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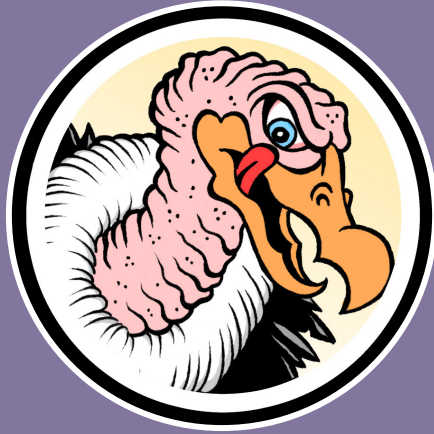


RETURNAL • KOJIMA • METAL GEAR SOLID

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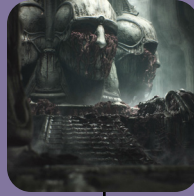
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Dear Reader,
Happy New Year!

I know, it's not exactly the beginning of the year anymore.

This month's cover feature (cover by Zack Giallongo) is Alma Roda-Gil on the kind of cyclical horror that *Returnal* is. Our second feature this month is Emma Kostopolus on avid television and movie imitator, Hideo Kojima.

As for our regular columnists we start the year with . . . Oluwatayo Adewole taking us back to 1966. Jay Castello on the new Pokémons. Maddi Chilton on the *checks notes* World Cup?! Emma Kostopolus gets *Scornful*. Matt Marrone went to Newport! Emily Price leads a colony of dwarves into obsession. Justin Reeve inhabits the husk of a dead titan. Rob Rich gets to streaming. Levi Rubeck went to a place with people and played a game with strangers. Phoenix is really looking forward to *Hades 2: Hellish Boogaloo*. Noah Springer reflects on 2022. Autumn Wright starts to get to the end of things.

Stay safe, wear a mask and climate change is real and causing more extreme weather!

See you all in a few weeks in Exploits!

David Shimomura
Chicago, Illinois
January 11, 2022



I'm kind of addicted to those end-of-the-year lists that tell you the best content that came out over the last twelve months or so. Across the board, movies, TV, books, games, whatever . . . I'm digging into those lists to see what I missed. In general, I've missed a ton of stuff, but I'm always surprised that even though I literally write a column on hip hop, there are still so many great albums that flew under my radar every year. So, with that in mind, now that all the best-of lists have dropped, here's a little wrap up of potential classics I overlooked last year.

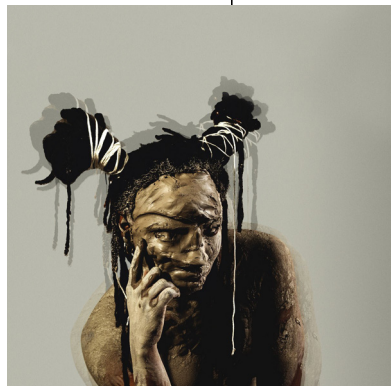
Infinity Knives and Brian Ennals – *King Cobra*

I won't pretend to have heard of Infinity Knives and Brian Ennals before the BotY lists dropped last month, by goddamn, I am ashamed to have missed this one. *King Cobra* is hard, political rap over exciting, innovative production. No punches are pulled – no quarter is given. This is potent shit, but it varies sonically from the more aggressive, almost Death Grips vein of industrial hip hop, to some real soulful singing, reminiscing about your own past, to some strange, '80s synth-mania. Each artist gives the other room to breathe, with both the MC and the producer getting time to find a groove and roll with it. Infinity Knives and Brian Ennals are both in my list of folks to keep an eye on in 2023.



LUCI – *Juvenilia*

Whew, LUCI is a breath of fresh air! *Juvenilia*, the debut EP from the North Carolina native is a wild blend of rap, alt-rock and punk, full of dirty guitars, driving verbal rhythms and sing-songy hooks. The album feels textured, layered with expressions of vulnerability and truth. This is an exciting debut for a young artist, and while it's kind of hard to pin down everything that is happening on *Juvenilia*, all I know is that LUCI has a voice that won't be leaving my head for a minute.



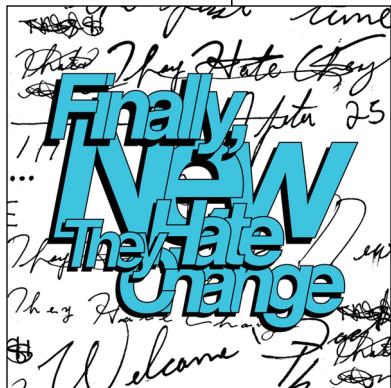
Jesse the Tree – *Pigeon Man*

Among the many cities in the US that you don't associate with hip hop, Providence is numbered. Nevertheless, like Seattle and Boston, there are gems to be found, and Jesse the Tree is proving something is happening in this northeastern hidden gem. *Pigeon Man* is full of knowing samples, classic flows and lyrics that feel real to Jesse's experience. Having been to Providence a few times during my tenure in Boston, the album feels like the city itself – fascinatingly complex, creatively flourishing and criminally underappreciated. I'm not sure what other hip hop is coming out of Rhode Island, but I'm going to keep my ears out for sure.



They Hate Change – *Finally, New*

Now, transport yourself south, down to Tampa Bay, where the duo They Hate Change are revolutionizing hip hop sounds. They dropped *Finally, New* last May, and it feels like something we maybe haven't heard before. Blending drum & bass, postpunk and grime (among some other UK genres I am less familiar with), Andre Gainey and Vonne Parks offer dance-floor beats full of that specific brand of Florida's braggadocio not found elsewhere, but with a bit of non-binary flair thrown in for good measure. This is an exciting development from Florida for me as I haven't heard much out of there that piqued my interest since Denzel Curry broke out nearly a decade ago.



Kenny Beats – *Louie*

I'm disappointed that I somehow missed this dropping over the summer, because I've written about Kenny Beats a lot over the years. But now, I get the chance to write about Kenny as a solo artist because *Louie* is technically his debut studio album. Crazy for someone who has been around for over a decade and worked with some of the best MCs in the game, but here we are, and it was worth the wait. Primarily an instrumental pursuit, *Louie* is quintessentially Kenny, full of quippy samples and catchy sonic fragments – instrumental earworms that dig into your head and refuse to let go. Even though you only hear words from other artists, including JPEGMafia, Vince Staples and Slowthai, Kenny's personality shines throughout, vibrating across the beats. While his work with other artists has been consistently excellent, *Louie* proves that Kenny Beats has something to say on his own and that you don't need words to speak. 🗣️





1966

This month in Run It Back we're heading to 1966 and focusing on three films. One is *Daisies*, Věra Chytilová's genre-bending film which follows the adventures of two young women (Marie I and Marie II) who cause chaos for 75 minutes. Then we have *Behind Every Good Man*, a short documentary student film by Nikolai Ursin which gives a snapshot into the life of an unnamed Black trans woman in LA. Finally, we have *Black Girl*, a film about a young Senegalese woman who goes to France to work for a family that mistreats her, by the godfather of African film, Ousmane Sembene.

There's so much to say about these women, but I kind of just want to see them meet for dinner. What if the fictional could move into the real for just one day in 1966? Would the Maries run off from the confines of the dinner table and enjoy a new world to destroy. Would Diouana and *Every Good Man's* subject find solidarity in their alienation as Black women? Would Behind and the daisies revel in their tenacity? Would the Maries help take revenge for Diouana's eventual fate?

I know one word would be on all of their lips – freedom.

Freedom is one of those fundamental and recurring items in how we think about the world we live in and our place in it. There are few times where this was clearer than in 1966. Various countries were just about escaping formal colonialism. The civil rights and free love movements shook up culture and counter-culture. Pre-Stonewall radical activist groups like San Francisco's "Vanguard" were developing to improve the material conditions of the most vulnerable queer people. The women in these films embody the spirit of that time in their own ways.

The protagonists of *Daisies* grab their freedom through creating chaos. From the club to the train station, they are constantly causing disruption and toying with the men who obsess over them wherever they go. Towards the end of the film, the Maries happen upon a grand feast which has been set up. They go through it with glee, creating a whirlwind of half-eaten food, smashed plates and shattered glassware. They refuse to be controlled or defined by anyone but themselves.



The subject of *Behind Every Good Man* finds freedom in self-embodiment and the pursuit of her own form of happiness. She doesn't just sit in the defiance of surviving as a Black trans woman in the USA in 1966 (thought that would be more than enough). Instead, she demands the things that she wants like "a man that wants to go places, do things", knowing her worth and power and accepting nothing below her station.

Diouana, the Black Girl in Sembene's film, seeks freedom from the poverty that she and her family experience, through taking a job in the imperial core. When she gets over to France, and is increasingly confined in her new position, she has to find new routes of defiance. The center of that is her carved mask that she took with her from Senegal and the back and forth for her to keep it.

Each of these films has their own unique style that carries through the sense of freedom that is struggled over within the texts themselves. Who better to take on these ideas than two of the most revolutionary filmmakers of the era and someone who would go on to be heavily involved in the oncoming years of queer activism.

Daisies perhaps has the most brazen free filmmaking. Věra Chytilová refuses to be confined to a single style here, instead she moves from genre to genre. In some places it's a silent film, in others it leans into war filmmaking, then into the illusionist-inspired style of Georges Méliès. By the end, she's shot in basically every style that had been prominent from the birth of film up until 1966. *Behind Every Good Man* doesn't shift constantly like *Daisies*, but it does have a flowing style that feels like it's more about getting a sense of the energy and life of this woman and that is so much better done through seeing her dance in her room to her favorite records than forcing an awkward and probing talking head style interview.

In contrast to these two, Sembene's filmmaking is more about a very intentional restriction. We move from the wide-open spaces of Senegal to the cramped apartment of the family Diouana works for. Where Chytilová's shifts in and out of color emphasizes the freedom of her protagonists, the black and white of Sembene's film accentuates the darkness of her skin against the blinding whiteness of the place which feels like less of a workplace and more of a cage.

Black Girl has the most extreme ending, resulting in the titular woman's death as a result of how she was treated by her employers, all three films recognize the impermanence of freedom for these women while patriarchal structures still remain. Employment cannot liberate the women of the post-colonial nations while their "former" masters continue to hold the plundered wealth and power. By the end of the film, the Maries have to clean up the mess they made and commit to being good and hard-working girls, the world-bending make-believe must end and we return to the war images that opened the film. Even before that ending, there are moments of darkness, throughout the film. *Behind Every Good Man's* has the reality of the world hit when she has a run-in with the police in some public toilets. As much as this specific encounter doesn't go badly, there is still the sense that it could have, and a reminder that the potential violence of the state is always looming large.

But maybe for a little bit it's worth indulging a little in the fantasy of the dinner table. A little bubble of freedom in the midst of it all where the biggest worry is which type of cake to try first. 🍰





Recursion

Over the December holiday, I finished Ben Lerner's book *Leaving the Atocha Station*. It follows an American poet on fellowship in Madrid who writes by combining the words of other poets, and then re-translating them back into Spanish, creating poems that circle around themselves:

*I imagined the passengers could see me,
Imagined I was a passenger that could see me
Looking up*

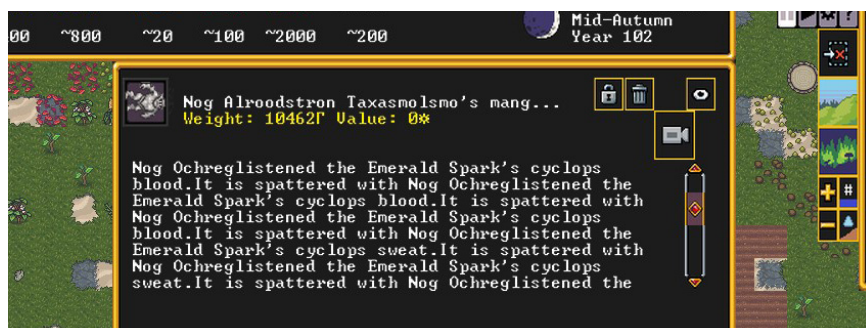
Lerner's narrator, Adam, tells stories by recycling the stories of others. A traumatic incident at a river told to him over instant messenger by a friend becomes his own story he tells to a date, who is horrified as he narrates "sucking on limes" to relieve shock. He lies to his love interests, who become interchangeable, about his parents and his upbringing, and he uses reporting on historical moments as a way to tie himself down to those historical moments. He is a collection of responses to others.

Over the break, I also started playing *Dwarf Fortress*, a game about avoiding the recurring, inevitable spiral of collapse for as long as you can.

Dwarf Fortress was released in 2002 as freeware, and has now released in an expanded form 20 years later on Steam. It's a management and storytelling game where you build a community of dwarves and assign them tasks to help grow your fortress. They will do things on autopilot until something breaks, often their psyche, and they are taken by a strange mood and create something.

My first dwarf to go crazy created an apricot wooden crutch that they carried around with them, despite never using it. The second, who was unable to pray to their god for too long, created a stool that they then decided had been a family heirloom for generations.

In *Dwarf Fortress*, I found a different kind of poetry arranged from descriptions about the world. Each dwarf has their own personality, which is constituted by a list of traits such as “disdains leisure” or “not concerned with the feelings of others.” They will do things and then feel emotions. Not only that, they will do things and then remember doing them and feel different emotions. A dwarf talks with a friend and feels fondness. A dwarf remembers talking with a friend and feels fondness. A dwarf gets caught in the rain and then feels frustrated recalling being caught in the rain. One dwarf of mine, a baby, witnessed a murder and then recalled the traumatizing effect of that witnessing again and again, for the rest of her life.



Beyond the reuse of handcrafted dialogue like personality traits, the description repeats itself for the sake of clarity. In *Dwarf Fortress*, each action and item and their owners are specified down to minute detail, so that you know exactly what a notification refers to. In some cases, this results in a repetition that feels abstract, even emotional. Despite the distance in the description, it can feel almost like an obituary, or an autopsy.

Over the course of *Leaving the Atocha Station* Adam has two girlfriends, and when one leaves, the other reminds him of the first. Not ever realizing the relationship lets him sit “in the flattering light of the subjunctive,” keeping up appearances first with the first girlfriend and then with the second, neither of whom is actually his girlfriend.

This equivalency only works because Adam himself suspects that he is not an entire person, that he hasn’t experienced art genuinely in his life and that the subject he’s devoted years to, poetry, ultimately means nothing. Adam’s repeating, circling life already resembles poetry. At the end of the novel he’s still considering whether to stay in Madrid or go back to America, but

he's ultimately a ghost in both places, and unable to express a more definite opinion on how art will or will not save his life.

One of the novel's questions is whether art really impacts life materially, a question I raised in my first column a year ago. Despite the peace Adam seems to find at its close, Lerner's answer seems to be no. I consider what *Dwarf Fortress* has to say about the subject. Dwarves make constructions when strange moods take them; their only response to psychological trauma is to create. But what they create is not only random, but it's not useful: it's artifacts, the closest thing the game has (besides books) to art. These artifacts provide a baseline for your culture and add to its story. Their creators go back to their regular jobs afterwards.

Is *Dwarf Fortress* post-modern? It's certainly random. Seasons rotate back around and you come up against the same scenarios again: the trade route comes once a year, the ice freezes, you can plant again. The dwarves are a lot like the (post-)post-modern novel's protagonist: they are mostly feelings. Maybe the randomness of their actions is why the descriptions make me so emotional: in a generated world where anything could happen, this, specifically, is what happened. And without randomness and the risk of generating no meaning, everything would feel curated. Instead, I get to see the aftermath of decisions I made without knowing I was making them.

The artifacts seem like an unconscious record of these decisions. Dwarves break under social stress or an individual unmet need and make something that records society as it is now, and when society eventually floods or gets eaten by wolves the artifacts remain. Their lists are their own kind of poetry. They stay when everything living is gone.

Does that make them impactful? I don't know. But once one of my dwarves, a seven-year-old named Ilral Charmsabres, stopped gathering plants to have the thought that "the creative impulse is so valuable." I remember that comment when I've forgotten most other things about that world, which is in the process of falling apart that I heard so much about before I started the game. I stopped because every season and migration wave started to feel the same. The repetition, so striking at first, got to be too much for me.

The artifacts are still there, though, when I'm ready to look. 🏰



Can Scorn Get out From Under the Cosmic Horror Legacy?

So, much like every other horror game fan, I spent a good chunk of hours in late 2021 playing my way through *Scorn* on Game Pass. The grotesque strangeness of the world immediately engaged me, as only things pulling from H.R. Giger's body of work can, and while some of the critiques I've seen about the clumsiness of some mechanics are valid, I actually think that lends itself to the game's charm. It's a game fundamentally about being newly born into a strange world that you know nothing about, so it makes sense that certain things would feel like you're bumbling through them – your positionality in the game is akin to a very gross and violent toddler (so, a normal toddler on a bad day). If you've been following this column up to now, you know that I find inversions of the standard videogame power fantasy to be compelling horror fodder, so I was down with never really knowing what was going to happen when I clicked on an interactable item.

This is not to say, though, that I don't have certain qualms about the game, though my reservations are necessarily a little more existential than mechanical. While my column last month was all about the horror of the known, *Scorn* and other sci-fi horror games like it (think *Dead Space* or *Alien: Isolation*) rely almost entirely on the horror of the unknown – the unknowable, the inconceivable, and the, well, alien. This type of horror, where the crux of the fear rests on something you fundamentally do not, perhaps cannot,

understand, is called “cosmic horror,” and while it’s been effective at terrifying people for decades, it’s got kind of a questionable history behind its popularity.

Cosmic horror was the claim to fame of one H.P. Lovecraft, whose tentacular character Cthulhu has reached meme-fandom fame, and who also wrote such stories as “Shadow Over Innsmouth,” “The Colour Out of Space,” and “Herbert West, Reanimator.” Lovecraft is a foundational figure in horror fiction, and the way the contemporary horror landscape looks in our media owes a lot to him. The issue with this is the same issue you run into with a lot of older media – Lovecraft was very problematic by today’s standards. Actually, by just about any standard – the guy was a raging racist and xenophobe. And his fears about non-white people didn’t just appear in his work, they were a central facet of his horror. In “Innsmouth,” for example, the horror of the story happens to be that (white) humans have been corrupted and perverted by interbreeding with a race of fish people; the story is literally just about Lovecraft’s fear of mixed-race folks, who he saw as inherently inferior. The more you look at Lovecraft’s work, the more the racism jumps out literally everywhere. It’s impossible to avoid and so blatant that it makes enjoying his work pretty uncomfortable – fish people can totally be scary, but not as an allegory for the moral ills of interracial marriage.

Apologies if this feels to some of you like beating a dead horse, but it’s absolutely impossible to discuss space-based and cosmic horror without pointing out that the foundations of the subgenre are racist. When you know that the type of fear modern space-based works are trying to build is modeled after xenophobia, it casts a different light on the fact that every alien you meet is an evil abomination (often one who corrupts human bodies, like the original Xenomorph) that your job is to kill with extreme prejudice.

Scorn is undeniably a different scenario, since you play not as an intrepid human, but as one of the alien creatures, and while there is combat, a lot of the horror is aesthetic and atmospheric – you’re confused and things are gross and hard to understand, which makes for tense times all around. But even with this change in player character, I’m not sure if *Scorn* does enough to get entirely out from under the legacy of the cosmic horror it relies on. I’m certainly not saying that the game is actively xenophobic in the same way Lovecraft’s work is, and it definitely does not have the same settler-colonial vibes of *Dead Space* (more on this in a separate column). I guess ultimately, I’m wondering if enjoying cosmic horror at all is always going to involve holding your nose a bit, once you’re aware of the thematic origins of the fear. Is there ever going to be space-based horror that isn’t tinged by a legacy of racism? 🇺🇸





Athletic Feats of Narrative

It seems appropriate, in this new year, that I start by shaking things up a bit. This is nominally a column about art, and about how we consume art in the world today. I haven't been doing that much lately. Instead, I've been watching sports.

Sports aren't art, by which I mean they're not intentionally constructed by a person or a group of people in order to convey an idea. They *are* a story, however, in the sense of history more than narrative: meaning is constructed in layers, first through experience and then through reflection, trying to make sense of the things we've seen. It's that first element – experiencing a story as it happens, one where an ending hasn't been decided – that gives sports their fun and their nerve. Witnessing something extraordinary is always a thrill, and sport is where we go for that, democratically, to sit in stands or in bars or on couches across the world and watch together.

An endeavor made more complicated by the current state of affairs, of course. Year three of a pandemic. Breathing air in the same space as other people is a loaded act lately. I couldn't look at a single picture from the World Cup last month without thinking, *Wow, not a mask in sight*. It was hard to bat away the anxiety enough to have a group of semi-familiar friends over for the final; or, if you look at it a different way, my desire to not be alone at that moment was strong enough that I let my defenses drop.

Our context informs our viewership. This World Cup in particular was a shitty distraction from any sense of (inter-)post-pandemic nihilism. From

its inception, the whole thing was a grand tribute to FIFA's corruption and the rubber-spined suits of the world. Any amount of death and misery is acceptable as long as it makes the right people money – sound familiar? The many miracles of the tournament, the genuinely riveting moments of sporting magic and the fangs-out bloody battles that made it such a spectacle seemed at odds with the strange, muted atmosphere of the thing itself, how no one could quite tongue out the lie that things were just as they'd always been. No one felt *good* about Qatar 2022. There are quite a lot of things no one feels good about these days. And yet, all around the world, people turned on their TVs.

Here's the story I wanted to see. I'm an Argentina fan, but in the fickle manner of the non-native – I haven't followed the team closely since their back-to-back final losses in 2015 and 2016, which were too much for my weak stomach. Like millions of other people around the world, I love watching Lionel Messi play. I felt that he deserved to get what he wanted. Everyone knew it would be his last World Cup, and it seemed like it would be a nice one for him to win, surrounded by a young team who loved him and who played prettier than they used to in the bad old days. I didn't want a boring repeat win by France, the favorites; I didn't care about it coming home to England or the US finally doing something of note in the men's game; I like Brazil, but I figure they'll get it again in the near future anyway. So why not Argentina? Why not throw Messi, eternally beloved, a man who's got everything else in the world, this one little bone?

As [Brian Phillips wrote eloquently in his final roundup](#), we tell ourselves stories to live. I felt that, during this tournament, as the infinite fracturing futures of my team split out in front of me. An introductory loss against Saudi Arabia spelled the comedic hand of fate, the laughing, fickle sense of



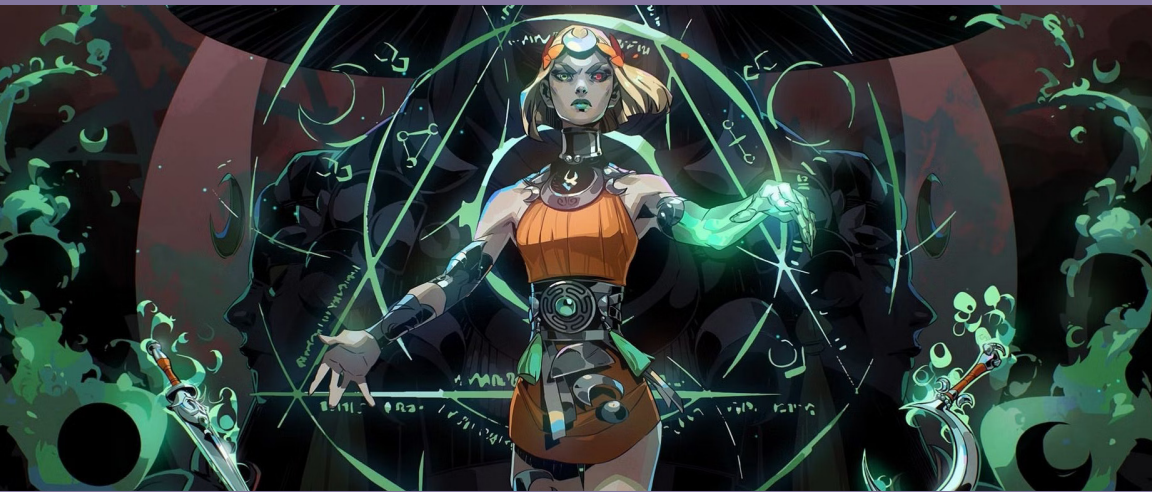
humor of some unknown god. The comebacks against Mexico and Poland were the rearing head of a beast that had been sleeping. Martínez' last minute save against Australia, Mateu Lahoz's ten minutes of extra time against the Netherlands; the pendulum swung forward and then back. There's nothing less gray than the knockout stages of a tournament. You win or you lose. So does everyone else.

That's the world now. We live in unprecedented times! Nothing's just been *alright* since March 2020: things feel very good, or they feel very bad. The good moments are a wild triumph, an outsized victory, some moment of happiness I feel I've personally stolen for myself and the people I love; the bad ones are confirmation that fate is cruel, that the universe doesn't care about us, that joy was for different people in a different time.

I don't know if I believe the world is a more terrible place than it used to be. I think every generation has borne the pressures of modernization in different ways, and I think everyone fears that the best is behind them, that things only get worse from here. We see more of the bad parts of life than we used to, that is certain, and the scope and scale of indignity looms like a wave, always on the precipice of crashing down and swallowing us – no wonder we feel dwarfed – but we see the good things, too. Somewhere out there, every day that we're alive, our stubborn little species is finding a reason to celebrate.

Every story doesn't end well. It's easier to go back to art, where things happen for a reason. But life? Sports, politics, family, relationships? In this world, the one we live in now, the cruel one? No one's writing the ending. There's no structure to follow, no author to trust. It's back to the funny little script of fate. The ball goes in, or it doesn't. The good thing doesn't happen . . . or it does. 🍀





The Triple Goddess Effect

I know. I know. It's so early to be discussing *Hades II* but Supergiant Games' use of mythic fragments has me entranced. And so do other aspects of Melinoë, the protagonist of this surprise sequel as well. When she was introduced in the teaser trailer shown during that Geoff Keighley show, I initially assumed (wrongly) that she was a descendant of Zagreus. But I soon found out from Supergiant's press release that she's actually Zag's sister!

Like Zag, she is also connected to an Orphic hymn, this time one that sings of her as a "saffron veil'd" nymph that inspires both night terrors and madness in people. She is also described as the child of Zeus (under the guise of Hades) and Persephone, whose limbs are "partly black and partly white" from her mixed heritage. Unless they're planning for a serious plot twist in *Hades II* the press release seems to be doing away with the infidelity as they did for the previous title and focusing on Hades and Persephone as parents. In my previous column, I was interested in how Zag's biracial identity was a metaphor for liminality and bridging the distance between his divine and chthonic relatives. But with Mel I'm particularly interested in how her identity and journey are tied more to the void between these two states and its boundless potential.

In the trailer the princess of hell is introduced during a sparring match with Hecate, the goddess of magic and witchcraft and assorted eldritch things. She's also known as the triple goddess – the maiden, the mother and the crone – the lunar symbology of which is very familiar to those practicing various spiritual paths today. [According to Neoplatonic philosopher Porphyry of Tyre](#), one of the earliest sources regarding Hecate's symbology, the goddess' powers would

wax and wane with the different phases of the moon. As Hecate's protege, Melinoë will be practicing sorcery and I do hope there will be an emphasis on lunar magic.

Supergiant has confirmed there will be a focus on Greek myth's connections to "the dawn of witchcraft" in the game's lore and Melinoë's character build. This confirmation makes me very curious about how they will play with time in the narrative design of the game. The princess is also seeking to kill Chronos, the titan who is "time itself," so I can imagine time challenges and time-based abilities will likely be core to the gameplay. There's another reason I bring up Hecate's background however: it's because Melinoë is deeply connected to Hecate in myth. She is in fact an aspect of Hecate, her name speculated to be an Orphic title or euphemism for the mother of witches. Both of them are known as figures who preside over spirits, magic, night and the crossroads.



While Zag shares his mythic origins with the "twice-born" god Dionysus, Melinoë is associated with a triple goddess (sometimes comprised of Persephone as maiden, Demeter as mother and Hecate as crone). Melinoë's name is only mentioned once more outside of the Orphic hymns, [inscribed on a magical device](#) for divination alongside other names (including Persphone's) in an invocation to Hecate. While I'm not sure whether these references will once more be mere trivia delivered by Orpheus in the game or not, looking up all this made me think again about fragmented identity and what fragments mean for a protagonist like Melinoë who is constructed from them.

Melinoë is physically similar to Zag in appearance, literally half-Chthonic and half-divine, there's emphasis on her spectral fragmentation. One of her eyes is red and black the other green, although the heterochromia is reversed to her brother's, and she is flame-footed too. But that's where the similarities

end. She also possesses left arm that is phantom-like from the forearm on down and a right leg that is curiously armored as if hiding another ethereal feature. Her fragmented appearance, together with her mythic associations with witchcraft, time and liminal space also point towards her identity most likely being queer.

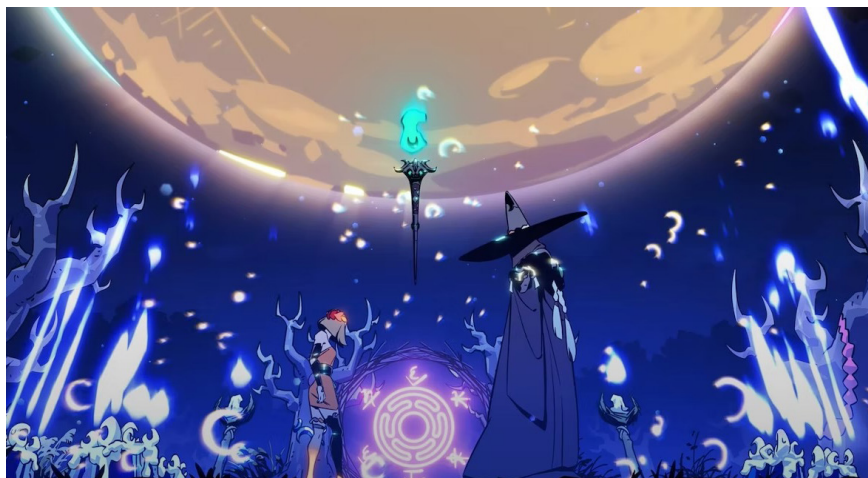
There's a lot to be said about fragmentation, time and liminal space with regards to queer identity and culture. Derek Tywoniuk, the composer of [Dorothy Fragments \(2019\)](#) which is a collection of sonic and visual ephemera from drag culture, community lingo, social dating apps, Craigslist forums and more, describes queer culture as “highly decentralized, reliant upon coded language and dress, inside jokes, and a relentless parsing of itself into subcultures, sub-subcultures, sub-sub-subcultures, and so on.” His collection captures the spectrum of queer culture and how the digital age enables queer individuals at different intersections to explore, discover, negotiate and express their identities as well as address more problematic aspects of their extended community online, a liminal space. Queer culture also intersects with witchcraft often, with the recent winner of *RuPaul's Drag Race All-Stars* Jinkx Monsoon claiming her victory in Hecate's name.



To bring it back to Mel and my early perception of her though, game narratives have been getting more aware of how time mechanics can portray queer experience. Editor and game critic Khee Hoon Chan, writing in a guest editorial for *First Person Scholar's* special issue on “Decolonising Queer Games and Play”, discusses how *Life is Strange* has shown how queer folks [experience and self-define time and normative markers](#) of adulthood differently. Importantly, they note that while games have become more willing to explore queer narratives over time, most queer representation is still overwhelmingly

white. And for all that I love how Zag and Mel showcase a nuanced biracial experience, they are both part of that representational issue.

Personally, I think focusing on a triple goddess theme is a beautiful way to lean more into what kept the first *Hades* game interesting for me: storytelling through music and exploring an unapologetic state of alterity. Other than the obvious in the first game: Zag's bisexual identity, Achilles and Patroclus' relationship and the inclusion of polyamorous romance options (which is canon to Greek myth, might I add), the game's music also obliquely points towards queer culture.



The soul of Supergiant's game narratives is its unique audio direction, second only to their concept art. If you remember anything even about their earliest title *Bastion*, it's probably going to be what your favorite musical tracks or voice work was. Over the course of the studio's ten plus years of game development, music has always been central to their storytelling style. Often characters will sing key songs that underscore a game's themes or will be bards themselves that also act as overt narrators. In *Hades*' it's the first instance of audio director Darren Korb acting as both a protagonist inspired by a bard's music and the singing voice of the bard in question.

Knowing what we know about the Orphic origins of the Hades' protagonists, this elevates the importance of musical storytelling to a new level. Korb is always involved early on in the game design process and will discuss story beats and themes early on with Greg Kasavin, the in-house narrative director who is pulling from these Orphic fragments to intentionally create characters like Zag who are complex and resist stereotypical queer-coding. This is essential to how intertwined Korb's soundtracks are with the lore of the various game worlds he's helped bring to life.

Hades' soundtrack is a hybrid of Korb's previous approaches to music as storytelling, specifically *Bastion* and *Transistor*. Similar to *Transistor*, where the soundtrack was composed around the premise that all tracks were previous in-world recordings by the protagonist-singer Red, *Hades* soundtrack is composed as if they are all part of Orpheus', the divine-touched court musician of hell, oeuvre. In fact, a major part of Orpheus' arc is that he's uninspired to play music for the Lord of the Underworld because he's pining for his lost wife and muse, Eurydice. And as with *Bastion's* soundtrack, the instrumentation matters as much as the lyrics. Korb likes to create unique genres for each game world and for *Hades* he used a mix of ancient Grecian and Turkish plucked-string instruments as well as an electronic sampler of theremin-like sounds. One could say the soundtrack carries fragments of each era of Supergiant Games.

Another famous queer figure associated with fragments and Greek myth is worth mentioning at this juncture: Sappho of Lesbos. The poet-musician's lyrical work survives only in fragments and according to poet and scholar Anne Carson in her popular translation of the fragments, "she knew and loved women as deeply as she did music." All of Sappho's music is lost to time, but Carson relates that it was apparently so beautiful that Hellenistic poets dubbed her "the tenth Muse" or "the mortal Muse". Similar to Melinoë, Sappho is a figure perceived through queer fragmentation, lyrical and hailed as half-divine. Kasavin and by extension Korb must be aware of these matters, to some extent. Even if Sappho does not make an explicit appearance in *Hades II*, she's certainly present in spirit.

All in all, I'm looking forward to Mel hopefully continuing the Underworld family tradition of being fearless, fiercely beautiful and queer in her liminality. 🍷





No Rules Newport

An undeniable highlight of each summer is Unwinnable's can't-miss coverage of [the Newport Folk Festival](#). Yet in 2022, it was nowhere to be found.

Did Unwinnable sit out a year that included legendary surprise performances by both Paul Simon and Joni Mitchell? Did the Rookie of the Year lose a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity to dance with the Wife of the Year to Joni's performance of "Amelia" – which happens to be the Wife of the Year's name (and his ringtone for her)? Did Unwinnable not shed a single tear during any of this?

No! Unwinnable was there! Unwinnable danced! Unwinnable cried! Unwinnable did not write about it!

It's time to rectify that. Because something else happened at the most recent NFF – Sylvan Esso debuted their as-yet-to-be-released and previously-unheard album, "No Rules Sandy" – for the first time. They performed it in its entirety, as we danced under a blazing hot sun. And guess what? It's my 2022 Album of the Year.

Amelia is also the name of the voice of Sylvan Esso, Amelia Meath. Leading into her performance I had been wondering why so many musicians insist on dressing in unseasonably warm attire at these shows. Newport is not a place where one would be judged for cargo shorts. And so, when Amelia Meath took the stage in a suit jacket and bra, she'd already won me over. When she removed the suit jacket, she became practically heroic.

She needed the fresh air. As I said, it was hot that day. I was covered in dirt from dancing in the dusty ground in front of the Fort stage. Amelia Meath was under cover and clean, but she moved like it was her first and last show, and her husband, bandmate, Nick Sanborn (the Sandy in the album's title) made his bleeps and bleeps with just as much enthusiasm.

I'm a latecomer to Sylvan Esso's music. I had "Ferris Wheel" on repeat heading into Newport, to the point where my two boys started requesting the "knees are bruised" song in the car. And while there might not be a song on "No Rules Sandy" quite that infectious, many come close – like "Didn't Care" or "Sunburn" or "Alarm". There's also arguably my favorite track, or at least the one that initially drew me in, called "Your Reality" which the duo has described as being a mashup of two very different ways of seeing the song. The result is splendid and not only suits the lyrics, but the album itself, a less-than-highly-polished post-pandemic parade of quickly written and recorded songs separated by short in-studio doodles and even a voicemail message from Mom.

The cover, too, is just the track list – black type left-justified on a white background (in iTunes the song titles disappear and reappear on a loop). It's clear my [inaugural recipient of the Executive Producer of the Year Award](#) wasn't consulted, though perhaps that's for the best. The mixtape mashup of "No Rules Sandy" doesn't have the gravitas of the Album of the Year runner-up – Shearwater's quiet but powerful "The Great Awakening" – but it's a ton of fun.

Listening to it, Unwinnable is right back at the 2022 Newport Folk Festival. Hearing it for the first time with everyone else. Crying to the "The Sound of Silence." Hugging the wife as a legend performed in front of a crowd for the first time in years, and for the first time at Newport since the 1960s. When it comes to the lineup, or the set lists, there are no rules at Newport. Not for Sylvan Esso last year, and certainly not for the other artists delivering unforgettable surprises.

We didn't write about it then. Now we have. 🍷



THE ABUNDANT NATURE

I wanted to clown on *Pokémon Scarlet* and *Violet* from the second I saw the “abundant nature” trailer.

Obviously, that’s not actually what the trailer is called, but it lodged in my brain like that. In fact, I thought that it was my first impression of the game because of how it stuck with me, but it’s actually from the “[World Overview](#)” from August 2022 – the third of the major hype videos that dropped in the lead up to its November release.

Still, the only thing I remembered from *Scarlet* and *Violet*’s advertisement cycle was the shot where they cut to a deeply bland outdoor scene overlaid with the phrase in question. Sanitized rock cliffs painted on top with monochrome, too-bright grass and a handful of trees. Abundant nature. Easy pickings for a column like this.

But Paldea, the Iberia-inspired region introduced in the latest entry in the series, really does have abundant nature. The geometry of the world itself isn’t particularly interesting – the cliffs are just rock, without a moss or lichen in sight, the grass is a monoculture, trees are carefully placed to construct paths or points of interest. But this is also the first entry in the almost 30-year-old franchise where you can feel that it was inspired by childhood experiences of bug catching.

Although *Pokémon Arceus* took a swing at the open world format earlier in 2022, it fell flat with repetitive Pokémon appearances and wide, dull areas. In comparison, *Scarlet* and *Violet* feels, well, abundant.

It has less to do with the density or variety of spawns, and more to do with how carefully they're considered. Pokémon don't just appear in a specific area but have a habitat. Eevee's Pokédex will tell you that it likes to be near towns and cities, and so hunting by the edges of settlements makes sense, rather than wandering onto a random route that is apparently somehow ecologically sequestered from the next one over.

And speaking of the Pokédex, *Scarlet* and *Violet*'s entries lean into the interconnected world that now exists in the game itself. One of the most popular previous Pokémon interactions was Seviper and Zangoose, who were said to have an ongoing feud. But *Scarlet* and *Violet* are packed full of these kinds of notes. Tarountula has a webbed body to protect it from Scyther attacks. Fletchinder uses embers to scare bug Pokémon out of hiding. Rufflet may peck at Spewpa, but Spewpa uses black powder created in its body to fight back.



The combination of experiencing Pokémon in the overworld, in their homes rather than scattered almost at random, and the Pokédex treating them with the depth that keen kids could previously only imagine makes Pokémon actually live up to its hunting and catching roots.

Which is why it's so noticeable that the advertisement clearly wanted to highlight this, but completely failed to do so.

Sure, it's hard to capture the sense of actually moving through the world in a brief trailer. Feeling the context of the Pokémon by where they appear and what flavor text they're given isn't something that can easily be splashed into a video for a couple of seconds. But there's also the problem of the format of advertising itself. Something created to sell has a different understanding of abundance than something created to emulate childhood experiences of the outdoors.

But the advertisement also feels held back by the game's own limited understanding of its ecological step forward. In Barbara Bender's *Stonehenge: Making Space*, she reflects on the portrayal of a "British landscape" on a rail poster. The advertisement makes the space into something to be observed while passing through on the way to more important things. So too does the "abundant nature" trailer. And the game struggles with the same issue.

Although it has three story branches that can be completed in whatever order the player chooses. At the beginning of the game, an NPC asks which you want to prioritize, and I chose completing the Pokédex – i.e., researching all the critters and creatures – only to be told that wasn't one of the three branches at all. Instead, it's a secondary task that can be done while moving between gyms, giant Pokémon and defeating rivals.

But that's never been what's drawn me to Pokémon. I wanted to exist in the world, exploring the different areas and seeing how they supported different webs of life. Pokémon *Scarlet* and *Violet* are the first games that actually let you do that – but their stories and their trailers don't quite seem to have realized it yet. 🍷





Mapping MÖRK BORG's Cruel Delights

It's not so much that we settled on *MÖRK BORG*, but it wasn't our first choice. If you've attended any PAX event in the last few years, you know that in order to sign up for most official events you have to download a janky scheduling app, wake up early and essentially choose one event. At 8 a.m. on the day of, you smash that register button and hope for the best, and from there maybe mosey to a few other lesser options to see if you can squeeze in, but with a light laugh at the futility.

There are waitlists for registered events, and PAX is largely about lines and patience and playing games with strangers in those lines or, if you're lucky, by getting into whatever you were in line for – so the ramshackle app is not the omega of one's experience. But I only really wanted to try and do my journalistic duty on one front for PAX Unplugged 2022, and that was the *Blade Runner* RPG from Free League publishing. There were copies on the floor but the books were yet to be released. As such, prepared referees were in thin supply, and demand was high, and I could have probably emailed some people or swung my media badge around pretending to be a real hotstepper, but I put my trust in the app.

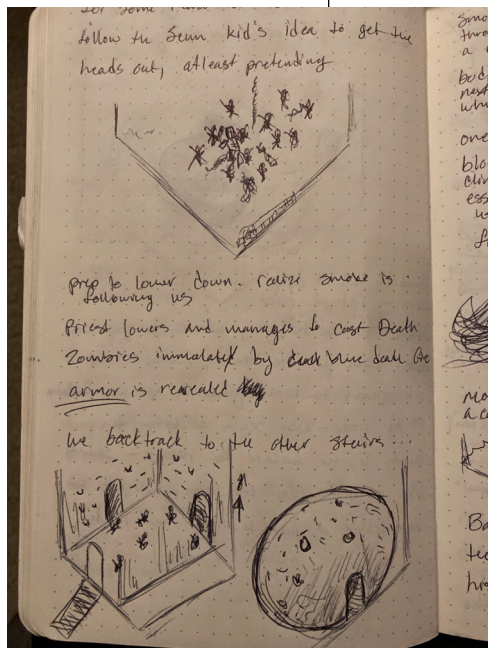
I should not have put trust in my friends though, one of which just would not be told to wake up before 8 to fiddle on yet another app, which is respectable. And I came more for friendship than scoops, so when he didn't register in time and the waitlist spots slipped away faster than a half-hooked bull trout, we

were left to choose from the tables that remained. Of them, we went with the hellish rules-lite RPG *MÖRK BORG*, given that others in our wider playgroup had expressed interest. Might as well learn from a pro, or someone that has carved through the maximalist design in order to break it down a bit.

We three sidled up with four temporary friends and a patient referee to get gnarly. First, some lines and veils sheets for us all to fill out and share, which I appreciated – though our group was all rough-shorn veterans who each brought multiple sets of dice, it's entirely plausible that others might have wandered for a game without even a book cover's worth of understanding of *MÖRK BORG*. It's an RPG about the end of a cruel, blasted world, as prophesized by basilisk gods and undead warriors amidst already smoldering remains. You can try to hasten or hinder this collapse, but your efforts will likely end up in death anyways, but the materials involved all look very cool in the meantime, and what else can you ask for?

MÖRK BORG was not entirely unfamiliar to me, having read the slim core manual. It flowed through me like water though, and I would fail a quiz about its intricacies, like most rulebooks I read. For me it's all about application, whether that means me fumbling as a ref via *Mothership* or some other game for this same RPG group, or really focusing in on a let's play or explainer video. Luckily, *MÖRK BORG* isn't really trying to reinvent what the schools new and old have served so far, but put a nihilistic *Dark Souls* scaffolding around it, so most of the concepts were familiar: try a thing, roll to fail or succeed, do math.

This session operated entirely as a “theater of the mind” scenario, meaning there was no map and there were no minis or tokens. This can be a perfectly serviceable way to play, and in fact our referee had the chops to keep us engaged, informed and aware of what was happening as our party of freelancers descended into a bloody hole to try and find the knight that everyone actually loves and bring him and/or his fancy suit of armor back home. Sometimes I struggle with the theater of the mind though; I grew up loving sprites and maps and shit so without that my mind wanders. Normally I attempt to counteract this by taking overly verbose notes as an attempt to center myself, with middling success – it's only a problem when I need to find

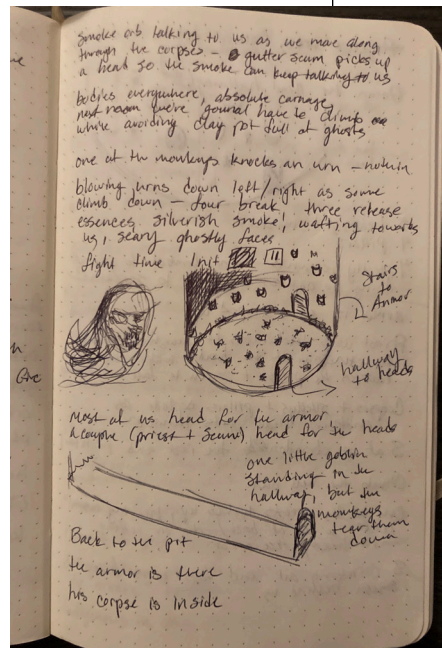


something in the notes, and my spelling is so inconsistent so as to befuddle the humble cmd+f shortcut.

Didn't have my computer here at PAX Unplugged though because I'm old and that stuff is heavy. Just a notebook and a few pens (and a couple sets of dice, I'm no slouch). Figured I'd scribble some notes as we go, but that wasn't really holding me, as I did not expect this four-hour session to necessitate going back through the lore. But I had small dots for guidance, and our referee was very descriptive of the shambling masses of corpses and floating blood spheres and then the goblin which I only later learned could have been a *real* problem for us, and the blood press into which we were wandering with its various rooms.

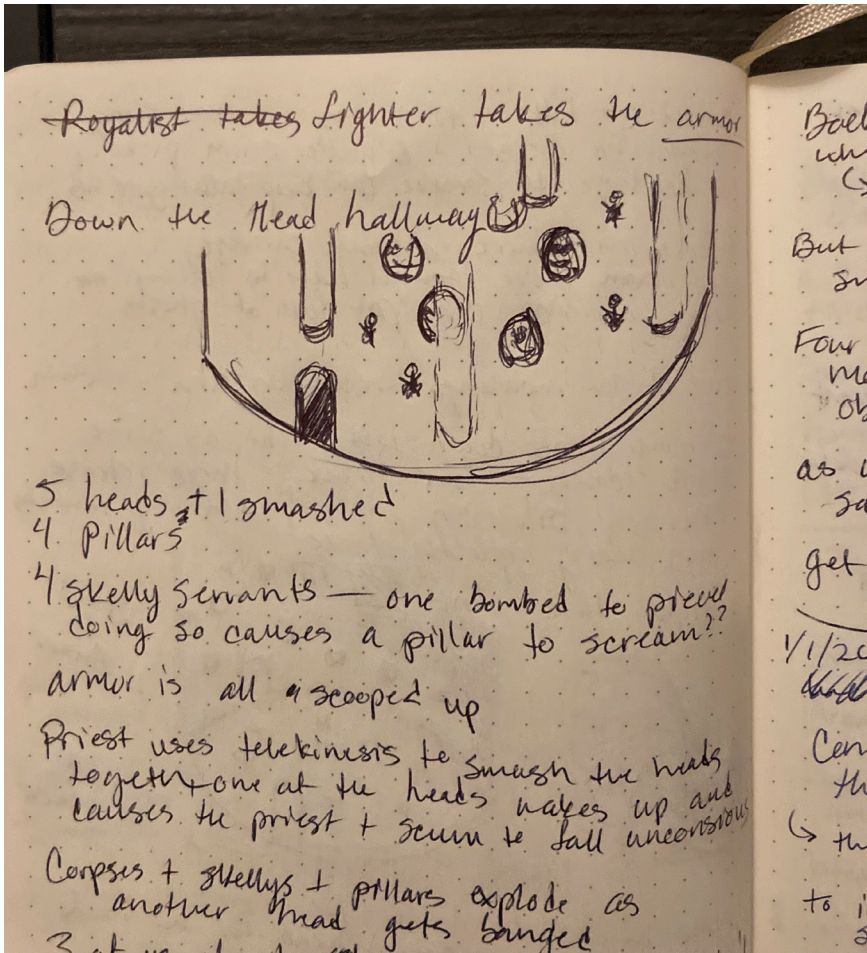
Then it hit me, like a dirty lightbulb in an ancient office that's gone undisturbed for far too long - I can draw these rooms. The power is mine, the technology is in hand. Why hadn't I considered this sort of thing before? Well, we really don't play many non-map games in my group, and the ones we do play, well, I run. And I try to make maps for these to use in our online tabletops, but a lot of the software is a smidge too finnickily for me or I just can't find the tile or whatever I want at the moment and then I wander away to play guitar or eat a snack. But there was no wandering from this *MÖRK BORG* table; we were here to find a dead hero and rob his grave.

I'm not saying I drew great maps, because while I like drawing it's really been a while and I didn't particularly pay attention back when anyway. But got damn if drawing those diagrams wasn't my favorite part of this whole con (though I did play more games and expect to write up those in some fashion soon please keep giving me media badges). It got to the point where it was clear we'd hit the final room, as we were trying to figure out how to stop these orbs from furthering the destruction of the world and essentially enacting the opposite of those intentions, and our time was wrapping up and there were no more rooms to draw and this delightful distraction was over. The session was indeed quite fun, though we'll see if anyone runs something more for our home table. The magic was a real treat in the way it's randomly assigned and almost always a problem for everyone in the vicinity, friend or foe, I'm always looking out for more mystical mayhem along those lines.



MÖRK BORG may or may not be my map inspiration in the future, though I certainly enjoyed my time at the table and would eagerly sign up for another session. And I've considered the #Dungeon23 train, a daily writing exercise of devising one room of a megadungeon per day as the main impetus, a way to put those Hobonichi Techo life books to real work, but I should probably keep whittling down all these poems.

Those little maps though, what sweet treasures. They juiced me with that creative joie de vivre that comes and goes too fast in an act of creativity, a reminder of what every aspect of this absurd hobby has to offer, may it carry on past the demise foretold by the lizard triplets. 🐸





A Golden Halo that Could be the Sun, Part I: Whose Apocalypse is This?

In his 1967 book *The Sense of an Ending*, Frank Kermode writes: “Apocalypse and the related themes are strikingly long-lived; and that is the first thing you can say about them.”

You wouldn't know this. You want to play a videogame, and [you want to save the world](#). You think stories about saving the world can save the world. That there is a “right track,” and that our stories have strayed. Is this what revolution looks like when videogames have radicalized you? The prolonged gasps of history unending, the maintenance of a status quo that has marched deathwards thus far? Is there no future worth imagining beyond this one? What would you write in the first chapter of a new history?

In our contemporary storytelling tradition, the flood is the ur-apocalypse, first appearing as violent creation myths for how the world was given its current form – because the apocalypse is not *about* destruction, but change.

The worlds that Ziusudra, Utnapishtim, Manu and Noah inherit all look familiar to those originally reading their stories. But what of the flooded? The perspectives of those judged by some higher power immoral, bothersome, over. What does the beauty of a world born anew look like from the depths?

* * *

“The second,” Kermode writes, “is that they change.”

* * *

Rooted in the Afrofuturist myth of ‘90s electronic duo Drexciya, clipping’s “[The Deep](#)” illustrates a utopic, underwater Atlantic city built by the children of drowned African slave women. The brief history of the oasis is interrupted when the ‘two legs’ of our modern-day bring war to the city in search of oil beneath the floor, prompting the merpeople to incite a great flood – rendered in 20 seconds of harsh static noise – that, besides causing immense destruction, leaves the world inhospitable to surface dwellers.

Which is one way to imagine an end to the colonial order.

Through their use of second person narration, clipping. maintains a sort of ambivalence in conversation with their abolitionist imagination. Because yes, the descendants of slaves and survivors of colonialism the world over will too drown, but the imagination of a perfect revolution does not stop the revolution. The pursuit of nonviolence is explicitly condemned throughout the trio’s discography, a refutation of imposed Christian values on a liberatory movement.

In “Blood of the Fang,” Diggs invokes “Queen Angela,” who, “done told y’all, ‘Grasp at the root’/So what y’all talkin’ ‘bout – ‘Hands up, don’t shoot?’”



Throughout the song Diggs evokes the figure of a Black messiah alongside Christian imagery, as if to suggest that the eucharist is Black history. As, “Brother Malcom done told y’all, ‘By any means/So what y’all talkin’ ‘bout – ‘All on the same team?’” In rejecting nonviolent narratives of revolution, Diggs refigures Christian imagery against oppressors, as he does in “The Deep” turning the Biblical flood onto the descendants of Christian slavers.

This desire for the end, the apocalypse and what comes after it, is as old as literature. Whereas *revolution* shares its origins with cyclicity, going back, recording society from the ground up, *apocalypse* suggests unrecognizable creation moving forward. The Book of Revelation imagined both the collapse of what were unshakable systems – the Roman Empire and its persecution of a religious minority – as well as the construction of a new utopia. It connected “apokalyptis,” meaning “unveiling” or “revelation,” with the end of the world *as we know it*.

When we hope for apocalypse, we hope to write a new chapter unburdened by history. But such change can look like destruction when the weight of your home rests on the backs that built it, keeping the movement inert. Delaying apocalypse then reflects one’s position in the current world. To imagine the now as savable, to envision the unfamiliar as loss, to romanticize playing environmental terrorists in ‘90s JRPGs belies a material reality. When, as Solnit writes, “even nostalgia and homesickness are privileges not granted to everyone,” to save the world is only to prolong its violent ordering. The apocalypse, in that biblical, eschatological sense, is violent only when you have power in this world but not the next. 🇺🇸





Remembering the Triangle Shirtwaist Factory Fire

Take a look around the game world in *Dishonored* and you'll soon see a series of high-density industrial buildings. While these can be found pretty much all over the place, the best examples in my personal opinion are located in the Flooded District, most notably the Greaves Refinery. According to various clues hidden throughout the area, this particular building was used to refine whale oil for the Greaves Lighting Oil Company. The structure was ultimately abandoned when the Wrenhaven River overran its banks during the Rat Plague, flooding the building and leaving the Greaves Refinery little more than a site for squatters.

The building consists of several stories filled with various materials from office supplies to industrial equipment, suggesting the wide range of different uses to which the structure has been put. While some of the space appears to be dedicated to administration, the Greaves Refinery is mostly about manufacturing, several parts being filled with vats, tanks and bottles. While the wooden floors are clearly rotten to the point of collapse, you can still see workbenches covered with tools like hammers and screwdrivers, apparently untouched ever since the structure was abandoned. The interior and exterior doors are mostly of the high security metal type which can stand up to almost any sort of tampering. When seen from outside, the building is largely characterized by its brick walls and smokestacks, but a metal bridge can also be found connecting a couple of separated segments.

This form of high-density industrial building was incredibly common a couple of hundred years ago, particularly in places like New York. There was in fact a famous fire which resulted in several dozen fatalities and the destruction of the Triangle Shirtwaist Factory back in 1911. The incident was entirely preventable and made infinitely worse by the implementation of incredibly poor practices regarding safety standards, basically nonexistent at the time. The fire wound up taking the lives of 146 working people through some combination of smoke inhalation, burning and jumping from windows to escape the blaze. The victims were mostly women and girls fresh off the boat from Italy and Germany. The oldest person was 43 and the youngest were barely 14 years old. Their names were Providenza Panno, Kate Leone and Rosaria Maltese, respectively.

The factory was located between the eighth and tenth floors of the Asch Building, a structure which still stands about a block away from Washington Park. The owners were Max Blanck and Isaac Harris, a pair of entrepreneurs who started a business producing women's blouses, the Triangle Shirtwaist Company. Blanck and Harris had something like 500 people working approximately 52 hours a week between Monday and Saturday for the equivalent of about \$800 a month in today's currency, roughly \$4 an hour. There was no minimum wage at the time. This would only be implemented several decades later in 1938.


The fire broke out as the workday was coming to a close on the afternoon of March 25. While the cause remains unknown, someone likely tossed a cigarette butt into a dust bin below a cutter's table on the eighth floor which happened to contain several months' worth of accumulated scrap from a few thousand blouses. There was hanging fabric all over the place which of course caused the flames to spread with incredible speed, climbing up to the tenth floor within a matter of minutes. While the factory had multiple exits including freight elevators and a fire escape, they were all inaccessible either because of the flames or the simple fact that most



of the doors leading to the stairs were locked, a practice frequently employed at the time to prevent workers from taking breaks. The fire escape was a flimsy metal structure that soon collapsed from the intense heat, causing about 20 people to fall several stories onto the ground below, killing them instantly. The gated elevators were of course reserved for management.

Several workers fled to the roof of the building, but as the blaze kept burning, the flames rose higher, firefighters being unable to help, their ladders only reaching up to the seventh floor. The result was that many people wound up jumping, something which produced a number of particularly sad scenes, a man for example being seen kissing a woman before both tumbled from a window. The journalist William Shepard later described how “I learned a new sound that day, a sound more horrible than description can picture, the thud of a speeding living body on a stone sidewalk.” This managed to attract a large crowd of people who looked on as no less than 62 people jumped from the burning structure.

Blanck and Harris went on to be charged with manslaughter, their case being brought before a court several months later on December 4. The owners walked away following an acquittal but were eventually found guilty of wrongful death in a subsequent lawsuit. While the families were awarded \$75 in compensation, Blanck and Harris actually turned a profit from the settlement, collecting around \$400 for each one of the victims based on their insurance claim. The fire on the other hand led to legislation about safety standards and provided the necessary impetus for workers to unionize and fight for better conditions.

Dishonored is a game which harkens back to a time when protection for working people was practically nonexistent, ruthless exploitation being the rule. This can be seen throughout the game world, but the Flooded District is perhaps the starkest example, recalling the fire at the Triangle Shirtwaist Factory. While conditions have definitely improved in the meantime, this particular tragedy provides a reminder that workers have to remain steadfast in their pursuit of better conditions, the struggle for equal opportunity never truly ceasing. The fact of the matter is that if working people don't keep pushing to get what they deserve, most of the progress made in the past might just be undone. 





Grappling With Game Pass

When the idea of being able to stream games like we do movies and TV shows first went mainstream, I was all-in. You mean I can play a game for a platform I don't own, and all I need is an internet connection? Sign me up! Unfortunately, this was during the OnLive era, which objectively sucked, and my experiences with game streaming never got much better over the years. But here's the thing: Though happenstance I stumbled into a free month of Xbox Game Pass, and in the span of a few weeks it's managed to rekindle my excitement for game streaming.

It all comes down to performance. In the past (even not-so-recently, when I tried the demo for the cloud version of *Control* on my Switch), this has rarely gone well. The image would degrade within only a few minutes of playing, my inputs would lag and sometimes I'd get disconnected from whatever I was attempting to play. So as much as I desperately wanted to enjoy the experience of playing a digital game over the internet – without the need to download anything or worry about system specs – it just wasn't happening.

This is where Game Pass has quickly chipped away at my skepticism. It's still got some of the telltale game streaming issues, to be sure, but they're overall less pronounced (and a *lot* less common) here. Which, as you might expect, makes a world of difference. I can put up with the visuals getting janky for a few seconds every so often, but surprisingly I've only run into noticeable lag maybe two or three times in the many hours I've sunk into the service so far. And even then, it was only for a minute or two, at most.

But beyond the performance being much better than other games I've streamed, what's given me that extra push into legitimately considering plonking down that \$15 a month is the library. You see, I don't own a PC or Xbox console, so I'm limited to whatever comes out on the Switch, Mac, or PlayStation 4. Which isn't to say I'm lacking in things to play! There's a lot of great stuff for all of those platforms and I very much appreciate just how often game developers account for the Mac these days. But there have been more than a few specific titles I really wanted to play that I never could.

And now I can. Just like that. All I have to do is open a tab in Chrome on my MacBook, plug in my PS4 controller and go. I've *finally* been able to play games like *PowerWash Simulator*, *Hardspace Shipbreaker* and *Scorn* – in addition to a lot of other games that *are* available for systems I do own, but I wanted to try them out first. It took me all of five minutes playing *Prodeus* on Game Pass before I pulled out my Switch and bought it on the eShop. Side note: You all should play *Prodeus*.

What's more, due to Game Pass running in a browser (with all the actual processing power needed to run the games being used on the other side of the internet), it barely affects my MacBook's battery so I can play for a very long time without needing to recharge. And on top of *that*, Game Pass works on my iPhone (though it does require a controller attachment) so I can play any of these games on something significantly smaller and more portable than even my Switch. Sure, it's not great if it's a text-heavy game that doesn't take smaller screens into consideration but I can play *Hollow Knight*, *Morrowind*, *Dead Space*, or even freaking *No Man's Sky* on my *phone*.

The perfect combination of working fairly well, having a ton of games I want to play and having it all work on just about anything that can support a web browser and a controller, has turned me around on this whole game streaming thing. It's still not perfect or a replacement for physical (or even digital) games by any means, but I can definitely see its value now. And I suppose \$15 per month isn't *too* bad, considering... 🍷



Features



TIME LOOP OF TRAUMA



By Alma Roda-Gil



I have always been fascinated by time loops. There's something about the helplessness of the protagonist as their day repeats over and over, about their sanity slipping with each loop.

And then, of course, there's the catharsis that comes when the loop is broken. The protagonist finally understands the lesson they were supposed to learn by being in the loop, or they are finally emotionally ready to confront the passage of time; it's a grand finale and the music swells as they open their eyes again, this time in a new, non-looping day.

Returnal is not that story. There is no catharsis to be had at the end of the loop. It becomes clear, as the player finishes the story, that it will keep going. And yet, breaking that genre convention is part of why it's one of my favorite time loop stories ever.

In a way, every single story is a time loop. You could finish watching, reading or playing it, see the ending, then start over right away, effectively putting the characters right back where they started.

Returnal takes advantage of this in a meta storytelling aspect: gameplay-wise the game is a rogue-like, so the player can just keep doing runs ad infinitum, even after they've finished the story and seen the credits roll. This is true of rogue-like games across the board, of course, but *Returnal's* protagonist Selene will actively comment on the fact the player is doing so. She'll even beg for the loop to end, essentially letting you know that it's your fault that this is still happening. You are causing her suffering. You could end this by putting down the controller. But unfortunately for her, *Returnal* is an incredibly satisfying game to play, so you won't.

Returnal's time loop takes place on the alien planet Atropos, where Selene's ship crashes while she undertakes a research mission into a mysterious signal called White Shadow. The way the story starts is another place where *Returnal* deviates from time loop genre conventions: rather than have a scene with the very first loop that establishes what the baseline of the loop will be for the rest of the story,

the game starts in media res, as Selene finds her own corpse on the forest floor. This is not the first loop. She's been here before, she just can't remember. *Death-loop* opens in a very similar way, with the protagonist Colt finding out he's been in the loop for years despite not being able to remember any of it.

This adds a uniquely horrific aspect to the already unnerving premise of a time loop; at least, in traditional time loop stories, the protagonists know what they've already tried to get out of it and have a sense of where they've been. Selene and Colt don't have that luxury – just the uneasy feeling that they may have tried to get out a thousand times and still ended up here.

Returnal exploits this even further by having Selene find audio logs she recorded as she explores Atropos; they all comment on how many times she's gotten to certain points, but even more than that, they document the sanity slippage that happens to time loop protagonists.

In some logs she sounds frantic and is nigh-incomprehensible to the Selene the player is currently controlling, the one who hopes she will never become that person. Of course, over the course of the story, that person is exactly who Selene becomes.

This sense of inevitability is the core theme of *Returnal*. As we get more glimpses of who Selene was before she got trapped in the loop, it's revealed that she applied to work for the in-universe space agency ASTRA in hopes to continue her mother's legacy, who was herself an astronaut but was rendered unable to fly by a tragic car accident. And now, light years away from it all, she keeps seeing a figure in an astronaut suit that's following her and will not let go. Her mother, Theia, is a figure that hangs over Selene for the whole story; being unable to continue doing her job after her accident turned her into a cruel, emotionally abusive parent to a young Selene who never quite got past the feeling that she had





to get away from her at all costs. And of course, what better way of putting distance between her and her mother than to leave Earth entirely?

But in doing so, Selene leaves behind her own child – the child that she swore she would raise better than her own mother raised her, that she promised she would never be distant and cold towards. By trying to escape the pattern at all costs, she only becomes more entangled in it, and this reflects her journey on Atropos. At first, going deeper and deeper into the ever-changing landscapes of the alien planet seems like progress. You're staying alive, defeating bosses, clearing each of *Returnal's* biomes. But the more Selene explores the planet, the more she finds herself inextricably linked to it.

When the player reaches the end of the third biome, where the White Shadow signal Selene has been investigating originates from, it seems like she's finally succeeded in getting out of the loop. She's

able to contact ASTRA for rescue, and there's a cutscene of her leaving the planet, trying to resume a normal life while she's being haunted by the memories of her crash and what she experienced on Atropos. One of these memories is a melody, one we see Selene play on a piano several times throughout her life, until she finally plays it one last time before dying of old age. And then, right after her death on Earth, Selene wakes up on Atropos. This is the start of the game's second act, and the planet players have come to know on the many runs it took to get to the third biome is now very different: the forest of the first biome is now in ruins, the desert of the second biome has frozen over, and the third biome is now completely underwater.

If you know anything about Greek mythology, you'll have noticed instantly that the planet Atropos is named after one of the Fates. Atropos is the one who cuts the thread and decides how and when

people die – much like the planet itself is constantly killing Selene. But aside from that, the name is another hint at the game’s theme of inevitability: it was Selene’s fate to end up here, sealed by her upbringing. *Returnal* is full to the brim of references to Greek mythology and analyzing them all would be a whole other essay in itself, but another major one tying into the game’s story is the Tower of Sisyphus, a new endless game mode that was added as free DLC in 2022.

Unlike a traditional run where players go through a set number of biomes and go back to the start after beating the final boss, the Tower is never-ending, much like Sisyphus’ story of endlessly pushing the boulder up the hill. The Tower introduces a new boss players will periodically fight, however, and that boss bears striking resemblances to Selene’s mother Theia. Every time Selene fights her, she will gain a permanent malfunction to her suit, a random debuff the player will have

to deal with for the rest of their Tower run. No matter how good your loadout or how skilled you are at playing the game, there is absolutely no way to avoid this, symbolizing the trauma you can’t avoid every time you confront your abuser no matter how prepared you are. The more times Selene fights this boss, the more malfunctions she will need to deal with, and the harder the Tower run gets. Some of them are annoying but possible to deal with, while others can make carrying on incredibly difficult, much like trauma in real life has varied effects.

* * *

Much of the discussion around *Returnal*’s story revolves around whether or not it all takes place in Selene’s head, particularly because the developers have left it intentionally vague. Personally, I don’t think that matters at all, and I think dismissing it as being all in her head misses



the point; *Returnal* is a horror story about the cyclical nature of abuse and trauma, with time loops symbolizing how hard it is to break the cycle. Whether what Selene experiences on Atropos is “real” within the game’s universe or not is irrelevant, because the themes used are very real things that people experience. Selene’s anguish at her mother not caring about her and blaming her for being a “bad child” hit very close to home. Her memories being unclear and out of order are something I have experienced, as it’s a benchmark symptom of intense trauma.

I’ve seen a lot of criticism for the game’s story being unclear or hard to follow, but for me the puzzle very much put itself together; I didn’t need much more context about what Selene was going through because her actions made sense once I knew what her childhood had been like. Obviously, I’ve never gotten stuck on an ever-changing alien planet, nor have I ever died and woken right back up. But I understand what it’s like anyway, how trauma sometimes feels so

inescapable that it might as well be a time loop you’re in, how a lot of the choices I make in life are a direct attempt at not becoming like one of my parents. I think that’s why the game worked so well as a horror story for me: horror is all about exploring the scariest possible outcomes for a setting, and to me, being trapped on a hostile planet where I have to keep reliving memories of my mother sounds absolutely terrifying.

Of course, you could probably play all of *Returnal* as a straight rogue-like and still enjoy it without caring much for the story, as the gameplay alone is worth the price of admission. But to me, watching Selene’s tragic journey unfold superseded everything else. It also made me think about how things aren’t as inescapable or suffocating as I sometimes feel. I’m not trapped on an alien planet, and unlike Selene, I have access to medication and therapy – I have successfully escaped my version of Atropos. I will never go back, but the least I can do is listen to Selene as she navigates hers. 🕒



HIDEO KOJIMA HATES YOU

A Study in Difficulty Scaling



By Emma Kostopolus



The conversation surrounding difficulty scaling in videogames is so ever-present as to almost not warrant an introduction. The battle between those who want videogames to have one static difficulty (a la *Dark Souls*) and those who want (and oftentimes, need) alternative modes of play has ranged far and wide, with no clear cultural winner. Those in favor of altered play rightly claim that games without features like control-mapping or difficulty sliders present extra challenges to disabled players, while those who support one single (often brutally difficult) mode of play claim that they are protecting the sanctity of the hobby, as well as the “intended play experience” of a particular game.

It’s this idea, that play is an intentional and authored experience, that I want to dig into further here. While games are pieces of media like books or film, it’s often fairly difficult to point to one person as the “author” of a game, or someone

with a vision for a singular way to play. Instead, games are created by hundreds upon hundreds of people, each of whom contribute meaningfully to the process. However, there are some figures in the industry who have risen up as visionaries, brightest among them being Hideo Kojima, often labeled as the creator of the *Metal Gear Solid* series, and essential progenitor of *Death Stranding* under his own label. Kojima, charitably, has an abundance of vision, and his games tend to be very dedicated to communicating a particular narrative, devoid of much choice, to the player. I’m one of those people who did not care for *Death Stranding*, so don’t come for me if you disagree here, but the seven total hours of cutscenes (including one that spans over half an hour) indicate to me that Kojima wants to tell you a story and that he wants you to sit quietly and listen. Even before he was allowed the creative freedom of his own label, however, his work with Konami still

demonstrates his resistance to the notion that players should have any control over the game they are playing. He showcases his displeasure with the way the *Metal Gear* games incorporate difficulty-alleviating measures including, of course, the infamous chicken hat.

The chicken hat makes its appearance in *Metal Gear Solid V: The Phantom Pain*, and it's exactly what it purports to be. It is a hat, in the shape of a cartoon chicken, that Big Boss (who's actually Venom Snake? I can't even remember anymore) can wear. This hat grants you, essentially, auto-stealth. You are invisible to all enemies and can stroll right past their AI without even attempting a crouch. The player is awarded the ability to don the chicken hat after failing a mission a few times, so that they can complete that part of the game more easily and move forward. Despite being a difficulty alleviating mechanic, however, the chicken hat is actually a not-so-subtle ploy to

reinforce the idea of the intended play experience and shame the player for being unable to perform to the vision of the game's creator. Kojima is making fun of you for sucking.

To break that down a little further, let's look into the experience of being awarded and playing with the chicken hat. I'm not going to expound overmuch on how putting your character in a cartoon chicken cap is intended to make them look absurd, since I think that comes for granted with the concept of the hat itself, but in case you were wondering: you look silly. To earn the chicken hat, you need to fail a mission a specific number of times. Per my experimentation with the game, I only needed to fail a handful of times (say, three) before the game offered me the hat as a way out of the experience. This indicates that Kojima anticipates that a lot of his players will have a low threshold for frustration with the game, or that he wants to taunt players for even





the smallest amount of failure with the silly chicken hat. Either way, the hat is offered to the player during what I would still consider a healthy window for experimentation and figuring out how the mission is laid out – I honestly almost expect to fail my first couple times going through a new compound in *Phantom Pain*. In any event, when you are given the chicken hat in the game indicates that Kojima has little patience (or thinks so of you) for fiddling around instead of steamrolling through the process of play.

So, what happens if you put the chicken hat on? Ostensibly, the game becomes easier, and players now have greater access to the content. While this is true in the most technical sense, the chicken hat attempts to solve the delicate problem of difficulty scaling with a mechanical bazooka. Instead of actually scaling back some of the issues players may be having, such as AI perception range or frequency of cover, the game simply removes the

AI's ability to detect you at all. So, you can walk right in front of an enemy without triggering their hostility. Enemies will not engage with you at all until you directly attack them, and will quickly return to a neutral state once you're out of eyeline. Since stealth is the central mechanic of the game, removing all of the stealth instead of simply paring back the difficulty means that players are no longer really allowed to *play* the game, so much as walk through the world. There's no real difficulty anymore, but with the removal of the central mechanic also goes all of the fun. To punish you for not being able to meet his idea of an intended play experience, Kojima took his ball and went home.

So, we appear to have an answer about how Kojima feels about easy modes. When you go further back into the history of *Metal Gear*, though, you discover that Kojima actually has a long history of gifting players with absurd power-

fantasy enabling cosmetics, from Raiden's many colored wigs in *Revengeance* to Snake's infinite-ammo-granting bandana. These items, unlike the hat, are all granted after the player has completed the game on high difficulty (lending further credence to the idea that for Kojima, the harder experience is the real one), and allow players to then muck around in the game world as de facto gods. These items also do not look any more ridiculous than the base character already looks in any given *Metal Gear* game, indicating that these items actually are rewards instead of grudgingly given play aids. Easy play in *Metal Gear* is then meant to be a reward for having done the real work of beating the game on hard – you can mess around and do weird stuff with game-breaking mechanics, but only after you play it through the right way. Kojima seems to feel, then, that difficulty scaling items are less about accessibility and more akin to old-school cheat codes – something only a truly dedicated gamer should be able to access, and if you get it without earning it, he should be able to rib you a little by making you look silly.

The debate surrounding difficulty scaling in games will go on as long as the medium exists, much in the same way other art forms have their own debates about the merits of accessibility vs. experience – people will also never stop talking about how much better live music is than recorded, for example, even though there are plenty of people without the time, money, ability or physical proximity allowing them to experience their favorite

bands in concert. Art, from live theater to paintings hanging in museums and even to seeing a movie in the cinema, has always been rife with issues of access. And much as we are loathe to admit it, there are some barriers to everyone having “the intended experience” that we have not figured out how to cross yet. But just because someone can't experience your art in the exact way you intended doesn't really give you license to mock them for it. Unless, of course, you're Hideo Kojima, and you have the backing of a substantial part of the gaming community who believes that accessibility options degrade the experience, and thus create an accessibility option that robs people of the entirety of the experience instead of actually removing the barriers to enjoyment.

At the end of the day here (and this is a much bigger issue than this feature can begin to address) we have to reckon with the idea of how much of an interactive experience can even truly be intended or controlled by an “author,” since the author is at best half of the equation. I can choose, by virtue of the controller in my hands, to do many things besides the specific thing the game “intends” me to do. To me, that's the best part about play, and it's something I don't think Hideo Kojima fully understands. 🙄





Meaning it's not just another nuke.

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Illustrations

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