as the central figures demonstrates the contradictions within the mythic figure of the American cowboy. An icon of whiteness but often embodied by non-white people and cultures – the word cowboy descending from "vaquero." An icon of hegemonic masculinity but lionized for being detached from ties to the traditional family – something Hiram Pérez writes extensively about, specifically how this dissonance is queer even when the cowboys themselves weren't always engaged in same-sex behaviors.

These foundational outlaw erotics also bleed through to contemporary true crime and its fascination with serial killers. Lone figures (usually men) with troubled pasts and tragedies aplenty leading up to their acts of violence. You can see this with Ryan Murphy's series on Jeffrey Dahmer, and also more broad true crime podcast conversation and also memes around the killer where his (structural) Desirability is so often placed front and center. There is a reason why Dahmer becomes a darkly romantic fixation, where John Wayne Gacy becomes an abhuman entity (within Murphy's series and more



broadly) despite both of them doing heinous evils which to a greater or lesser extent involved children.

Glass towers loom over the spot where the boy turned blue. On Aaron's daily walk he always goes past it but never through, and so does his Pitbull Rusty. He couldn't quite remember which one of them started the tradition, the ritual avoidance, respect or fear for an arbitrary piece of pavement. He wondered if the ritual would die with him, or hold on forever, like wolves know to howl at the moon.

True crime (particularly that involving murder) generally relies on the idea that there are some harms that shock us and others that don't. Specifically in the case of killers, the dead become a vessel through which we can explore troubled minds. To be fair to Capote, he does try to give us a full and embodied understanding of the family and their complexities before their deaths. But it all still mostly feels like a purpose for the violence and tragedy.

As above, what makes these deaths so shocking is that they break the supposed safety of the home but also the deceased were nice and white and classed. But what most of us who exist on the margins can recognize is that this Security, however temporary or fleeting, only ever existed for a tiny few. To paraphrase William C Anderson – some of us are always at war.

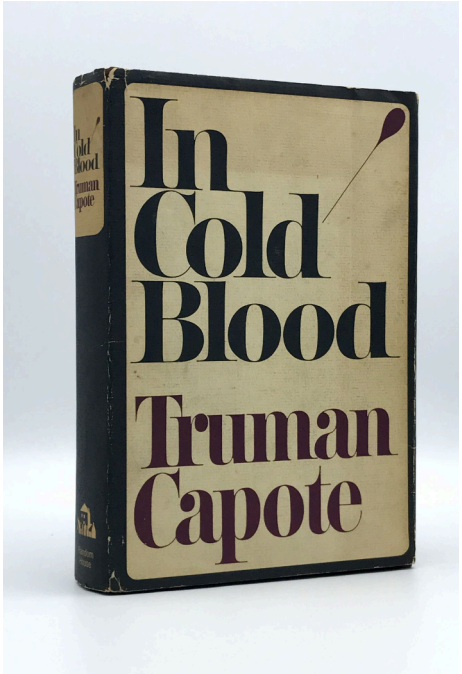
At the same time of this book being written and realized, the Civil Rights Movement had peaked and was soon to be falling. Malcolm X had been killed, the authorities continued to increase their surveillance and harassment of movement leaders. Despite the passing of legislation, people were continuing to be martyred for engaging their basic rights. The Vietnam war was ramping up, with more and more people killed in the name of imperial interests. This is the context in which this novel pioneering the modern genre and its understandings of death must be understood. That to the target audience those deaths were distant and perhaps even expected or worst of all deserved. But the Clutters at what shakes the nation.

More contemporaneously, I think about Tony Hughes and his presentation in the aforementioned Murphy series. He is the main victim who gets humanized and has time allocated to his life. Hughes was a Black Deaf man and also happened to have been one of Dahmer's longer relationships with a victim. At points the portrait is really powerful, but it does repeatedly veer into using his disability to produce pity from non-disabled audiences, rather than using it to highlight the way he (and other disabled people) are made particularly vulner-

able to violence. In general, I think the direction and performance also over-rely on Hughes' niceness bordering on infantilization to beatify him. I think the lean towards pity based on disability betrays the reality that Black people have to be extra-innocent to not be seen as walking corpses – even in a genre (and at this point an industry) whose leaders will often claim that victims are at the center of their work.

Ultimately the cruel truth is that if Hughes had died of AIDS, had died in gang violence, had died from addiction, had died from suicide, had died from any other issue allowed to run rampant by the state, he would just be another dead Black boy for the pile. In the context of true crime and white America's relationship with Black death, his death is only relevant because it complicates the narrative of the eroticized and enigmatic "Monster" who killed him.

Maybe the most difficult thing is that despite all of my criticism *In Cold Blood* is still a deeply compelling novel when you're reading. I knew it was extremely unethical, and far more interested in poetics than journalism. I knew (and could tell while reading) Capote was very intentionally playing favorites in his portrayals of the characters. However, it's hard to deny the beauty of Capote's dreamy vision of sleepy towns and tortured killers. And in the era of endless true crime podcasts and documentaries and text-to-speech YouTube videos I wonder where the poetry has gone.



THIS MORTAL COYLE | **DEIRDRE COYLE**

THE GOTHIC WRITER FROM *GAME OF VAMPIRES*

A subcategory of this column might be called, "Am I Enjoying This?" This question haunts all my columns about mobile games, and this month will be no different.

Game of Vampires: Twilight Sun is a horrible little mobile game from DreamPlus, developers of *Game of Sultans* and *Game of Khans.*

Let's be clear about what I mean by "horrible": I hate it.

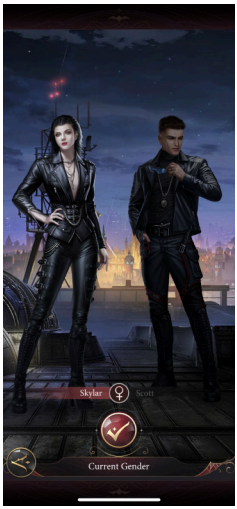
Let's be clear about what I mean by "I hate it": I cannot stop playing it.

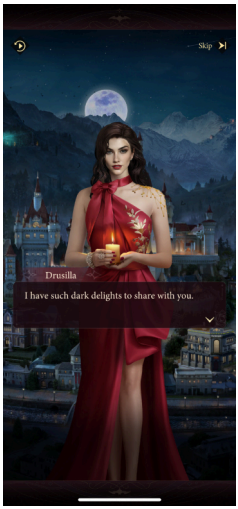
As a vampire game, the art style is, naturally, high gothic. No notes. My current avatar looks like Wednesday Addams carrying a notebook; she's labeled "Gothic Writer." Again, no notes.

What's horrible, in this gothic writer's opinion, is the gameplay. Like other mobile games of its ilk, *Game of Vampires* involves tapping through frequent offers of in-game riches in exchange for IRL money. This is standard, but I hate it every time. Gameplay also involves gathering resources (tapping), wooing lovers (tapping) and tap-tapping through a plotline involving Dracula, Victor Frankenstein and Carmilla, a vampire presumably named after Sheridan le Fanu's 1872 novel (see also: Hammer Horror's Karnstein Trilogy). Many characters reference vampires of the pop cultural past: for example, "Saber," a vampiric vampire hunter who looks suspiciously like Wesley Snipes' Blade. There's also a wavy-haired, brunette "Drusilla" who claims to have "dark delights to share with you."

Every aspect of gameplay feels like collecting. Collecting resources (blood, nectar, bats), logically, but also collecting lovers, wardens and children (who sometimes appear after "dates" with your lovers).

The thinly veiled euphemism of "dates" *is* winkingly comical. "Dates" between you and





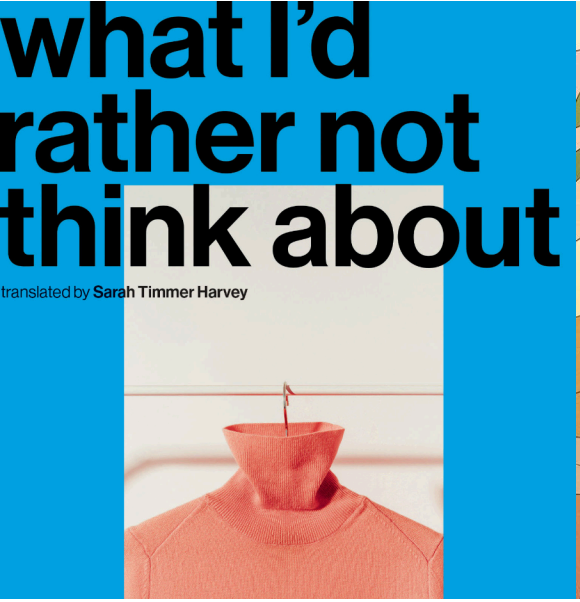
one of your lovers are usually depicted as two silhouetted characters in a romantic setting – by a fireplace, or in nature – and when your "date" is about to result in the birth of a child, a heart-shaped vignette zooms in on your lover's crotch area. And then there's a baby – immediately!

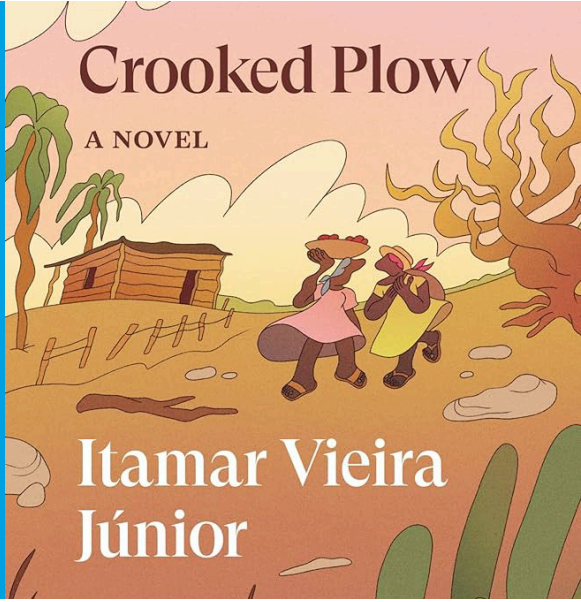
One interesting element of the game's romance system is the ability to choose your lovers' gender on a case-by-case basis. Every lover-character's story is the same, but you can selectively decide whom you want to see as masc and whom as femme. Only two genders are on offer, but it's an element of dating sim gameplay that I, personally, have not encountered before. (Some of the male characters I think look like jerks, while their femme counterparts look like women I would chew off my own arm to know. See: Skylar/Scott.)

Do I love this game, or do I hate it? Am I being a downer because of latent mobile game snobbery? Do I simply hate tapping? (No, I love tapping.) *Is* my Gothic Writer avatar even someone I'd want to befriend? (Yes.)

Do I think this is good gameplay? No. But do I care about gameplay *more* than lush goth graphics and a collection of vampire lovers? I mean . . . I would prefer to enjoy gameplay *and* graphics, but I won't pretend to require both. Maybe I'm just an aesthetic digital hoarder, but when I see the grayed-out lovers I have yet to collect, I know I must catch them all.

I guess that means I love it.





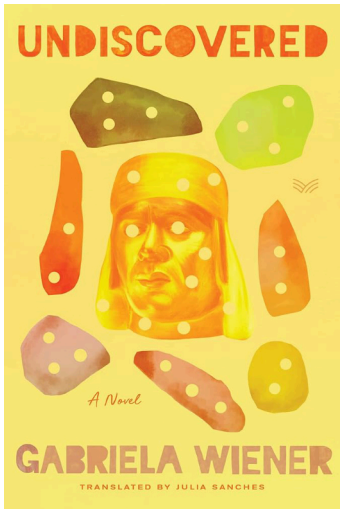
MIND PALACES | **MADDI CHILTON**

BOOKING IT (VOL. 1)

I'm trying to read the International Booker Prize longlist, 13 books from around the world that were translated into English within the last year. I'm doing this for three reasons 1) because I've been trying to read more translated fiction, 2) because I enjoyed watching the Oscar movies, and 3) because I like to assign myself side quests. So far, I've read six out of the thirteen, four of which I really enjoyed, with one significant standout.

The two I felt neutral about, *Undiscovered* by Gabriela Weiner (from Peru, translated by Julia Sanches) and *Lost on Me* by Veronica Raimo (from Italy, translated by Leah Janeczko), feel like two parts of a trinity in theme on the books I've read so far. The third, *What I'd Rather Not Think About* by Jente Posthuma (from the Netherlands, translated by Sarah Timmer Harvey), I ended up really liking. As I was reading them, they began to form a kind of grouping in my mind, as all three are concerned with womanhood and belonging in modern society, though they all explore it in different directions – *Undiscovered* through race and colonization, *Lost on Me* through family legacy and creative drive, and *What I'd Rather Not Think About* through an intense and compelling sibling relationship. Even as I write this, I recognize that I've parceled out the female authors from the male, but I do believe they shared a strong stylistic and thematic bent.

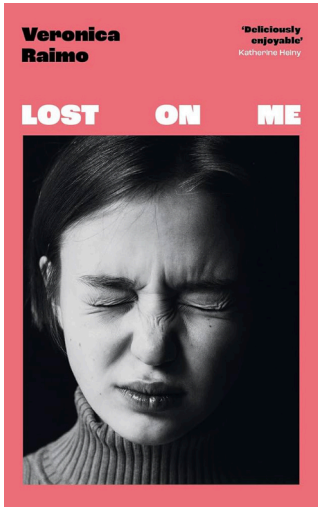
There is a slow and inward-looking pace to these three that only feels fully realized in *What I'd Rather Not Think About,* which is given momentum by its almost claustrophobic focus on the relationship between the narrator and her brother. To a certain extent, it doesn't even rely on its own construction of characters – it exploits and explores the reader's own internal ideas of twins, all of the baggage they bring to the concept, and then forces them to hold that picture against the relationship actually portrayed. The other two books, I felt, got lost without such a sense of focus. The autobiographical *Undiscovered* feels like an extended journal entry more than anything else, the narrator musing about her Peruvian identity and her colonial heritage and her life abroad in Europe without much movement

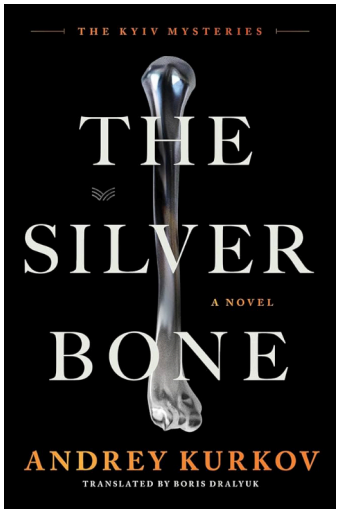


behind it. *Lost in Me* winds along similarly, as individual vignettes in the life of the narrator feel evocative and sympathetic but the book never feels sound as a whole. In contrast, *What I'd Rather Not Think About*'s gentle introduction of its frankly upsetting subject matter – the narrator's twin's suicide, and the dissolution of their relationship until that point – pulls you through the pages in mute horror, knowing what will happen and wondering how they got there.

Stylistically opposite from the first three is Andrey Kurkov's *The Silver Bone* (from Ukraine, translated by Boris Drayluk), a mystery set in Kyiv in the tumultuous period shortly after the arrival of the Soviets. It sticks rigidly to the conventions of genre fiction, which I found abrupt after the first books I'd read on the longlist, but as I made my way through it, I understood more strongly its place there. It explores similar questions to the other books, though much less openly – questions of identity, occupation, individual agency and familial loss – and I thought provided an especially interesting contrast to another book I found fascinating, Itamar Viera Jr.'s *Crooked Plow* (from Brazil, translated by Johnny Lorenz). Crooked Plow, about sustenance farmers in Bahia, is intimately concerned with the characters' relationship to their land. *The Silver Bone,* though outwardly echoing similar themes as Kyiv changes hands, feels muted and hesitant compared to *Crooked Plow*'s vitality.

The prevailing feeling in *The Silver Bone* that persists past its crime fiction structure is confusion amidst inexplicable violence, as the main character's numbness after witnessing the murder of his father extends through the entire book, even as he has his home invaded by barracking soldiers and courts a possible wife and investigates a murder. It takes the feeling of "going through the motions" to almost comical extremes; the characters try patiently to fit themselves into place as daily life becomes more and more absurd and dangerous under the new regime. *Crooked Plow*'s characters are the opposite. The structure of their life and their world is clearly demarcated – plantation owners, tenant farmers, mud houses for married children appearing on the same plot of land as their parents, everything constant but the weather – but none of the characters go willingly, from the introductory scene in which a young girl puts a knife in her mouth and accidentally cuts out her tongue to the very end, where that girl, now a grown woman and widow, kills the cruel overseer of the plantation in her sleep, possessed by one of the spirits her father used to channel. Kurkov's Kyiv balances carefully in the abnormal normal; Viera Jr's Água Negra can't help but tear apart the seams holding it in place.





My favorite book of the six I've read so far is Domenic Starnone's *The House on Via Gemito* (from Italy, translated by Oonagh Stransky). It's the oldest book on the list – written in 2000, though only translated into English recently – and in my opinion the most stylistically adventurous, as the entire book is essentially a single, cascading stream of consciousness memory of the narrator thinking about his father, Federì. It echoes themes that have recurred through the longlist – legacy, family, occupation and collaboration, personal identity, community, abuse and responsibility – but, like *What I'd Rather Not Think About,* focuses so strongly on its subject that it feels impossible to stop and consider the context in which the story is being told instead of being helplessly pulled through. The world within it, the vividly drawn portrait of the Neapolitan community in which the characters live, appears despite its incredible and precise depth to be only a painted backdrop for Federì himself, who towers over the book. The terror and awe he inspired in his son, his wife, his in-laws and everyone else he knew almost drips through the page. In many ways it resembles the first three books I spoke of, and perhaps does strictly share their structure of portrait painting through vignettes, but where the modern entries tend to present their moments of memory in isolation, Via Gemito's narrator knits his memories of his father into each other, often triggering himself to think of something that he will not explain until a hundred pages later, his mental image of Federì a rich and volatile landscape resistant to structure. The rest of his life can do little but weave around a few momentous scenes surrounding his father; an extended description of the ache in his legs as he knelt to pose for one of his father's portraits is one of the most tense, nauseating portions of the book. It's a dense, thick book that went down like a dream, a real testament to Starnone's craftsmanship.

It's fun to read these books in succession, though it's hard to figure out if the similarities between them are more a consequence of the Booker committee's preferences or of current trends in translated fiction. The two of these six that made the shortlist, *What I'd Rather Not Think About* and *Crooked Plow,* certainly feel like some of the stronger entries I've read so far, though *The House on Via Gemito* is dearly missed. Among the books I still have up are the only Asian entry on the longlist, Hwang Sok-Yong's *Mater 2-10,* plus a few others I'm excited to get to. I'm interested to see if the themes I found so prevalent in these first entries are as strong in the next group.

See you next time for the follow-up!

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

I HAVE NO MOUTH AND I MUST SCREAM: THE TERROR OF TAMAGOTCHI

When I was sixteen years old, my high school drama club did a secret Santa gift exchange at the end of our winter play run. I opened my package from my Santa to behold an egg-shaped keychain with a small screen and several buttons. It was the year 2010, and I had been given a Tamagotchi, which had been so far removed from the cultural zeitgeist to have bounced back around as vintage. The Santa responsible quickly revealed herself – the girlfriend of one of my closest male friends. I was surprised by this, because I was under the impression that Meredith really didn't care for me, given how negatively she had reacted to her boyfriend and I starring opposite each other as a married couple in the play we had just wrapped. But I accepted the toy gladly, with the idea that I must have misjudged her, since she got me such a unique and thoughtful gift, as I was well-known for enjoying videogames.

But oh, how wrong I was. Meredith fucking hated me. Her gift was not a cute piece of nerd nostalgia, but a brutal PsyOp designed to drive me to the brink of despair. And it worked. I spent weeks obsessively tending to the little 'gotchi, making sure it was fed and that its enclosure was cleaned and that it knew, as best as I could make it understand, that I loved it. The toy immediately took up a substantial portion of real estate in my working mind – I was never far from it, and I checked obsessively to make sure that the digital creature within was healthy. And yet still, within a brief span of a few months, the Tamagotchi died, and I was forced to watch its little angelic form ascend to Bandai heaven with the crushing guilt of my neglect in my chest.

Ever since then, I have been convinced that Tamagotchis have a solid place in the canon of "Distressing and Creepy '90s toys" right there alongside the Furby I'm still too afraid

to put batteries in. But, going even further, never after that point have I been comfortable playing any sort of "pet management" or "care" sim; I never owned a Nintendog, and whenever I see ads for the new self-care/productivity app Finch, where you take care of a small digital bird by drinking water and doing yoga, I feel a little sick to my stomach. But why this reaction?

Fundamentally, I think, the Tamagotchi instilled in me a deep fear of unilateral responsibility over another living thing – if you are given total power and control over the life of something else, you have an utterly terrifying burden. Forget to feed it? Dead. Don't clean its virtual pen often enough? Dead. The list of ways to kill your 'gotchi feels exponentially longer and more flexible than the list of ways you have to keep it alive, and that slim margin for error lives rent-free in my head today in the form of an utter refusal to ever own a live plant or an animal that resides inside a cage or tank. My teenage Tamagotchi was a sinner in the hands of a forgetful and flawed God, and nothing has ever made me more afraid than being in that position.

To pull back the scope a little bit and get out from under my own neuroses, we can think about our positionality with Tamagotchi or the care sim of your choice as being the polar opposite of our positionality within most games, especially horror. In the vast majority of our play experiences, we are, in essence, the Tamagotchi: a small and mostly powerless thing screaming into the void of omnipotent and indifferent code. All of our actions within the game are made with the end goal of continuing to survive within the world of the game, but ultimately, we are at the mercy of the game itself whether we live or die. With a Tamagotchi, the tables are turned, and our focus is no longer on our own survival, but the survival of something else, whose life hinges entirely upon the length of our attention spans. We are bestowed not with vulnerability, but great power, and we all know the line from *Spider-man* about that. And so, I suppose, at the end of the day, the Tamagotchi freaks me out because I am reminded more than ever of my continual obligation to think about and take care of the things for which I am responsible – my cats, my students, my family. No one would die if I occasionally drop the ball in the way the Tamagotchi does if you leave it alone for a day, but it nevertheless presents a constant reminder that we must always be vigilant about our power – over whom we have it, and how we exercise it for moral good instead of negligent indifference.

INTERLINKED | **PHOENIX SIMMS**

INTERGENERATIONAL DESIGN

Rooster is an all-ages point-and-click puzzle adventure game by Sticky Brain Studios, a Toronto-based developer. The game seeks to celebrate Chinese history and culture in a unique way. Showcasing painterly graphics that evoke traditional watercolors and calligraphy, *Rooster* is a narrative-driven collection of twelve themed minigames. I'm excited to see the continuing trend of games mixing analog and digital media styles with their graphics (a la titles like *Dordogne* and *Pentiment).* The developer has also made one of *Rooster*'s core design pillars accessibility, which is heartening. In my experience, games that claim to be inclusive of a broad audience of players often forget about (or even ignore) disabled players or players with a chronic injury or illness.

The game is about the Rooster of the Chinese zodiac who has been sent back to ancient times by Dragon to relearn traditions and mend broken bridges with other fellow animals of the zodiac. This is the trickster-like protagonist's punishment for ruining the festivities of the Chinese Lunar New Year's feast with his rude manners and disrespect of others. When Sticky Brain's creators reached out to me about covering their game, what I was intrigued by is how food is featured in its mechanics as a throughline for expressing Chinese history and culture.

Food and its representation and potential as a game mechanic, whether narrative or technical, is an affinity of mine. Food is, in my opinion, a subject that is never neutral. Even in strictly casual games like *Cooking Mama* and *Candy Crush,* food is an effortless and often on-the-nose signifier of a player's consumption of gameplay. *Rooster* is a casual game too, but even with its early GDC demo, which I had the privilege of playing, it resists the rigid categorization of the previously mentioned casual classics. Although the controls are simple and the narrative a perfect framing for teaching players about Chinese history and culture, that is not the aim of the game.

Food unites many other common human experiences as well, such as survival, pleasure (not just sensual, but contentment), change, language (both verbal and non-ver-

bal) and memory. Nina Mingya Powles explores this last aspect eloquently in *Tiny Moons,* her memoir of eating and immersing herself in the Shanghai half of her biracial heritage. When we revisit recipes we grew up with, we often find ourselves craving not just the physical experience of the food but the exact temporal experience of the memories attached to that food as well.

I was pleasantly surprised when, in a brief yet insightful Q&A with the creators of *Rooster,* they were keen to mention that they were not developing the title as an edutainment piece. According to the thoughts shared by Sasha Boersma (co-founder and producer), Deborah Chanston (writer/narrative designer) and Connie Choi (creative lead), *Rooster* "the game is not designed with anything educational in mind. It's being designed for all ages." And this sentiment aligns with my playthrough of the early demo – although there is an emphasis on gleaning facts of Chinese culture through lore points contained on interactive scrolls throughout the first level, finding these scrolls isn't necessarily the goal of the level.

Although this early build did have some technical issues with triggering the next part of the narrative where Rooster must build a gift basket of cooking ingredients for Rat, it was difficult to tell if the trigger was linked to interacting with the scrolls. Your ultimate goal is to make amends for your transgressions of some Chinese traditions and interpersonal relations. This brought to mind recent Independent Game Festival award-winner *Venba* and its unapologetic authenticity in expressing the story of an intergenerational story about Indian immigrants throughout '80s and early noughties Canada.

In a recent talk titled "Lore Don't Tell" given at this year's GDC Abhi, the creator of *Venba,* asserts that players should be encouraged to naturally observe and discover aspects of a culture that may be new to them via lore. Lore, unlike the more explicit narrative design of a game, can be potentially missed for those not seeking it but is infused throughout a game's atmosphere and felt more organically by players. Abhi laced his game with countless references to Indian history and culture, some so niche that only people growing up in a similar generation and from a similar region to Abhi's birth country might catch.

For instance, the scene where the father, Paavalan, reveals the result of the putu recipe Venba and Kavin cooked together is based off of a famous scene from an Indian film. There are also family mementos around Venba's house which communicate culture in an ambient way, such as posters and collaged family photos. In Abhi's opin-

ion, the key to authenticity without pandering to a Western or international audience unfamiliar with a featured culture is to focus on representation over representativeness.

This is what the design of *Rooster* seems to be striving for as well, which I commend it for. There's been a lot of fruitful discussion in recent years of how narratives centering non-Eurocentric or Western cultures need not be crafted for those audiences. Foreign cultures don't have to be pressed into touristic service for those unfamiliar with them. Abhi's advocating for lore imparting a sense of culture is in line with the opinions of writer-scholars like Elaine Castillo (whose brilliant and enlightening *How to Read Now* posits that Western and Eurocentric pandering undermines decolonization efforts) and Matthew Salesses (whose *Craft in the Real World* gets at how even at the workshop level of storytelling, the global north dominates and dictates form and representation). Jericho Brown has explored similar ground to Salesses, but from an African American and diaspora perspective in *How We Do It* as well.

There are two of the twelve mini games included in the demo, one a hidden item game associated with Rooster's gift basket for Rat and the other a shape-matching game where Rooster is helping Snake keep a toddler safe from the many potential incidents that can take place at a market during a street festival. Both of these minigames are charming and are centered around food and family, as part of Rooster's teaching moment in being sent to the past is to follow alongside Little Dove's family. You also receive gifts in return from your fellow zodiac animals; some sticky tree sap from Rat and a lantern from Snake. I'm unsure as of yet what these items will be for, but I like that the player is not rewarded with points (though points do feature during the minigames as progress markers).

While these minigames did illustrate some important morals for Rooster, like putting others' needs before his own and selflessness, I struggled a bit with how expository the dialogue after these games were. I wasn't expecting the fable-like aspects of this tale to be so apparent, since the minigames within the overall framing of the tale already felt demonstrative enough to me. There's a nice balance of narrative design and popular cozy gameplay with these two minigames, so to have the moral be told to me afterwards felt…not redundant, but close. At once, I found myself wanting to linger on the loading screens which featured philosophical quotes, yet found the loading times so whip fast (not necessarily a drawback in of itself) that I would never quite catch the gist of them.

However, I had to remind myself that this game is meant to be all-ages. Something that both very young players, kids ten and up and their parents could play, apart or together. And there's something to be said for the classic feel of this game. As an older player, who grew up with several '80s-'90's public school computer lab titles like *Number Munchers, Mixed Up Mother Goose, Mario Teaches Typing* and others, *Rooster*'s simple mechanics and its inventive narrative framing resonated with me. Another discussion that arose out of my asking if the game was meant to be edutainment was learning that several of the Sticky Brain Studios team have a background in education games.

"[U]s as company founders, you know, collectively have decades of experience developing educational games for Canadian broadcasters, education companies, government bodies and [not-for-profits]," Boersma explained, noting that what they wanted to carry over from previous experiences in such development was a respect for the intelligence of their younger audience. Boersma's co-founder Ted Brunt also led the children's interactive departments for Canadian public broadcasters for well over a decade. "[W]e think that they're capable of more." Like me, Boersma grew up on '80's learning games, specifically The Learning Company classics like *Reader Rabbit* and *Rocky's Boots*. Chanston added "I actually market myself as a person who specializes in preschool educational TV" when it comes to the writing side of Sticky Brain's development.

Choi, who is in charge of the visual design of *Rooster* mentioned of the painterly graphics inspired by Chinese paintings and calligraphy that the process was organic. "It just happens to be the visual medium for that. And so, while it borrows a lot from that…we just want to pick a very different art style that other people may not have seen." The three women also left me with a poignant thought to ponder: with their past lives likely influencing the mechanics of their current project, how might the next generation of game developers be influenced by the educational games they might have grown up with?

We often forget that despite all the technical aspects of game design, human involvement makes the process vibrant and organic. Despite it being an early build demo, playing and talking about *Rooster* was a delightful reminder of that.

ROOKIE OF THE YEAR | **MATT MARRONE**

IF YOU CAN'T WED IT, REDDIT

Last month, I took in a game at The Big A, home of the Los Angeles Angels.

It was personally significant in two ways. 1. Most notably, it was my 30th lifetime MLB ballpark. 2. Less impressive, but fun, I realized later that my trip there means I have now seen a home game for every team on which my childhood baseball hero, Dave Winfield, played.

When I realized the second part of this and breathlessly told my wife about it, she didn't even bother to feign interest.

"Why don't you tell Reddit about it?" she helpfully suggested.

"I'm telling WEDDIT," I responded, thinking myself clever.

But my wife's snark contained an element of truth: Reddit seems to actually care when no one else does. Reddit, the one social media site left on the internet that doesn't make me sick, feels truly welcoming. No doubt it has its pockets of nastiness, but it's not wholly overcome by cruelty (see: Twitter) or phoniness (see: Instagram, TikTok) or naively spreading misinformation and then arguing about it with friends and family (see: Facebook).

No, Reddit is a place where people who share niche interests can actually enjoy them without fear of being ripped for asking earnest newbie questions, where commenters make fun of each other in good spirit – often leading to long threads of riffing – and where bots actually make you laugh.

As I sit down to write this, Reddit has just had one of its finest moments: Sleuths have finally solved the years-long mystery of "Everybody Knows That" – an unknown '80s-sounding song snippet that inspired thousands to form a community, scouring the web for clues about its origins and sharing theories. The fact that the song turned out to be from a porno, the clip chopped out in between moans, only makes the discovery sweeter.

All this being said, I decided to take my wife's advice. I posted the first two graphs of this column into a new Reddit thread on r/mlb this morning and then went to the gym. By the time I was done working out, there were dozens of comments and upvotes, both from those impressed by my ballpark count and others seconding my love for Winfield or naming their own childhood favorites.

Within hours, those upvotes had surpassed 300 and there were more than 200 comments. I haven't read every response, but none of the ones I've seen were anything less than other nerds geeking out on my theme. I admitted in my original post that my "accomplishment" was both minor and esoteric. I left myself vulnerable, open to being teased. That hasn't happened. Instead, others like me came together. You know, as social media was intended.

I'm not saying I would have gotten a different reaction on other social media sites. I'm just saying that, once again, I spent time on Reddit and didn't feel like shit after. There was no doom-scrolling, no clenching my teeth to stop from responding to morons, no swiping away misleading memes, no sifting through despicable comments and lamely blocking deplorables.

Best of all, I found validation – both in my baseball fitness and my social media preferences.

When my wife didn't care, Reddit did.

AREA OF EFFECT | **JAY CASTELLO**

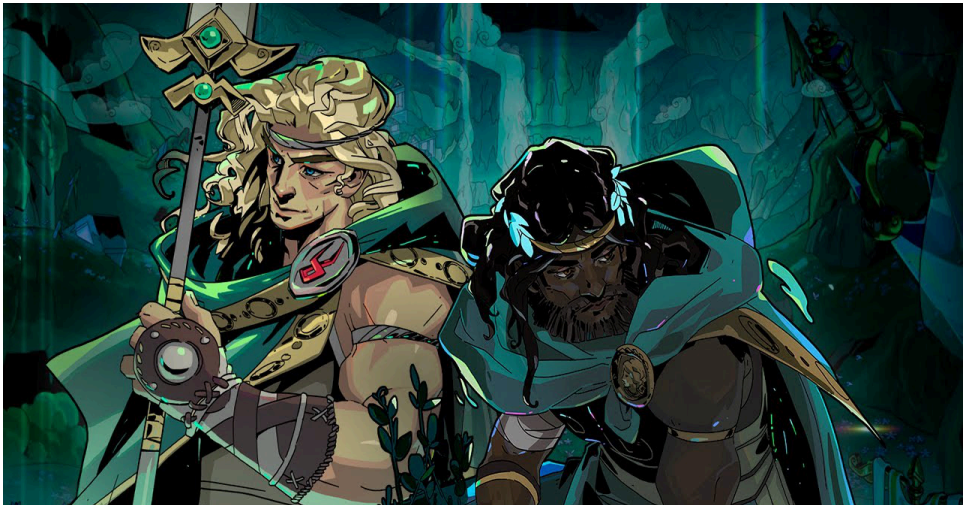
SUPERGIANT'S SCRAPPIER, BETTER UNDERWORLD

Hades and *Hades II* both take place in mythological underworlds. In the original, Zagreus flees the House of Hades, fights through Tartarus, Asphodel, Elysium and the Temple of Styx, all based on the underworld of Greek mythology filtered through thousands of years of history and the game design choices of a 2018 roguelike. *Hades II* brings us the crossroads, a less well-defined area that seems to sit somewhere between the world we know and the underworld of its predecessor, and a space that will presumably grow as the game enters and eventually escapes from early access.

But before either of these, there was another underworld escape attempt. Supergiant's previous release, 2017's *Pyre,* follows a group known as the Nightwings who, like Zagreus, are trapped in a strange but beautiful purgatory, this time known as the Downside. And, like Zagreus, they're absolutely determined to make it back up top.

But unlike the spaces of the *Hades* games, the Downside is not an infinite labyrinth of rooms, filled only with enemies (and the occasional Charon store). The Downside is a world. Escaping it is a journey that takes the Nightwings through a variety of jewel-toned, hazily lit environments, each with their own moods. It necessitates the wagon, a home base that feels simultaneously comforting and crowded. And it gives all the characters a sense of grounding, a place in the world that lends them important narrative weight.

The characters of *Hades* and now *Hades II* are beloved, albeit perhaps shallowly. But their depth as characters feels proportional to how placed they are in the narrative. The gods of Olympus, who show up only briefly to offer a line of dialogue and a helpful boon for Zagreus's current escape attempt, have no roots.



Those who are stuck in the House of Hades can get a little more depth from Zagreus's repeated interactions, as well as their interaction with the space around them. Hypnos dozing by the Pool of Styx automatically says something different about him than seeing Hades in his great throne, even with no understanding of their characters, myths or development in the narrative.

But it's those who appear in multiple places that really begin to shine. Yes, Thanatos can be found in the House, but it's the fact he'll show up outside to help you that makes him fascinating. And vice versa for Mel, who will try to kill you on the runs only to be friendly back home. And then there are characters who are, for a long time, much more trapped than Zagreus. Take Achilles, unable to visit Patroclus in Elysium until Zagreus helps him out, late in the game. When you first run into them together, it's a moment of victory in a game that's otherwise mostly about failure.

On the other hand, Patroclus' glade has no indication that he's tried to make it a home, giving the impression that he's been drifting without Achilles. It's easy to compare these to how the carefully kept spaces of Eurydice and Persephone tell us the stories of two women trying to make the best of a place that they don't really want to be; knick-knacks built up over the years, a focus on cooking and farming as a personal hobby as well as a necessity – both for physical needs and their mental health.

These are the spaces that give solidity to Hades, but they're few and far between in actual runs, where the rooms might shift constantly but almost all remain battle arenas and little else. In *Pyre,* every new screen is a place with a history, and they lend the same weight to the people who appear there.

For example, the Vagabond, a character who you can name anything that rhymes with "Gray," attaches herself to your wagon in the desert. She's obsessed with the Scribes, Pyre's religious figures, and her desert wanderings are reminiscent of medieval saint's tales – plus they explain her scattered, dream-like approach to life. Not long after she joins the Nightwings, she insists on defending the group from attack, presumably familiar with protecting herself in the harsh desert environment. Immediately following that, the drive imp Ti'zo appears, who seems mysteriously connected to the wagon, as well as the Rites themselves, hinting at yet more links.

After picking up the Vagabond and Ti'zo, you head for a place known as the

Cairn of Ha'ub. There, a giant skeleton emerges from the ground, and before you can react, the best song in the game cuts in out of nowhere. These are the Dissidents, a pack of dog-like Curs who are fast, ruthless scavengers. And when your friend Rukey admits later that he's in debt to them, it makes all the more sense, because we already know who these people are. They live under the ribcage of a long dead thing.

All of these examples come one after the other; the Downside never pauses and has no filler. Every environment has something to say, and someone to say it. So much of *Hades,* and by extension *Hades II,* can be seen in the primordial soup of *Pyre.* But *Pyre* also stands alone as a fantastic game about resourcefulness, determination, and teamwork. And its spaces contribute to that in a way that the roguelike, battle arena necessities of the *Hades* duo can't replicate.

CASTING DEEP METEO | **LEVI RUBECK**

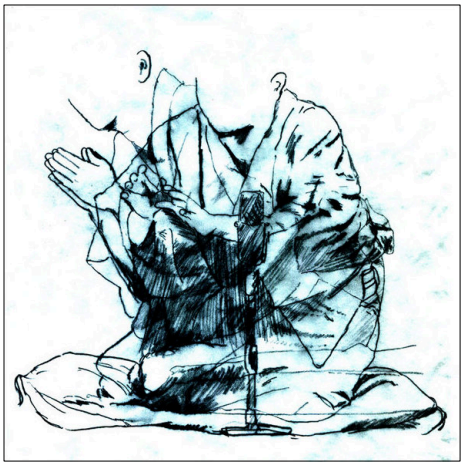
ZAZEN BOYS AND THE HEALING RIFF

Who are we to ask for more from Shutoku Mukai. Number Girl wasn't enough, certainly not for me. If you've checked all Tim Rogers' citations you've surely spun them a few times, vanguards of Japanese guitar rock fed on Sonic Youth and Smashing Pumpkins and so much more. Another band locked out of American distribution, comparatively huge at home but kept at bay from those of us clinging to the physical manifestations of seized time left in the West.

If I can confess though, I've always preferred Zazen Boys, Mukai's side project turned main gig after the end of Number Girl in the early 2000's. Number Girl could go from still to boiling in seconds, and that same heat simmers throughout Zazen Boys, but there's more appreciation of what the middle temperatures can accomplish. There's an ode to the Fender Telecaster, so we know that Zazen Boys still make rock 'n roll the bedrock of their seasoning, but they dial back from Number Girl's wall of textures and commitment to clip. The trade off is for Steely Dan-level players doing the Minutemen versions of Fagan and Becker, guitars, drums and bass locked in from jangly strum through a firmly socketed groove.

Zazen Boys bounce where Number Girl steamed, getting downright swampy like the best Talking Heads songs. Which isn't to say they were buttoned up at all times, as the live Matsuri Session records show a band knows when to lock in and when to throw all the doors wide open. And where most bands start sliding in Moog synthesizers because they've worn down their frets, Zazen Boys crashed back fully rejuvenated with their late career album すとーりーず *(Stories).* Bassist Ichiro Yoshida went nuts on his own solo album with the layered bloops and saved some of that sauce for Mukai and the gang. It was a good album, but I worried that the bop was left behind, the engine bereft of coal.

Despite the fleet of ships keeping underwater fiber-optic cables linked so that the world



is nominally connected at all times, it's hard staying up to date on a band that operates primarily out of Japan and in Japanese, as a primarily English speaker and reader (undergrad classes notwithstanding). But every now and again I catch some news on Mukai's twitter feed; a DVD I can't find, live shows out of reach, Yoshida quitting the band and being replaced by Miya, formerly of 385 and Bleach who can absolutely dis/entangle a bassline with style to spare. A videos of her performing with Zazen Boys surfaced and it was a revelation, the slap-funk from those early albums was back and now I was hungrier than ever.

So we come to らんど *(Rando),* news to me but sprouting through the server farms even over here on launch day and kicking off the best of 2024 while January still shivered. Mukai and Sō Yoshikane are plucking through their Fenders in the entire spectrum of harmony, while Atsushi Matsushita has stuffed his drums so full of silica gel packs that they're drier than the surface of the sun. I thought Zazen Boys were done, but Mukai knows that youth is an application of spirit and that this band contains too much booty-shaking energy to be contained.

The first single was "Eternal Girl", accompanied by a low-fi Vegas sphere music video of the band playing alone in a room but then through a series of projections over their human forms, aged but no less charged. Watching this video I was surprised in two ways, first that there were English captions (however they might have been generated), confronting me with meaning behind Mukai's words for the first time, and second that these words pretty aptly matched the flipping timbres of the tune. "Eternal Girl" starts off in maximum Telecaster chimes singing through the upstrokes, a mist of ska wafting through as Miya starts popping in. A song about a mothers and grandmothers in gazing out photographs, family history looked over, but then the light and the tone shift to 1945 and the horrors of nuclear holocaust, the photograph hiding the pain fire and war and the attempt to survive afterward. Generational pain threads through a jaunty song cast in idyllic scenes then harshly under lit.

The English bits throughout the rest of the album don't really hint at such harrowing and historically nuanced examinations of how trauma works genetically as well as through the soil surrounding those who were lost. High school, barracuda, dueling composers, who can say. But Zazen Boys, even after so long, is clearly not afraid to confront multiple shades of life, breaking time and time signatures while remaining achingly human. It's selfish, but I can't help to hope for another dozen albums before the worms carry me away.

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

POST-TRUTH BEEF

When Biggie asked "what's beef?" almost 30 years ago, the consequences were dire. Biggie's meditation on the escalating violence in the war of words between the East and West Coast dropped 16 days after his murder in 1997, closing one of the scarier sagas in hip hop history. The bloody rivalry between Biggie and Tupac (surrogates for the beef between Suge Knight and Puff Daddy) may be the most publicly known feud, but it was far from the first and certainly far from the last. Marley Marl claimed Queens as the birthplace of hip hop back in the '80s, and that didn't sit right with KRS-One, who claimed the Bronx – bars were traded. Tim Dog released a track in the late '80s directed at the startup hip hop industry on the West Coast and Dr.Dre called "Fuck Compton." 50 Cent loves to get messy and yell at all sorts of rappers, including Jadakiss and The Game. And, of course, the Jay-Z vs Nas feud which ended with Nas's "Ether," which effectively coined a new term for winning a hip hop beef.

Now, in 2024, we have a new round coming through with Kendrick and Drake. While, in some ways, this feels very similar to other beef, I also think this may become known as the first post-truth beef in hip hop. While the facts seem to be solidified, the interpretations of the tracks released by Kendrick, Drake and J. Cole, and their impact, all seem to depend on what side of the fence you land on. Is this a beef for the post-truth era?

First, let's stick with the facts. Back in 2013, Kendrick and Drake collaborated on a handful of songs, but then fell out, with Kendrick dropping a vicious diss track "Control," targeting Drake, Cole and about every other rapper in the industry. Since then, to my knowledge, Kendrick hasn't explicitly acknowledged tension between the two – maybe because Drake was busy taking shots from Kanye and Pusha T, and Kendrick was just biding his time. That all changed in February when Kendrick, in a feature verse on Future and Metro Boomin's recent album, *We Don't Trust You,* took his first shot, rapping "fuck the big three, it's just big me." This was a reference to a recent J. Cole bar about the big three – Kendrick, Drake, and Cole.

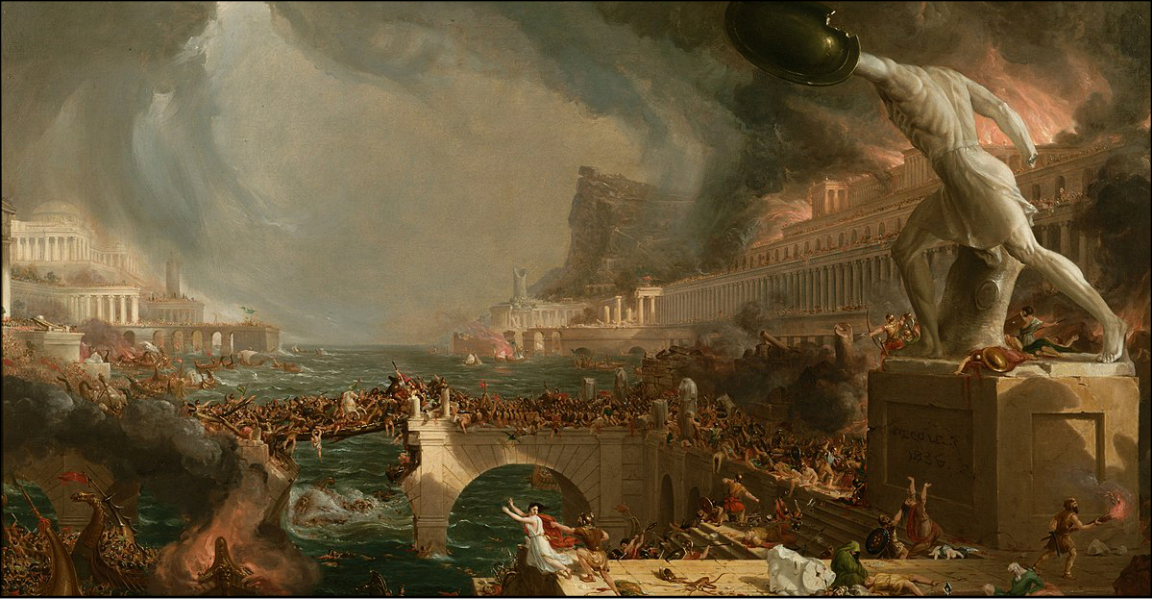
In response, Cole dropped and quickly deleted a response, maybe proving him to be smartest man in the game, because in the last two weeks it has gotten wild. Drake took a couple weeks, and then released two diss tracks: "Push Ups" and "Taylor Made." These two tracks amounted to Drake accusing Kendrick of a) being short and b) trying and failing to make popular music. This happened approximately within the last five days of writing this article.

I'm making this time stamp because it's just gotten even more wild since then, and who knows what's going to happen between my writing this and the release. On May 3 and 4, Drake dropped a track claiming that Kendrick and several other rappers are teaming up against him, Kendrick assaulted his wife, and that his son is actually Dave Free's. In turn, Kendrick dropped three tracks starting 15 minutes after Drake released his, claiming: Drake is a pedophile; Drake has an unacknowledged daughter; Drake is co-opting the Black culture of America for his own profit while giving nothing back; and then, Drake rebuffing the pedophilia accusations and claiming that he baited Kendrick into thinking he has a daughter. Now, that covers about 25% of the content in all the verses from everyone involved, and I'm not even bringing Rick Ross into this.

But the whole beef is far from settled – depending on where you side, I'm not sure anything can happen to sway anyone's mind. Stan culture is the post truth culture, in the sense that if you are ride-or-die for one of these artists, I don't think a verse or killer line can change your mind. I mean, Pusha T objectively knocked Drake out in 2018 when he called him out for having a child he didn't acknowledge. And yes, this proved true and Drake has since been in his kid's life, and yes, Drake has continued to be the most popular rapper by a long shot since then. While Pusha T won that beef, objectively, Drake continues to win in numbers.

When you are an ardent believer/fan/constituent of a group, what does it take to change your belief? Can your mind even be changed at that level? Kendrick and Drake both claim the facts and lyrical skill are on their side, but I'm not sure it will end up mattering. In the post-truth era, facts are alternative, and pointing out Drake's propensity to groom young women or Kendrick being conned by his opponent may not be enough to sway the public. I mean, similar accusations didn't stop people from voting for Trump in 2016, so why would they stop people from supporting one of the biggest pop stars in the world in 2024?

But those are broad questions for the general public. For the heads, the folks who are deep in the know, I feel like the question is – can Drake withstand the onslaught? Kendrick has clearly decided to be his number one hater. Can Drake clear these hurdles and maintain his popularity? If numbers say anything, then apparently yes. If Kendrick says anything, hell no. I think in the post truth era though, the answer to these questions ends up depending on what side of the fence you fall on – and I know where I am siding. But, on the other hand, who knows what chaos either rapper is planning for tonight, so, to be continued I suppose.



ALWAYS AUTUMN | **AUTUMN WRIGHT**

THE WORST CASE SCENARIO

The world has ended a thousand times before.

That is the first lesson to take from Paul Cooper's history podcast turned multimedia project turned book (out now via Duckworth Books), *Fall of Civilizations*. Compiling the hours long episodes into citation-laden prose, *Fall of Civilizations* retains the narrative flow and academic heft that Cooper has so artfully crafted over the projects five year run touring the history of societal, cultural, and very real ends of the world.

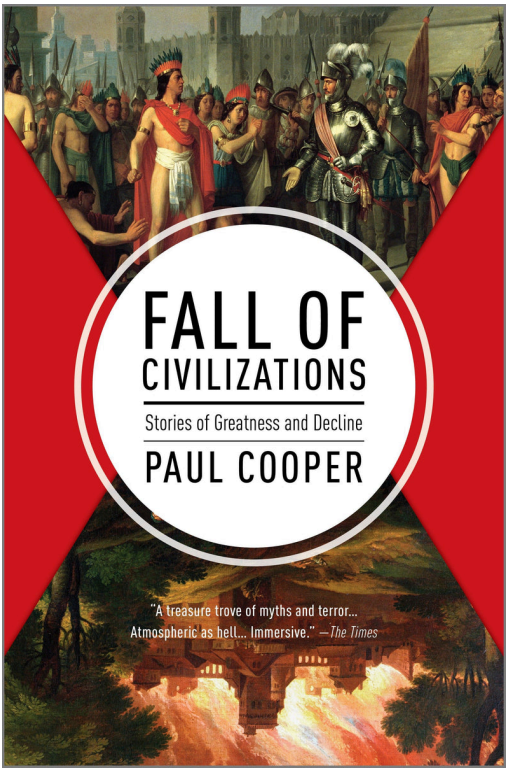
So, why are we so ready to deny it will again?

This new collection of writing from Cooper is built off archaeological and historical research, all honed for a general audience through Cooper's use of narrative. Its 14 chapters recount the environmental, geopolitical, economic and even interpersonal events of civilization collapse ranging in time and place from Sumer's end circa 2000 BCE to Rapa Nui's 19th century colonization and coinciding collapse.

"I aim to tell as complete a story of the history of human collapse as could be achieved without significant repetition," Cooper states in his introduction. The recurring themes he identifies: Climate and environmental change, social stratification/inequality, the dissolution of dependent trade networks, the violent enforcement of borders, and an unwillingness to change course. History as repetition, as rhyme, as a collection palimpsests.

I first listened to Fall of Civilizations while studying history as an undergrad (the podcast is an Ur-text for this column on apocalypse fiction), and now what I find most valuable from the project in print form is the voice of its author more directly. The text is bookended by an introduction and epilogue that begin in and return to ruins.

We begin in the present, the modern-day ruins of Saddam Hussein's regime built atop the ruins of Babylon. "A ruin is a place the



mind can't stay quiet," writes Cooper. Each a site where the future was canceled. A paradox. A haunting. "Every ruin in this book should thus be understood as a warning and a challenge," Cooper writes in an explicit call to action. "Take nothing for granted, resist those who have mortgaged our future for their greed, and fight with every inch of your being to build a better world."

It's a powerful sentiment as Cooper connects the streets of Detroit, the pyramids at Giza, the arenas of Rome, the temples of the Maya, and the bombed buildings of Bakhmut, Mosul, Aleppo and Gaza with his historical account. And yet we still deny these are end times. Indeed, while our pop culture fills with ahistorical scenarios of the apocalypse, writers are simultaneously urging us to keep our eyes closed and our foot on the accelerator. They do this by invoking history, too, reiterating apocalyptic sentiments of yore. "There have always been doomers," Dorian Lynskey wrote just this year, citing McGuire, Wells, Huizinga, Cyprian and more.

It's worth asking whether people in the past thought they lived at the end times. It's worth more to realize that despite the recurring sentiment, *we* do. It is the wrong lesson of history to stand amongst the ruins and proclaim "we have made it through worse before." "All I hear is the wind slapping against the gravestones of those who did not make it," Clint Smith replies in his 2019 poem.

The facts of climate change are unprecedented, yet while writers, politicians and artists return to denial – "climate optimism," the commitments of the Paris Agreement, solar punk – the material reality of the world around us will not bend to spirit. It's enough to drive someone whose studied apocalyptic sentiment, let alone climate science, a little mad. The world is ending, and we are pretending it is not! We need more manifestos on how to blow up a pipeline, not consent manufacturing of the incremental progress of carbon capture or the escapist fantasies of videogames!

I wouldn't call Cooper's own post-apocalypse tale optimistic, but it is hopeful. In his epilogue, the author returns to ruin: our impending one. Cooper's version of the end of the world, however, contends not just with how humans respond to catastrophe in the historical record, but also the circumstances that make the looming reality of climate collapse unique: "We have built a machine that will destroy the world as we know it, and we depend on it to live."

Cooper's brief sketch of life after climate collapse, a "distant world, perhaps thousands of years in the future, [arisen] out of much death and suffering" carries a certainty I have failed to recount to the loved ones I have shared it with, so I will not attempt to again here. Instead, I'll leave you with his own end: "We will not live to see it, but there are people who will. And one day, perhaps, one of them will tell our story."

FORMS IN LIGHT | **JUSTIN REEVE**

THE FIRST CITY

The architecture of the ancient world has always captivated our imagination, offering a glimpse into the lives and culture of the people who came before us. The city of Çatalhöyük, a Neolithic settlement in Turkey dating back to around 7,000 BCE, is a prime example of how early humans lived, built and organized their communities. The unique architectural forms, characterized by interconnected buildings and a lack of doors or even connections in between structures, remains in stark contrast to modern methods of design, but these dwellings hold valuable lessons for us, particularly when it comes to videogame level design.

Imagine a city without streets, a place where homes double as walls and roofing takes the form of a pathway. This was the norm in Çatalhöyük, one of the oldest known cities in the world. This particular Neolithic settlement offers a fascinating glimpse into some of the earliest architecture and community life, presenting plenty of open archaeological questions, while offering some potential inspiration for game developers.

I recently dove into *Horizon Forbidden West,* released by Guerrilla Games back in 2022 for PS4, but only just recently on my platform of choice, PC. I'm still in the early stages of the game, but when I came across the main settlement of the Utaru tribe, Plainsong, I was immediately reminded of Çatalhöyük, not on account of any obvious resemblance but owing to the fact that Plainsong challenges our understanding of structure and form. The settlement is basically a giant treehouse, winding vertically upwards from ground level in a sort of spiral, featuring criss-crossing bridges connecting covered courtyards that border shops and houses. Plainsong was built within the remains of a ruined array of satellite dishes, lending the location a kind of round or circular motif to the various buildings.

The heart of Çatalhöyük would have to be its architectural form. These were not only structures, but integral parts of daily life and religious practice. In contrast to modern cities with organized streets and individual houses, this ancient settlement was characterized by tightly packed mudbrick buildings,

interconnected in a maze-like fashion. There were no streets. Instead, people walked on the rooftops, using ladders to access their home. This communal design, with buildings that share wall and roof, speaks to a sense of unity and interdependence among the inhabitants, at least according to the latest archaeological theories.

The most striking feature of Çatalhöyük is the lack of doors. Access came through a hole in the roof, suggesting a unique approach to privacy and security, if the inhabitants even had such concepts. The buildings were small and cramped on the inside, with low ceilings and few windows, limiting natural light and ventilation compared to modern homes. This created some obvious concerns, particularly smoke from household activities. People cooked using wood and charcoal at hearths, producing soot and smoke that came to cover just about everything over time.

The interior layout of the settlement was fascinating, showcasing the importance of communal spaces and the blurring of boundaries between public and private areas. Many of the structures had platforms above that served as resting or seating areas, often adorned with colorful murals depicting scenes of hunting, farming and certain rituals. These murals not only added aesthetic value but also played a role in storytelling and the transmission of cultural practices, again according to the latest archaeological thinking. How precisely these buildings were used in terms of religious, political or economic activity remains poorly understood, although all three of these may have simultaneously taken place, making Çatalhöyük a true mixed-use neighborhood.

The seamless integration of the spiritual and the mundane at Çatalhöyük represents one of the most intriguing aspects of the architecture. Burial sites were found beneath the floors of many homes, hinting at a close connection between the living and the dead. These bodies were quite literally part of the settlement, having been commonly built right into the walls of buildings. This integration of life and death speaks to a deep spiritual belief system that permeated every aspect of daily life, but the details remain extremely vague and the evidence can sometimes be contradictory. In any case, this type of treatment for the dead is relatively uncommon throughout history, and extremely different from a lot of current practices.

Comparing this ancient marvel to modern architecture comes with quite a bit of contrast. In modern cities, buildings are often designed for efficiency and individuality, with a focus on maximizing space and resources. The streets and transportation systems are carefully planned, clearly sepa-

rating residential, commercial and industrial areas. Privacy and security are paramount, along with ease of access and of course personal comfort, something which most likely led to the increasing presence of doors and windows over time, as construction technology allowed.

The concept of community living today is often overshadowed by individualism, with people retreating into their private spaces at the end of the day. Çatalhöyük on the other hand reflects a more communal way of life where people lived in close proximity, sharing not only walls but also their daily experiences and religious rituals, not to mention their productive capacities.

Çatalhöyük offers a fascinating glimpse into the early origins of human architecture and community living. The unique architectural forms, characterized by interconnected buildings mostly devoid of doors and windows, most likely reflects a deep sense of community and spirituality that stands in sharp contrast with modern design. Çatalhöyük offers valuable insight into the evolution of human history, but also challenges preconceptions of both form and function. By studying this interconnectedness of structure, blurring of boundaries between public and private space in addition to the integration of the spiritual and the mundane, level designers can find a new source of potential inspiration, and players can explore virtual worlds that push their perceptions of architecture and deepen their understanding of culture.

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

ACAB INCLUDES MARTIN BRODY

1975's *Jaws* had more than one undeniably large impact on pop culture – possibly even the world at large. It helped bring about the idea of the summer blockbuster, became a masterclass in suspense (and how to accomplish a lot when your practical creature effects don't work) and was the catalyst for an alarming amount of damage to the shark population. It's also just a fantastic movie with a wonderful cast, including the late, great Roy Scheider as police chief Martin Brody, who made for quite the affable and memorable protagonist and eventual killer shark . . . killer. Here's the thing, though: Martin Brody is still a cop, and All Cops Are Bastards (ACAB).

The term revolves around the "belief" (read: fact) that modern law enforcement is an inherently unjust and oppressive system – to put it mildly – and anyone working within that system is complicit. Even if their intentions are pure; even if they're "a good person" at heart; even if they hope to change things from the inside. This is typically where someone chimes in with that "it's just a few bad apples" bullshit, but how does the rest of that saying go? No, seriously, finish saying it. Yeah, that's what I thought.

But surely someone like Martin Brody who pushed to close the beaches and keep people safe, and put his own life on the line to protect his community and the hundreds (thousands?) of tourists vacationing there has to be an exception, right? Of course not, and if you really think about the events of the film, it's kind of obvious why.

Right from the start it's apparent that Martin believes there was a shark attack and that the safest thing to do would be to close the beaches. This is the objectively and morally correct solution, so he obviously cares. But what happens after that? He immediately caves to pressure from the mayor and town business representatives, leaving the beaches open despite knowing the risks. Chief Martin Brody, our hero and "good cop," opts to look out for society's financial interests instead of people. Sounds like a familiar criticism, doesn't it?

Okay, but after that one kid (just one child, that's not so bad, right?) gets killed – after he *knew* something like that could happen – then he shuts down the beaches, brings in shark expert Matt Hooper (played by Richard Dreyfuss) and hires grizzled shark hunter Quint (Robert Shaw). He does do the right thing! He just made a mistake! Well, no. Ignoring the fact that he didn't make a mistake (he knowingly put the community at risk to protect economic interests), it then happens a second time.

Some locals catch a tiger shark and the powers that be decide that's the big bad, so now the beaches are safe again. And despite Hooper showing up and debunking that theory – with Brody present to witness the distinct lack of partially-digested child during the autopsy, no less – the beaches are re-opened. Yes, it's arguable that it was the mayor who ultimately made it happen, but Brody is the god damned chief of police. It's difficult to believe he didn't have enough influence to force a shut down on his own, especially in the name of public safety.

But no, the beaches are opened again and the most protection Amity Island gets is a few boats with gun-toting officers on them and a few more pairs of binoculars on the beach. Once the inevitable next attack happens, it's only luck that keeps Martin's own son from being killed. Instead, it's a hapless guy who was trying to help some kids with their boat. *That's* when Quint gets called in and Brody (and Hooper) take to the sea to personally put a stop to all of this.

What makes Brody such a bastard in this scenario is his complicity. He never really pushes back against the mayor or business owners despite being *the* law enforcement guy for the whole island. He just sort of grumbles his disapproval but goes along with these extremely dangerous plans anyway. He doesn't put his foot down until his own child is almost a victim – until his bad decisions and spinelessness impact him personally. But by then three people (and a dog) are dead, and that's two more people (and a dog) than there should have been for any real action to be taken. I say three because Ben Gardner wasn't actually Brody's fault.

Martin Brody isn't an evil man, or even a bad person. He did want to do the right thing. But he is a bastard who put the needs of greedy politicians and selfish business owners above the safety of other people. He is still a cop.

SAILING THE ASHEN SEA WITH *TEPHROTIC NIGHTMARES*

FEATURING LUKE GEARING

by Maddi Chilton

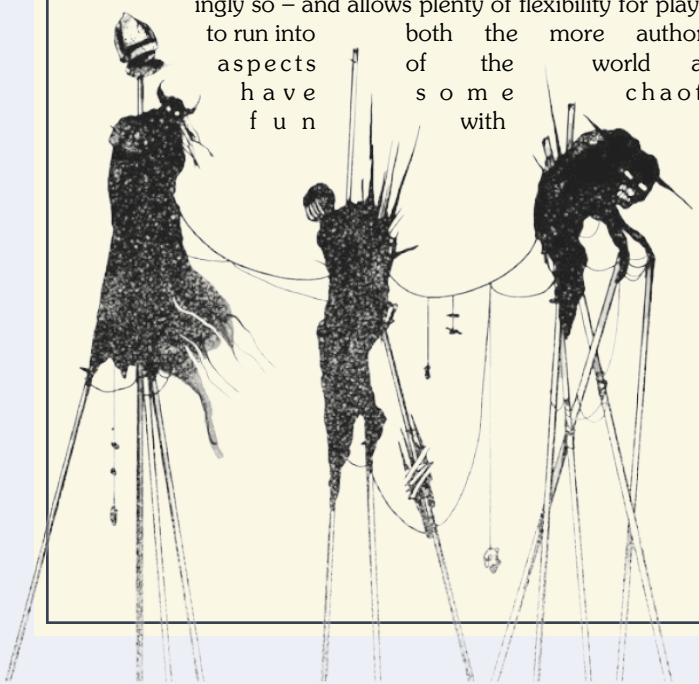
This series of articles is made possible through the generous sponsorship of Exalted Funeral. While Exalted Funeral puts us in touch with our subjects, they have no input or approval in the final story.

You balance atop undulating waves of ash, eying the great, gloomy structure in front of you. Above squawk the cannibal birds that have pulled your sled this far, away from the raider ships you saw in the distance – theirs the fast, fragile Tephro-Foil Skincraft, that glide above the waves but are also quick to tip their occupants, screaming, into them. In front of you towers the Urniversity, where

twitching, nervous researchers study the end of the world – not the one yet to come, but the one that has already descended, a long night of flame that left ash underfoot and the world around you as you find it now, unwelcoming and hungry, shifting and violent. The scholars hate you – you have made an enemy of them through your persistent, flamboyant ignorance – but you also know that somewhere within their walls is the Inquisitive Mechanical Fish, which does not sail the ash but sinks beneath it, and with such a ship the Ashen Sea would be yours for the taking, the dangers above incapable of touching you…

This is the setting for *Tephrotic Nightmares,* the new MÖRK BORG adventure by experienced TTRPG designer Luke Gearing. MÖRK BORG needs no introduction, of course: the black-metal-inspired, ultraviolent RPG is everywhere these days, having hit the perfect match of an inventive, unique premise and wildly creative design to be on the tip of everyone's tongue when they talk about current indie RPGs. It helps that MÖRK BORG has made its name by encouraging creators to build more games within its world, and since its release the community has ballooned not only with players but with designers, sketching out their own little pieces of doomed worlds to contribute to MÖRK BORG's cause. Gearing had been interested in joining the fun: "I wanted to work with the [MÖRK BORG] team, especially as someone who's work recently has taken a much less design-heavy approach," he said. "I thought it would be fun and engaging to develop something that runs counter to that."

Tephrotic Nightmare's basic system is the hex-crawl map of the Ashen Sea, which is expansive – but not overwhelmingly so – and allows plenty of flexibility for players to run into both the more authored aspects of the world and have some chaotic fun with



random encounters. It's tightly focused on the Sea and its impact on the life and un-life within and around it. "A lot of my work comes from taking one idea and then trying to realize it as fully as possible," Gearing said, and *Tephrotic Nightmares* certainly feels realized – almost gluttonously so, with a wide variety of factions, a vivid environment and wildlife, and a delightful modular boat-construction system. Players can sail around on, say, a wicker basket pulled by a swarm of necromantic bees, or the hollow corpse of a Sea-Giant, while loading themselves up with weapons (rams! scythes! flaming-oil slingshots!) and defensive or aggressive charms (one of Gearing's personal favorites is the Scapegoat Homunculus, that can, if frightened, seep acid or give birth to an entangling net of useless fetuses or simply sail off, with the players and the rest of the ship, into the void). The hex-map used for the larger world is sized down for boat combat, which players will run into often – how couldn't they, with Ashmouth Raiders patrolling the seas, or Dustlions looking for food? – but don't worry, if their boat capsizes, they can always trudge their way to land on stilts – slowly, uncomfortably, and at the mercy of the weather and the waves.

In their travels, the players are certain to stumble across one or more of the factions of the game, all of which bring their own bloodthirsty edge to the gray expanse of the Ashen Sea. Perhaps they'll find themselves bartering with the Bloodhunters, who hunt the ugly, cruel creatures of the world and test their initiates in the great Clot that pools below their mountain. They offer equipment that may be otherwise hard or impossible to find, and they pay well for the heads of Thunderlizards and other beasts. Or they might take commissions from the Urniversity to map uncharted ash-waters, build vessels or borrow them, or simply bring them strange artifacts they've found in their travels, which the scholars are desperate to study. Players might do better to avoid the Dry-Witches: they trade valuable water for bodies, but they also each possess terrible powers, and the towers where they

reside are shifting, impassable death-traps. These factions bring life to *Tephrotic Nightmares,* giving the feeling of a dynamic, changing world that the players simply wade through as these groups persistently pursue their own interests and agendas across the Sea. Gearing designed the game with the idea of centering player affiliations, so players that find themselves working with, say, the heretical, apocalyptic necromancers of the Burnt Offerings might have a totally different experience of exploring the world than those who become involved with the conservative, self-perpetuating hierarchy of the Cannibal Count.

But the strongest character in the setting – the most vivid, the most realized, and the most overwhelming – is of course the Ashen Sea itself. As the introduction states, the Ashen Sea is all that remains of a lush forest that existed before a great fire was set by the Arsonist, who still lurks in her sunken stronghold, to be unearthed by the brave or suicidal. *Tephrotic Nightmares* revolves around the sea: traversing it, surviving it, plundering its treasures and discovering its mysteries. The creatures are all defined in relation to it – ash renders the Dustlion Mother's eyes useless, the Lungfish continue to swim through it, impossibly, but their meat is poisoned beyond saving – and the only solid lands left are the mountain fortresses where the factions gather and players must return to extract corpse-water from kills (after a cut from the desiccator, of course). Gearing's concise, vivid writing breathes life into the world he's created, and his interest in "layered history and ruins" gives the setting a sense of depth and chronology.

Gearing says that the factions of the game were all "different takes on reactions to an ecological disaster," in part inspired by what he's seen in his own life and in the news. The brutally funny, almost carefree humor of the game comes into its own in this light. After all, who doesn't recognize something of our modern experience

of climate change in the Cannibal Count's seemingly-endless rooms of inefficient, suicidal bureaucrats, or the Pneumatic Order's fervent religious, isolated denial? The scale of the disaster is catastrophic, sure, but the reactions of these people and creatures to the destroyed world they inhabit isn't fantastical so much as just exaggerated. Water as currency, splintering tribal groups enforcing their preferred and extreme ways of life, the creative, unfamiliar methods of navigating a newly-hostile landscape: all of these are common characteristics of environmental dystopias, of which *Tephrotic Nightmares* is simply an extreme example.

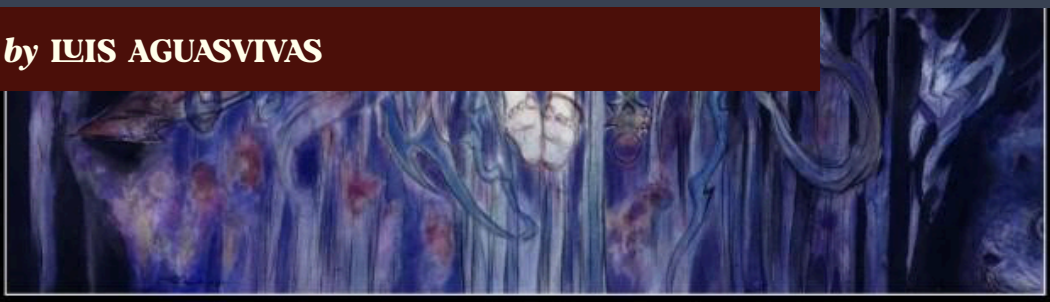
MÖRK BORG's entire deal is the end of the world. Its charm comes from its utter commitment to doom, the heady, silly, nasty craft of puppeting terrible little creatures towards the inevitable apocalypse. It's funny, then, that *Tephrotic Nightmares* could be mistaken as almost… optimistic? The Ashen Sea has already burned, see; the end of the world came with the Arsonist, and now she's buried deep within her stronghold as the weak but persistent remnants of the forest reach for her, attempting through fungal growth and vegetation to end Her fiery reign and return themselves to the surface they came from. And on the edge of the Sea, the Cinderbloom Thickets grow unfettered, brimming with insect life and birdsong, and threaten to turn the ash into soil once again. The end of the end of the world, perhaps. Or the beginning of something else.

* * *

Pre-orders for Tephrotic Nightmares *will go live on this page over at Exalted Funeral soon.*

AN ATTEMPT AGAINST MUSCULAR DEMONSTRATIONS OF POWER: CHILD OF LIGHT AT TEN

by LUIS AGUASVIVAS



CHILD OF LIGHT

There was a point where I became disillusioned with videogames. As they "matured," videogames began to feel frivolous. Their morbid themes, adolescent fantasies about power and worlds full of drab color were more than off-putting. As I grew into adulthood and I began to interact with an increasingly perilous world, things like climate disasters, international crises and the shrinking prospects for the middle class became my preoccupations. I decided that I would rather waste my time with something else. Thus, from 2010 to 2017 I played few videogames. However, just one still image of *Child of Light* is all it took for me to want to play it, to venture into the world of Lemuria. Immediately, I saw *Child of Light* as a quixotic attempt by one of the biggest AAA studios.

No matter the destination, quixotic quests begin with just one bold step. In 2014, for Ubisoft Montreal, this bold step was releasing a game like *Child of Light*. For the game's main character, Aurora, it's her first steps in the world of Lemuria. *Child of Light* was the only game I played on release during my long spell when I fell out of love with videogames.

Its lineage is easy to discern. Its turn-based gameplay was influenced by *Grandia* and *Final Fantasy*. In a making-of documentary for the game, creative director Patrick Plourde stated that with *Child of Light,* he wanted to provide an experience for fans of "classic console RPGs" that can be shared with their families and loved ones. Plourde, who grew up playing games like *Chrono Trigger* and *Final Fantasy IV,* wanted to create a game that he and other parents could play with their children. This was one motivation behind giving players the option of playing the game cooperatively. One controls Aurora, a young girl on a quest to save her father, and the other, Igniculus a blue sprite. Aurora is the avatar through which we experience the world of Lemuria. Igniculus is her companion that controls like the star cursor, as in *Super Mario Galaxy*. A companion player can light paths, open chests, and even influence battles with Igniculus.

Child of Light, both as a game and a production process, was a soft epistemological break from prior forms of AAA development because it simultaneously pandered to an old-school audience's nostalgia for Japanese role-playing games, while also attempting to reach a wider demographic through the game's picturesque visuals and an unconventional story told almost entirely through rhyme. The game's rhymed dialogue is charming, especially for fans of poetry, though it can sometimes

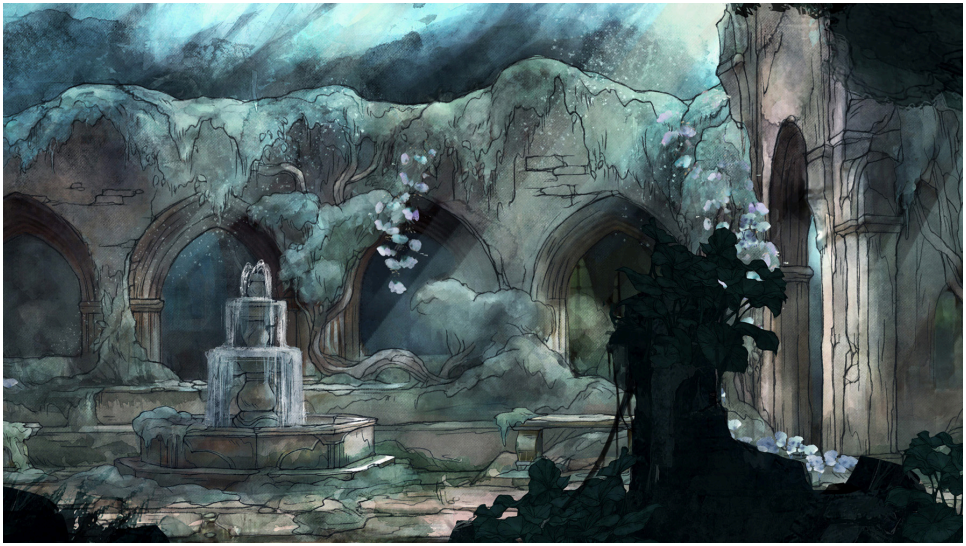
feel forced and occasionally creates moments that are hilariously cringe. While exploring a dungeon I opened a chest and Aurora asked, “What’s inside?” and Igniculus answered her by saying, “Homicide.” I laughed out loud as a monster emerged from the chest and triggered a battle. Expect many more “forced” rhymes like this when playing *Child of Light*. This adds to the game’s magical charm.

A decade after its release, the whimsy of Ubisoft Montreal’s *Child of Light* still twinkles. In retrospect, the game was released in an era when big studios took more chances due in part to the success of the Nintendo DS and Wii, and the ubiquity of smartphones. These devices ushered in a rise in "casual gaming.” It was a time when AAA studios created smaller “artisanal” games alongside the typical big-budget fare.

Playing *Child of Light* for its tenth anniversary is a bittersweet experience. I’m happy that Ubisoft made it, but I’m verklempt when I consider that AAA studios and their investors do not deem a game like this worth creating in 2024. The industry now finds itself trapped in a curse of its own making, brought on by the shortsighted embrace of criminally expensive productions. Those in top level positions dictate that the same game to be made over and over again. This shortsightedness is apparent considering that *Child of Light* was released at the beginning of Gamergate in 2014. Unfortunately, with vile voices again decrying diversity in videogames, our spunky protagonist Aurora, the world of Lemuria and its inhabitants might be moronically perceived as “forced diversity” by fanatics, chauvinists and quacks seeking to clout.

Videogames cannot be discussed devoid of context and the historical and material conditions in which they are produced. Doing so dilutes their intrinsic value. I, for one, view videogames first and foremost as cultural artifacts imbued with meaning. Call me naive, but the type of games that AAA studios prioritize engenders certain passions in fans. These fans are the same ones decrying diversity in games, and seek a sort of perverse fantasy life that validates them, one that is devoid of meaning and poisons all that come into contact with it.

Around *Child of Light*'s release, Bastien Alexander, a creative consultant for Cirque Du Soleil Media who also helped in the game’s development, described it as “a breath of fresh air in a world where most videogames are based on muscular demonstrations of graphics and power.” Alexander’s statement was astute back in 2014 and is still relevant today.



Creating the world of Lemuria, like the process of creating games in general, was an extraordinary collective undertaking by a team of around 40 people at Ubisoft Montreal, an unusually small number. For this team, the production differed from other games they worked on. Recalling her experience while working on the game, Brie Rose Code, the game's lead coder, stated the team had the highest morale of any other she worked with at the time. One-third of the team were women (a total of twelve). According to Plourde, this was the "biggest ratio ever" at the time for any Ubisoft project. For Code, who stated in the game's development diary that, "representation in media is very important," this is one of the reasons morale was so high.

Code goes on to add, "And so it has been such a pleasure and an honor and a dream come true to work on *Child of Light.* I love the character of Aurora. She's brave and tough and relatable and girly and cute and rises against adversity. She's an interesting character. And all of this is beside the fact that people in real life are just so interesting and so varied. People are fascinating. And in games, we are making virtual worlds, and so we can make anything we want. I think we have a responsibility then to create interesting, varied characters." The increase in different perspectives contributed to *Child of Light* becoming a game full of tenderness.

In a GDC talk in 2013, Plourde laid out his vision for *Child of Light* as feminine, exotic, mysterious and dreamy. He admits that the game was a tough sell at first since *Child of Light* "doesn't have a lot of hot business buzzwords. Small is not a virtue," the game is "not free to play" or mobile and when the game was proposed to higher-ups Japanese roleplaying games were "not sexy." Infamously, in 2012 *Fez* designer Phil Fish tactlessly said of Japanese games that, "they suck." This was not just the opinion of one individual but a more widely held belief by Western designers, executives and players. Plourde was able to get approval for *Child of Light* because he had a "stockpile of bargaining chips" from his work on several projects at Ubisoft. Coming back to the present, it's difficult to imagine many creators today in AAA studios having such a stockpile to leverage in order to make another such game.

Child of Light is a progenitor game of sorts. It was part of a larger revival and interest in Japanese roleplaying games. Sabotage Studio's *Sea of Stars* and Square Enix's recommitment to old-school 2D RPGs with games like the *Octopath Traveller* series are indebted to it. *Child of Light* wore its influ-

ence on its sleeve for all to see one year before the release of Toby Fox's indie darling *Undertale.* The fact that a Western AAA studio made a game inspired by Japanese roleplaying games back in 2014 made an impact. The game's developers were made into a core team at Ubisoft Montreal, showing that games like this had a future in the AAA industry outside of Japan.

Child of Light's aesthetics convey a magical world – though visually distinct – that engendered the same sense of wonder as its Japanese roleplaying game influences did over a decade prior. Eschewed was the bleakness and rotten visual aesthetics of AAA videogames at the time. *Child of Light* was not embodied with an "assassin's creed" or preoccupied with making you spin the gears of war. According to Jeffrey Yohalem, the writer of *Child of Light,* the game was created to be "…an experience not based around adrenaline like many other games, but one that transports you to another world. Step into a painting, and live a dream hand-made for you that doesn't sacrifice good gameplay for art." In other words, a vehicle for play.

Child of Light was both critically and commercially successful. According to Plourde, the game was "…profitable enough that we would have been able to fund a sequel." Yet the current state of AAA game development in the West is unlikely to produce a game like it. In 2019 the proposed sequel was canceled. Plourde stated in an interview for the game's fifth anniversary that Ubisoft is focused on making more "adult-oriented games" and "like most other AAA developers, it's increasingly focused on 'games-as-a-service… I don't think it's the type of game that Ubisoft wants to make [anymore]."

Child of Light was a game made by AAA studio that was not Nintendo or Sega, and it sought to bridge a gap between generations. Its core mission statement was one of bringing people together through play. It's a fitting title for a passion project made from code – a labor of love. Play it to see Aurora fly through the sky.

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KAIJU|KAWAII

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