

# UNWINNABLE MONTHLY

*Volume 10, Issue 3 - March 2023*



**ANDOR • ELDEN RING**

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*Monthly*

161



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This machine kills fascists.



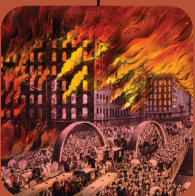
### SHORTFORM

a brief introduction to the issue *LETTER FROM THE EDITOR* | DAVID SHIMOMURA  
 selections of noteworthy hip hop *THE BEAT BOX* | NOAH SPRINGER  
 reframing what is seen and unseen... *EYEING ELSEWHERE* | PHILLIP RUSSELL  
 kcab ti nur *RUN IT BACK* | OLUWATAYO ADEWOLE  
 what's left when we've moved on *PAST PRESENCE* | EMILY PRICE  
 examining trends in fanfiction *SELF INSERT* | AMANDA HUDGINS  
 fictional companions and goth concerns *THIS MORTAL COYLE* | DEIRDRE COYLE  
 we are what we're afraid of *HERE BE MONSTERS* | EMMA KOSTOPOLUS  
 interfacing in the millennium *MIND PALACES* | MADDI CHILTON  
 where videogames meet real life *COLLISION DETECTION* | BEN SAILER  
 analyzing the digital and analog feedback loop *INTERLINKED* | PHOENIX SIMMS  
 ridiculing and revering everything *ROOKIE OF THE YEAR* | MATT MARRONE  
 finding deeper meaning *ANOTHER LOOK* | YUSSEF COLE  
 what does digital grass feel like? *AREA OF EFFECT* | JAY CASTELLO  
 architecture and games *FORMS IN LIGHT* | JUSTIN REEVE  
 a monthly soapbox *HERE'S THE THING* | ROB RICH

### LONGFORM

forging resistance in *Andor* *HOPE & SACRIFICE* | KIERNAN ELAM  
 something is wrong in *Caelid* *THE ENVIRONMENTAL HORROR OF ELDEN RING*  
 | KATHRYN HEMMANN  
 presented by Exalted Funeral *FUNERAL RITES:*  
*PORTENTS OF THE DEGLOVED HAND* |

### CONTRIBUTORS



Dear Reader,  
Meteorological spring is here! Though it may not feel like it for a lot of us . . .

In this month's cover feature (cover by our own Stu Horvath, who keeps a pile of bricks handy for all occasions), Kiernan Elam breaks down *Andor* and its portrayal of resistance against fascist systems. Our second feature see Kathryn Hemmann examining what *Elden Ring's* Caelid tells us about real world ecological damage.

Emily Price continues our feature series Funeral Rites, sponsored by tabletop RPG publisher and distributor Exalted Funeral, with a look at Matt Johnson's *Portents of the Degloved Hand*, coming soon to Kickstarter.

As for our regular columnists, let's start with . . . Oluwatayo Adewole on 1982, welcome back Tayo! Jay Costello goes eight ways from Sunday in *Octopath Traveler 2*. Maddi Chilton beckons us all to bow our heads and *Prey*. Deirdre Coyle wonders why Serana cannot requite her love. Amanda Hudgins tries on some thread fics. Emma Kostopolus lives, dies, repeats. Matt Marrone tries to use a map. Emily Price talks about how this moment is being willfully eluded by us. Justin Reeve sets the whole place on fire. Rob Rich puts the mobile back into handheld games. Phil Russell minds the gap. Ben Sailer's favorite basketball team is an entire town's least favorite team. Phoenix Simms has a sticky little ball of thoughts. And Noah Springer has some recommendations for when you're flying high.

See you all in a few weeks in Exploits!

David Shimomura  
Chicago, Illinois  
March 13, 2023



I've lived in quite a few different cities and towns during my stint here on this earth, but I swear, I do have a bit of a knack for bringing something along with me as I have moved. I lived in Boulder, Colorado in 2012 when they legalized recreational marijuana at the state level; I lived in Boston in 2016 when Massachusetts legalized pot; and then, when I returned back home good ol' to St. Louis, guess what? They legalized it! All that is to say, I may or may not have danced with the devil's lettuce in the pale moonlight a few times in my day. And one of the best things to do when you've got a touch of the reefer madness is put on a hip hop album and zone all the way out with some hazy beats and intricate lyrics. Here are a few that I would recommend to plug into your earholes when you're doin' the dope.

### **Outkast – *Aquemini***

[Outkast's third album](#) is definitely in the running for one of the best albums of all time, but also definitely grooves a little differently with some trees in your system. The front end of the album, from the intro through “Da Art of Storytelling’ (Pt. 2)” is one of the most impressive runs on any album that I know of, bringing together everything Outkast had been perfecting up until this point. In fact, there is only one track on *Aquemini* that I don't really like, “Mamacita,” which just kind of feels out of place on the record. But once you push past it, you get to



“Spottieottiedopalicious,” and when those horns hit, you know you’ve landed back in the zone which then crescendos with “Chonkyfire.” All in all, *Aquemini* is a masterpiece and you definitely don’t need to be high to appreciate it . . . but it doesn’t hurt.

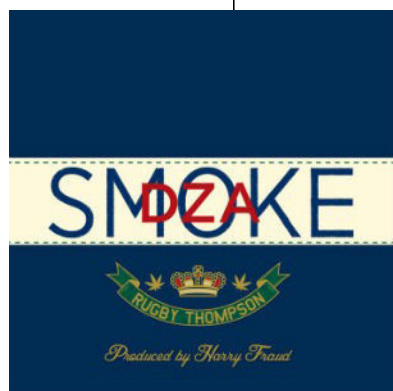
### **DangerDOOM – *The Mouse and the Mask***

Now unlike *Aquemini*, which could be considered a masterpiece under any circumstance, [MF DOOM’s 2005 collab album with Danger Mouse](#) is best appreciated under the same conditions that contributed to the success of the album’s major influence, Adult Swim. Now that is not to downplay how good of an album *The Mouse and the Mask* is on its own merits. This is MF DOOM in his lyrical hay day and Danger Mouse is never a slouch when he’s on the boards. It’s more just the fact that various Adult Swim characters (most often from the king of all stoner animation, *Aqua Team Hunger Force*) pop up across the album, sprinkling a heavy dose of comedy throughout. A serious album this is not, and a taste of the green goes a long way to helping you appreciate the zaniness throughout. Put this one on and blissfully relive what it was like to be alive in the mid-2000s and switching across cable channels, only to randomly find MF DOOM wishing you a [Merry Christmas](#).



### **Smoke DZA x Harry Fraud – *Rugby Thompson***

Harry Fraud is one of the haziest producers out there, especially in his early albums when he broke through during the apex of “cloud rap.” [His team up with Smoke DZA](#), one of the more stoned rappers out there, ends up with one of the best albums to put on when you’re roasting a bone and looking for something on the cinematic side. *Rugby Thompson* feels like a trip through the NYC streets with DZA, with samples from ‘90s action thrillers like *New Jack City* and *Suicide Kings*, but it also feels very rooted in 2010s with DZA’s lazy drawl and adlibs. A decade later, this still feels fresh, elevated beyond just weed raps into something touching on the sublime.



### Lil Ugly Mane – *Mista Thug Isolation*

Three minutes of noise and static open this masterpiece of psychedelic hip hop horror. Once you get past that dissonant introduction, Lil Ugly Mane creates a masterfully eerie soundscape by adopting the Memphis aesthetic inspired by the likes of Three 6 Mafia, blending pitched down vocals with booming production (under the name Shawn Kemp) and jazzy samples. If DangerDOOM makes music for people who like to get high and laugh and *Rugby Thompson* is for someone who wants to get a cinematic experience through music, *Mista Thug Isolation* is for the smokers who like paranoia. Lil Ugly Mane creeps along the tracks, repeating phrases over and over again until they lose their meaning, dropping bizarre verses over more bizarre beats, giving you the sense that someone is looking over your shoulder, singing along, waiting to murder you. From front to back, this album leaves you a bit unsettled, but also rewards you for sticking through it with some truly spectacular pieces of instrumentation and phenomenal overall aesthetic. It might not be the best when you inhaled a bit too much though.



### Mick Jenkins – *The Water[s]*

Once you've had enough of Lil Ugly Mane's paranoia, it's time to turn on *The Water[s]*, pop open a bottle of water, sip some ginger ale and sink into the couch. Then, let the dripping, lush production lull you to sleep on the lazy river of Mick's smooth baritone and immaculate style. This album almost feels like a cloud to me, a comfortable piece of relaxation that is nearly perfect thematically, lyrically and sonically. It almost feels effortless, like this whole album appeared in whole cloth out of nowhere – like it always existed in some platonic ideal of a hip hop album and Mick Jenkins just plucked it out of the ether. Obviously, that's not the case and a lot of hard work went into making this the classic that it is, but I can't help but get some other worldly vibes from it. Maybe that's just the weed though! 🍊







## Behind the Camera

**B**ing Liu's documentary, *Minding the Gap*, starts with a group of boys descending a downtown parking garage on their skateboards out into the empty streets of Rockford, Illinois during golden hour.

The opening of the film highlights a major strength of Liu's feature length debut: his willingness to insert himself within the documentary, first pushing his friends to look inward and make sense of the personal traumas they all share. Second, by turning the camera on himself and examining his own hardships. What we get is a documentary that explores the very personal narratives around domestic abuse this gang of friends has instead of a sweeping look at the topic from a wide-angle lens.

Liu's documentary follows the lives of two of his friends, Keire and Zach, who he'd met at the skatepark. They both are young men navigating the tensions that we all face in early adulthood around wanting to have fun while pursuing a goal that can allow some form of security.

While the boys share a love for skateboarding, the heart of the documentary lies in the shared histories and traumas surrounding domestic abuse. Through learning about these personal histories, Liu highlights how these experiences affect young men's own identities and also their relationships – romantic and platonic.

Keire and Zach handle their feelings regarding their abuse much differently from one another. Keire, a soft-spoken Black man, talks to the camera as if his heart is splayed open for the world to see. He talks to Liu about the abuse

he faced from his father openly and honestly. Keire talks at length about the anger he felt toward his father growing up, but also how his passing revealed a love and admiration he'd not realized existed before.



Zach is a more brash foil to Keire. He is closed off about the abuse he received from his father growing up. At one point, he admits that by today's standards we might call it “child abuse,” but also that sometimes people “need” to be physically disciplined. These words hold a more ominous weight coming from him given the fact that Zach and his girlfriend, Nina, have a child together early on in the film. In both cases, Liu isn't interested in casting judgment on his interviewees' beliefs, but he is also not afraid of pushing them to dig deeper, much like a good *friend* would.

This is how Liu depicts his own hometown in the film. His directorial style for this project doesn't seem interested in casting an objective portrait of his rustbelt stomping grounds, but instead, it showcases landmarks that caught his eye or meant something to him and his friends.

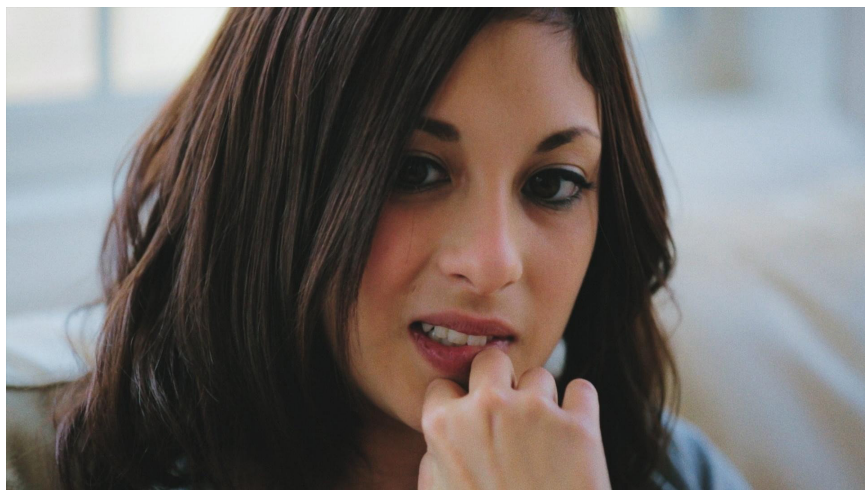
While some documentaries gain credibility through highlighting a menagerie of voices in order to comment on an idea, *Minding the Gap* is deliberately sparse, with the film being composed almost entirely of interviews between Keire, Zach, Nina and their families. Much like the anti-establishment sentiments of the community these men reside in, halfway through the film Liu does something that many would say is a faux pas in documentary filmmaking – he injects his own personal story into the narrative.

Liu himself was a victim of domestic abuse at the hands of his step-father growing up. In emotional interviews with his step-brother and mother, Liu steps out from behind the camera and reveals himself to the viewer, inviting them to sit with him as he talks with his family about the beatings inflicted

on him growing up. His mother, a Chinese immigrant who worked countless hours to keep her family afloat, has trouble talking about these events (which often happened while she was away working).

Through tears, she tells her son how she wishes she could go back in time, but also how she realizes that isn't possible, how she knows there is no going back after experiences like this. One (of the many) things that Liu succeeds at with his documentary is highlighting the tightrope act we face when confronted with abuse, how sometimes we are equally complicit while also victims, and how our own pasts can make us fall prey to being complicit in the abuse of others.

While interviewing Zach after an intense fight he had with his girlfriend Nina, his friend plays an audio recording of Nina yelling a variety of threats at Zach – “I’ll kill you!” She yells at one point. The audio is intense, and much like someone you know might react, Liu is surprised to hear this, but like a good documentarian would do, he uses this opportunity to dig deeper and explore what was really happening in Zach and Nina’s relationship.



Later, when Liu is interviewing Nina, he asks about the recording and she tells him that, while that might make her seem crazy, Zach didn't tell him how moments before he started recording he had hit her during their argument. Off screen, we hear Liu say, “I didn't know that,” and Nina reply, “Yeah, and that isn't the first time that it happened either . . . We just kind of ignore it like it didn't happen.”

Stories about the cyclical nature of abuse are by no means new, but *Minding the Gap* approaches it with an honesty and vulnerability that is admirable, to say the least. In our current cultural moment, we are making some forward progress in terms of confronting sexism, misogyny, consent and sexual as-

sault. A problem that still persists, however, is that *women* have (and continue to) be the ones doing much of the labor and self-policing to stop abusers and educate communities.

The trajectory of the documentary post Liu finding out about the domestic abuse issue in Zach and Nina's relationship highlights the true-to-life questions one might have when finding out such incriminating information about someone they look at as a friend.



The documentary never overtly paints Zach's action as wrong, there is no 'bad guy' in the narrative of the film and while one might argue that this could be problematic, I found this angle to be a surprising and honest way of approaching the situation. Reading interviews with Liu, it is obvious that he believes Zach's actions are wrong, but it seems like what he is more interested in facilitating with this film is the importance of dialogue, especially between men, to confront issues of violence, misogyny and trauma head on, even if things are uncomfortable.

By no means is *Minding the Gap* a blueprint for how men should grapple with trauma or hold each other accountable for each other's actions. But what *Minding the Gap* does represent is art that wades into the murkiness of life. As a writer with an extensive past in creative nonfiction that often weaves the lives of others into my own, Liu's self-insertion felt like a stark reminder to process my own gaze within my art. A nudge to remember that creative nonfiction is at its strongest when the author is willing to place the same level of scrutiny on their self as they do their subjects. 🍷



## 1982

**H**ello good wanderers! This month we're in 1982 and taking on two grand pieces of homoeroticism, Rainer Werner Fassbinder's final film *Querelle* and Judas Priest's *Screaming for Vengeance*.

\* \* \*

For Wes, the train was always a space where a new face could create a new reality, like the face of this man (that towered over him) leaning against the glass (a veritable Clark Kent. Pecs bulging. A loc taking the place of the classic curl. Ready to whisk him away).

He didn't let his location limit him. Work was also a space for the mind to run wild. In the moments before he put down his briefcase and steeled himself for the case in which (he the paragon of justice would ensure the dastardly fiend) a 20-year-old caught in the midst of a fight gone wrong was rotting in prison (so he couldn't flood the streets with blood and poison ever again).

Then after (a good day's) work bolstering the (just leviathan of society's criminal justice) system, the lawyer (and dream weaver) returned to the train (his palace of thick-aired sweat laden fantasy) and once again thought about another passenger (this one an Adonis, warm breath carrying him into forever).

As the dreamer left the station and got to his flat, the usual call for money came from the usual yellowed teeth and the usual sad gappy smile deep set into the usual mahogany face. Wes gave the usual halfhearted shrug and kept walking.

Adapting Jean Genet's 1947 novel, *Querelle* feels like Vaseline was smothered on the lens between each shot of Xaver Schwarzenberger's cinematography. Even the streets have a slight glaze to them in the sickly over lit yellows. The port city of Brest is presented as less tangible space and more manifestation of the sweaty fantasies of the western queer male imagination – with every actor barely clothed and glistening. There is also an overwhelming amount of not-at-all concealed phallic imagery, from the guns, to the architecture to the poster of the film itself.

However Rainer Werner Fassbinder doesn't sanitize or idealize the fantasy space he's operating in here, instead he dives straight into the thorniest bits. The two characters that this gets most keenly explored with are Mario (Burkhard Driest) and Nono (Günther Kaufmann).

Husband to the lady who owns the haunting hedonist bar where much of the film takes place (*Feria*), Nono runs the less than legal side of his wife's business and also is the only speaking Black person in the film. As such, the portrayal ends up being one of the harder ones to untangle. There is a read of this film where Fassbinder is uncritically constructing Black men as hulking beast of power and violence. His costuming is certainly meant to emphasize his size, moving between a bulky suit and a tank top that barely clings to his frame. However, I think it's more compelling to read this as yet another engagement with the sexual fantasies of white gay Europeans. Whiteness and its gender norms are constructed in relation to The (racial) Other, whether that's in terms of dominating them (see: the masculinist construction of the myth of the American cowboy) or being under threat by them (see: how civilizational feminism in France relies on defining Muslim men as the primary source of sexual violence). White queer European men are by no means excluded from that. Prominent examples of this can be seen with men like Lawrence of Arabia



who were part of imperial forces and were able to use that position to explore their sexual desires using people of color while also being part of the regimes which enforced many of the homophobic laws which still oppress the queer people in those countries to this day.



Mario is a corrupt cop in the pocket of Nono and *Feria*, who is deeply infatuated with the protagonist *Querelle*. His costume is less Precise Recreation and more like something someone would wear to a Halloween club night. He is the Man In Uniform In Extremis and creates a space to problematize that fantasy. The complexities here arise because on the one hand there's something in proscribing eroticism into the thing that has/does oppress you. After all, at the time in which the film was set and even the time when it was filmed, there were still a wealth of explicitly anti-queer laws on the book in the West. On the other hand, big threads of white queer manhood in the West have been deeply tied up with fascism – with one of the most prominent examples being the masculinist gay Nazi Ernst Röhm. But again, this is not a film of didactic moral judgements, and he exists as a complicated figure in that collage.

*Querelle* portrays a feeling of fantasy that doesn't exist in isolation, and is instead colored by the world which surrounds, particularly engaging with the complex political space of the white European gay fantasy.

\* \* \*

I don't think you ever forget your first time rushing through the air clinging to leather with just their body/your breath for company.

The world looks so different at a hundred miles an hour, your corporeal form now a black blur on the horizon as you paint your stroke on reality in your tightly sculpted armor.

In this state anything is possible as blood becomes air becomes leather becomes oil becomes warmth becomes speed becomes lighting becomes revolution.

Then it all stops. The journey over. But it wouldn't be the last.

\* \* \*

Christopher slumped into his gilded office chair. It had been cruel to drop the boy like that. He gently removed still-shining brogues. Cruel but necessary. He removed his tie and undid the top two buttons on his now-wine-stained shirt. There was too much of a shine in his eyes, too much weight to his step - the boy was forgetting what this was.

Christopher got up, strode past his desk, stepped over the remains of a wine glass and over to the bloodied mark in the wall left by the boy's fist.

What had really been lost? He'd come back. He always did.

Christopher called the handyman to have it fixed later that evening.

\* \* \*

For the men of *Querelle*, pain and pleasure are inseparable. In any given scene it's impossible to tell whether these men are about to kiss or fight - and the answer is often both. As Lt. Seblon (Franco Nero) looks over his subordinates from his office and monologues into a tape recorder, he notes how he can't look at the broad shoulders of these men without thinking about the capacity of these men for killing.

That underlying violence is present in every movement these men make and in every frame. A gun at the table. A knife at the throat. The acting is all very intentionally stilted, with overloud blunt deliveries and sharp movements. With his off-kilter direction, Fassbinder paints a portrait of a Western masculinity which is deeply entrenched in violence and at war with its own desires. There are constant power games, with the insistence that one position or another means someone can engage in homosexual behavior without sacrificing their manhood. Like how Nono insists that because he doesn't kiss/love the men, his encounters maintain his manhood. Or Mario masks his barely-concealed desires in prodding and teasing, the same for Theo in regards to Gil.

The connection between violence and desire is once again neither lionized nor chastised by Fassbinder - again choosing to push and explore more than dictate.

\* \* \*



The phone slams against the receiver.

He smiles.

His mouth stops.

He smiles again.

His face pauses.

He traces fingers against the steamed-up glass.

His leather glistens wet in the moonlight

He wipes mascara by hand

The smile creeps across his face once again.

\* \* \*

When the fantasy and violence collide, they create a fever. The great fever pitch of desire burns bright and then burns itself out. Throughout the film there is this overwhelming feeling that this homoerotic fantasia is only temporary, haunted by the oracle and owner of Feria Lysiane (Jeanne Moreau) singing that “each man kills the thing he loves”. Querelle betrays both his beloved Gil and his brother, falling into the arms of Lt. Sebon who it seems he will inevitably betray as well.

Yet there’s still a glistening beauty to it all. Sure the ride ends but maybe the rush was worth it? The euphoric rise worth the painful fall? Maybe to love something is to embrace the inevitability of its end.

\* \* \*

-60 bpm-

Cigar smoke on my breath

-70 bpm-

Our eyes met between the beats

-80 bpm-

Rushed together, closed the distance

-90 bpm-

Fevers blooming in our naked chests

-100 bpm-

Fluids flurry, our destiny is nigh. 🍷





## Manufactured Ends

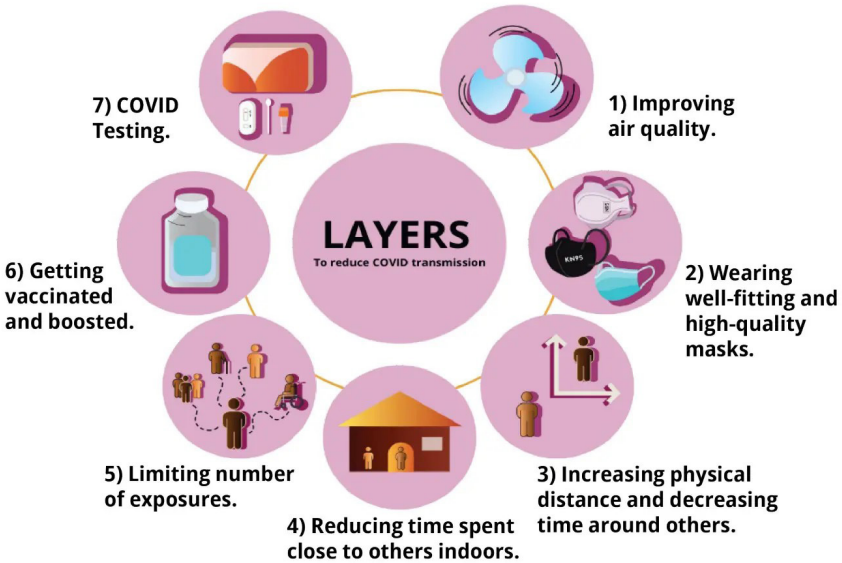
This is a column about media objects and the past. So why am I writing about Covid?

With Joe Biden's choice to end the public health emergency on May 11, and more locally to me NY state's decision to stop requiring masks in medical settings, those who need to avoid getting Covid are seeing any support rapidly narrowing. As [this piece](#) from January points out, many disabled and immune-compromised people feel left behind by these decisions, as they'll [remove essential services](#) like free PCR testing (where it still exists), kick millions off of Medicare, and make essential medical trips more dangerous. At the same time, the end of the emergency also means the end of Covid tracking, the method by which the CDC determines (in theory) if masks should be mandated— if there's no data, there's no possibility to recommend a mandate.

As the podcast *Death Panel* pointed out in [December](#) when discussing the removal of federal mask mandates in 2021, policies like these, enacted co-constituently between federal and state governments, manufacture an end to a crisis that is undeniably ongoing. At the time I'm writing this, nearly 400 Americans are dying of Covid every day, over 30,000 [this year already](#), a number which does not capture any of the disease's non-acute effects. Clearly, it is not over with us.

So, I'm choosing to write about this for the column because I can see the US government, the CDC and other bodies around the world trying to turn the pandemic into the past tense, a project which has been ongoing for two plus years. As many disabled activists have pointed out, this is a decision which will

lead to even more debilitation and death. Pushing back against it in the venue I have and trying to share some of the information I've learned as I've paid closer attention to the changing science and epidemiologists' recommendations, feels appropriate.



In contrast to the CDC and the US government's manufactured end date for the health emergency, there are still reminders of it everywhere, from persistent coughs to old signs requesting you keep 6 feet of distance. Masks are one of the most singular visual reminders of the ongoing pandemic, and for that reason they also elicit a lot of emotion. As [this NY Times article](#) argues, collectively many of us not only want to be done with the pandemic, but forget its worst moments ever existed: from the start, "as soon as solutions were put in place, we seemed to forget the problems had even existed; our sense of "normal" reset to assimilate them." We have no national day of mourning for the millions of people dead; we have no systematic help for the tens of millions disabled. We've chosen, societally, to forget.

I recognize that in this column, I'm asking you to travel back into a place which may seem like it's in the past but is in fact ongoing, a fact which is potentially angering and sad. In this light I'd like to say two things up front, starting with this: though it has implications for the safety of others, wearing a mask is not a moral signal but an action in support of public health. As outbreaks in the past have shown, moralizing illness and the spreading of illness is dangerous. While it's a win for public health to prevent the spread of disease, getting sick can't and shouldn't be a reason for shame.

The second thing I want to say here is that I'm not perfect or immune to the desire to go back to normal. I've taken risks like flying, and I have gone to indoor gatherings, though I wouldn't do that right now. There was a period a little over a year ago when I did go to some indoor events with no mask, and believed a lot of the official messaging – that Covid was almost over, that the vaccine was sterilizing (it's not), and that individual risk was low. The results of those choices – I fucked around and found out, you might say – have convinced me to adopt more cautious behavior, as have new developments in medical research that suggest Covid is worse than we've considered it in the past.

Because my behavior has changed – I went to indoor events, and now I don't – I've had a lot of people ask me why that is. Simply, it's because I learned new information and decided to change my behavior because of it.

One of the things I found most helpful when I was recovering last year and worried about the long-term state of my body was the sentiment that while the best time to resume precautions might have been yesterday, the second best time is now. If you've stopped wearing a mask, you can start again at any time. And if you've been sick once, the best thing you can do for your health is to avoid getting sick twice.

Now that I've laid out my reasons for wanting to write this column, here are the four reasons I still wear a mask and encourage you to do so, too.

### **Protection for Immune-Compromised People**

I'm an immune competent person (presumably, anyway – I'll get to that in a second). But I have people I love who are immunocompromised, and who are at higher risk than I am of getting very sick in the acute phase of Covid as well as having complications later.

This is one reason I was relatively plugged in to the science around Covid in 2020. (Another reason is that I spent way too much time on Twitter, which, surprisingly, is where a lot of epidemiologists hang out.) It's also a major reason I wear a mask, and practice additional mitigations like precautionary quarantine when I visit these people. It's important to me to do everything I can to keep them safe.

It's also true that I will interact with immune-compromised people who I don't know are immune-compromised. It's just going to happen. It's impossible to tell someone's medical history just from looking at them, and no one should have to tell me about theirs in order for me to change my behavior. In the absence of that information, I believe wearing a mask is the most respectful choice.

## **Covid may be Immune-Suppressing**

Studies in the past year have suggested that Covid does not only make you sick, but makes you more likely to get sick in the future. Several studies [have suggested](#) Covid suppresses immunity both in the acute stage and in the [8 months following infection](#), and possibly longer (since those studies only lasted 8 months). While researchers don't yet know [how often immune suppression occurs](#), even a small percentage of cases from a disease as widespread as Covid could be devastating on a societal level. So, when I said I'm immune competent a few paragraphs ago, what I really mean is that I was immune competent before I got Covid – and many people reading this might be in the same boat as me.

Building on this, Covid in the acute phase – meaning the first few weeks after you get sick – has the potential to cause adverse effects, even if you are vaccinated. It has been linked to [increased risks of serious conditions](#) like [heart attack and stroke](#). [Studies show](#) that this [risk increases](#) each time you catch it. With over 90% of the population of the US having had Covid at least once, chances are if you're reading this, you're trying to avoid not just infection, but reinfection. As I said above, the best thing you can do if you've been sick once or more than once is try not to get sick again.

## **Long Covid is Prevalent, and has Lasting Effects**

This is another major reason I wear a mask, and the one I try to spend time talking about with people who ask me about my mask. The CDC estimates that 1 in every 5 people who catch Covid will go on to develop Long Covid, an estimate that's remained stable [since at least 2021](#). As a recent example of this, it was confirmed that 16% of people in North Carolina – 16% of the entire state, 1.6 million people – [have had Long Covid](#). And as far as we know, though vaccination keeps you out of the hospital quite well, [it only slightly reduces the chance of developing Long Covid](#).

Long Covid is a name for a constellation of nearly 200 symptoms (which [this study](#) does an effective job breaking down). [These include](#) systemic multiorgan issues, [brain fog](#), GI symptoms, tinnitus, and many more. They also include higher rates of susceptibility to conditions like diabetes and dementia. Many Long Covid patients develop dysautonomic disorders like POTS and ME/CFS, both of which themselves carry symptoms like fatigue and tachycardia, and both of which [can be caused](#) by post-viral issues. [Patient accounts confirm](#) that even those conditions that might seem negligible at first can be difficult, and even traumatizing; likewise, receiving appropriate diagnosis in the first place can be difficult. And even after receiving treatment, almost 71% of people with

Long Covid have difficulty returning to work for 6 months or more, [studies included in this NYT article show](#).

While [a recent study](#) suggested that symptoms resolve for some patients after a year, it has been criticized for making this claim based on doctors' records and not patient reporting – many patients stop seeing a doctor not because their symptoms are resolved, but because the doctor hasn't been able to help. The takeaway from this is that, especially in a U.S. healthcare context, many people are not getting the care they need, and illnesses like Long Covid are still getting pathologized or attributed to anxiety. In other words, if you do get sick, you shouldn't count on the healthcare system to have a solution for you. [Wearing a mask is protective](#) against not just acute disease, but all these ongoing issues.

### **Wearing a Mask Aligns with My Values**

This is the kind of statement that could be framed as identity politics: I perform an action because of how I want to be seen. However, I feel it's important to say because I believe being a leftist means resisting structures that disenfranchise others, and in the context of a continuing pandemic, wearing a mask accomplishes this.

I have skipped a lot of leftist events in the past year because they've not required masks. Alternately, I've attended several which either did require masks or were held outside; I found these really emotional and felt a solidarity that I haven't felt in other situations. When researching leftist responses to Covid I've learned more about the AIDS epidemic and political responses to it. Activists pushed against stigma, emphasizing that being sick should not equate to dangerousness or immorality, but [also advocating](#) for prophylactics like the barrier method and access to STI testing. These activists are a [main reason](#) things like condom distribution programs exist today. In other words, they emphasized collective actions, but also individual ones.

Additionally, part of being a leftist is critiquing structures of power and treating them with some level of skepticism. The recent response to the derailment in East Palestine, Ohio, has been to muse that the government's insistence that residents are fine to return is motivated by a desire to minimize the accident, when just a few months ago several Democrats voted to quash rail unions that [raised the danger](#) of events like this one. When it comes to Covid, though, it seems like many people are ready to take the US government's advice at face value. I believe this is an oversight. The U.S. response to Covid has overwhelmingly been motivated by a desire to get people back to work even when conditions are unsafe. In this light, Covid is a workplace safety

issue and a labor rights issue, and it's one the government seems determined to ignore from now on.

Lastly, I want to acknowledge that there are variations in privilege as to who can avoid public contact, and even who can wear a mask without harassment. Though I've intentionally organized my life to include hybrid work and avoid cramped indoor spaces, this choice is also a privilege: I was able to find jobs in my field that are hybrid, I haven't (yet) needed to be back in person full time. But the thing that makes me advocate for universal masking despite this point is that everyone is safer when everyone masks. Masks are one of what the People's CDC calls "[layers of protection](#)" for individuals and in groups: more masks mean less virus in the air. If you can't mask or avoid public spaces, you're safer in this environment too.

### **So, What Now?**

The fact is that mandates work, not all the time or for everyone, but enough to increase the standard of living for vulnerable people. Without them, we get exactly the response that we're seeing now: people assume that they are safe, because there would be rules in place if they weren't, and then they get sick while doing what they've been told is safe to do. Personally, every week last fall was full of people I know, love, and work with reporting that they were sick, as has this spring. Even as careful as I am, I have close calls all the time. The system we have currently which has set us up to get seriously sick every few months, something we can't afford financially or health-wise, is clearly untenable.

Frequently, I feel frustrated, scared and concerned. There are several bright spots that I hold when I feel this way. One is the [development of nasal vaccines](#) that (scientists hope) may provide sterilizing immunity, making the virus less transmissible. Advancements like this make it possible for me to believe that rather than taking the precautions I take forever, I'm actually waiting until further progress is made and trying to avoid getting sick as much as I can until then. Another bright spot is all of the people I know who adjust to my level of safety by eating outdoors even when it's cold, testing before we meet and especially changing their behaviors to wear a mask when they're out in public. If you're someone I know who's done these things, this column is dedicated to you.

Among these individual changes, structural change is clearly important. Part of the reason we are where we are is that the CDC has given us misinformation about the efficacy of masks, how Covid is transmitted (yes, it's airborne), and how long you need to quarantine for (the five day quarantine, by the way, is the

result of [lobbying by the airline industry](#), not science.) However, as individuals we have the power of choice. We don't need to go along with this incorrect information, and we have a lot of power to change our immediate situation right away.

Along with wearing a mask, here are a few resources I would suggest for keeping yourself and others safe:

- The People's CDC has a Covid rate tracker and guides on [how to gather safely](#) and [what to do if you get Covid](#)
- I buy my masks from [Bona Fide masks](#) (NIOSH certified) and from distributors listed on [3M's website](#). For the newest variants, an N95 or better offers you the best protection, but consider at least a KN95.
- If you can't afford to buy quality masks, these services offer masks for free:
  - At least for now, HRSA lets you search for [pharmacies near you](#) that may have free N95s
  - Twitter-based mask distribution:
    - Check [Wendi Muse on Twitter](#) (includes a link to donate)
    - or [Maskup412](#) (local to Philly)
  - Also, [Mandate Masks US](#) has information about mask distribution programs as well as info about mask advocacy and COVID prevention efforts

If you read this whole thing, thank you. I hope it inspires you to put a few mitigation tools you might have set aside back in your toolbox, especially masking. And to return to what I said at the beginning, Covid and its effects, and public health in general, are inextricable from the environment in which we do critical work. I started my freelance career during the pandemic. Over the past three years I've had many occasions to think about why a particular project matters, against the horrific backdrop of everything that's happened. If you have felt this way or are currently, I see you. All I can say is that I hope things are better soon, and I take comfort in knowing I am doing my part to protect myself and others in the hope of a better future where my work can feel more meaningful. I hope you're able to do the same. 🙏





## Thread Fics

Twitter is slowly turning into the social media equivalent of a post-apocalyptic wasteland; a few people are still scavenging the ruins, growing mushrooms in damp, quiet places and generally holding onto what they can until they're forced out. As a millennial, my life has been largely dominated by the deaths of social networks – quietly and slowly (MySpace), inexplicably Russian (LiveJournal) and now loudly, quickly and spearheaded by a capitalist asshole (Twitter).

Social networks are the frameworks of communication, and as someone who has watched so many forms of social network die ignobly, it's interesting to watch happen, but it's also a moment of sadness for the forms of communication and expression that will ultimately be lost in the fireworks. There are plenty of things that are going to be lost when Twitter dies, from the easy communication of journalists and their subjects to the comedy of Twitter bots. But the one that I'm the most attached to, the one whose disappearance will actually bring me a moment of real sadness, is the Twitter thread fic.

Thread fics are a very specific form of fanfiction that has popped up on the micro-blogging platform. They're a strange sort of fiction, whose style and concept is baked with elements of casual engagement. A thread fic utilizes Twitter's threading feature, wherein an author can respond to their own initial tweet with many, many more, in order. The casual nature of Twitter allows for a certain level of informality that even among fanfiction is incredibly loose. Frequently writers will abbreviate names of characters, or places – Lan Wangji is abbreviated down to lwj, or maybe given an additional tag to identify the

type of character he is “dragonji” for a dragon shifter version of the character. The fics frequently start without intention; an initial tweet in a thread fic might begin with a phrase like “ok so what if . . .” and then spin out over a dozen, or sometimes hundreds of tweets. Not all thread fics begin that way – it’s just as common for a thread fic writer to begin by stating their intention, and then writing out from there. Generally told in 160-character chunks, these stories grow and morph, frequently depending on audience opinion.

A common trope of the thread fic is to stop at some point and ask the audience which direction they want the story to go. Sometimes with options written out, sometimes with emoji’s whose meaning is exclusively known to the writer. It’s a bit of a choose-your-own adventure style of content but written usually with immediacy.

Like all works in progress, thread fics have their own relationship with completion – some writers will take over a year to write a thread fic, coming back months in between to update the thread of content. Some will write the entire thing in one sitting. There is no rule, one way or the other.

The little brother of the thread fic, and still most commonly found on sites like Twitter, is the social media fic (or soc med) where the writer will recreate screens of text messages, fake social media accounts and more to show the story in an epistolary format. A reader will open a Tweet with four images and then click through to see the story progress over the images, like watching a conversation between characters through modern means. While these fics will sometimes have segments where the writer writes out traditional scenes – either in screenshotted notes or through a more traditional thread fic – large chunks of these works are exclusively told in this epistolary form. Over Twitter.

Some of these works have been saved over the years, using applications like threaderapp or other third-party services to export these fics from Twitter over to a central document, and then saved to an archive (like AO3) or a third place. But a lot of them aren’t. These fics are, by nature, casual. For a lot of writers, they’re basically expressions of headcanons and nothing more.

It’s possible that one of the many Twitter clones that have popped up and demand attention from fleeing users will be home to these works – maybe Cohost or Spout or Hive or Mastodon and its billion instances will be a home. But in a lot of ways, Twitter is the home of the thread fic and when it goes, so



will they. This kind of thing is the actual loss of a social media network – the way that the communication that existed there in the past will die once the format does. This is the nature of changes in the standards of communication, though perhaps in Twitter’s case it’s sadder because of the expedited way in which the site is being graphically murdered in front of the user’s eyes. We can watch as a form of communication and expression is sacrificed brutally on the altar of one mans’ idiocy and do nothing about it.

There isn’t much else to say about it. There’s something incredibly sad about the whole situation, and while thread fics aren’t the biggest thing being lost, they’re a community and a style that is unlikely to be replicated. There’s no pithy rejoinder for something like that. So, like so many thread fics, I’m going to leave it on a cliffhanger. 🍷





## Skyrim and Existential Angst Redux

When I first conceived of this column, I wanted to write about Serana from *Skyrim* and how upset I am that I can't marry her. Then I got distracted by existential angst and wasn't conceiving of much at all.

As someone who plays a lot of games, it can be frustrating not to unlock achievements in my daily life. People joke about millennials wanting trophies for everything, but how is that an insult? Of course I want trophies. Trophies rule, and I should be rewarded for completing harrowing missions like "sending an email" or "leaving my house."

It's easy for people to tell you that life isn't like a videogame. But what if life *is* like a videogame?

As far as I know, my *Skyrim* avatar has no existential angst. She isn't worried about her purpose. She's busy completing quests, making potions and agonizing over whom to marry (longtime readers may remember that [I married Farkas in an earlier playthrough](#), but that was because the Dawnguard expansion – in which Serana was introduced – didn't exist yet. And why *can't* I marry Serana? I would like to take this up with Todd Howard personally).

I assume that my avatar is having fun (despite not being Serana's wife) because *I* am having fun and/or dissociating while puppeteering her around the province. But what if my avatar *isn't* having fun? What if, while I am insisting that she piss off jarls and kill beasties, she is having loads of internal angst?

(I guess *Bioshock* is relevant here in its meta-commentary about an avatar having no choice, but I'm not talking about *Bioshock* today. Would you kindly let me write about *Skyrim* forever?)

This leads me to the real expanding-brain-meme question, the real GIF of Keanu Reeves saying "whoa": what if I am an avatar of some higher self who is moving my little meat skeleton around this plane of existence?

Sorry, I don't mean to be "like that" in my column about videogames. You're probably thinking that I've been alone playing *Skyrim* too much. That's correct, but let's go with it.

What if my higher consciousness is navigating me around this "IRL" game and eating cosmic nachos on the cozy couch of a higher realm, not worried about anything? What if she finds it hilarious that I worry about my writing career or my friendships or my relationships?



If my body *is* being puppeted around by a super chill consciousness on some other plane, does that mean I should, simply, stop experiencing angst and gamify my life with the aim of unlocking more IRL achievements? Would that even be possible?

IRL achievements are so subjective. I know what some of the achievements are supposed to be: as in *Skyrim*, they often involve money, accumulation of objects, or leveling up relationships with other characters ("people"). (Other *Skyrim* achievements involve war and bloodshed, in which I have zero interest IRL. Change the gun laws.)

Sometimes I achieve things IRL. I can't think of anything cool right now, but I did wash my hair yesterday.

Then again, if I were playing *Skyrim* for achievements, I wouldn't be collecting every book in the province and organizing my library. If I were playing IRL

for achievements, I wouldn't have been sitting in this café for hours, debating whether to have a second iced coffee.

In *Skyrim*, I'm gathering every side quest I can find and barely playing the main questline. That sounds like how I play IRL, except that I have no idea what the main questline is IRL. But do I care? Maybe the nice thing about life on this plane of existence is that there is no main questline. Or there is and I totally missed it because I was too busy gaming.

I understand that "gamification" doesn't apply to an actual game. But *Skyrim* feels like my life right now, and IRL is the game. In that worldview, *Skyrim* subverts gamification by allowing me to ignore the main quests, to wander indefinitely. The game mechanics don't pressure me to move forward, so I don't feel guilty about aimlessness. If I could convince myself not to feel guilty IRL for wanting to wander a while, for wanting to rest, that would be the real achievement. I don't know the remedy for existential angst, but it would be nice to have some relief from my angst around lack of concrete achievements.

So if my avatar is experiencing existential angst, I would like to apologize to her for not noticing sooner, and I would like to tell her that it's fine. She should feel free to complete every sidequest in the game without worrying about the main quest or whether she has a higher purpose. She should feel free to relax and [organize her library](#).

Meanwhile, I am going to enjoy a little sidequest as a treat. I am going to have a second iced coffee. ☺





## Every Game is Happy Death Day

*Author's Note: I've written on a similar topic to this one before, on [Sidequest.org](http://Sidequest.org). For some fun background and context, go find that article and see how my thinking has developed.*

\* \* \*


Death is scary. We know this, because it's one of the few nearly-universal things that populates our horror media. Across scary films, books and games, the end goal of the main character is often simply to escape whatever scenario they've found themselves in alive. Death, beyond its avoidance being a core instinct for living things, also has emotional, philosophical and spiritual ramifications for a lot of people. What happens to us after we inevitably die is a source of anxiety for folks, and people often turn to various systems of beliefs to come to a secure answer. But at the end of the day, we have no verifiable proof that we continue existing in any form after our physical bodies cease to function, or what that existence looks like.

Videogames, with their very direct focus on death and rebirth as a normal part of play, are uniquely positioned to get us thinking about the horrors of our own mortality, as well as the possibility of a less-than-ideal afterlife. In most games, you simply die again and again until you figure out how to play that particular section – an interactive and horrific *Groundhog Day*. But there are two horror/horror-adjacent games that I think deal with this concept in a particularly interesting way: *Returnal* and *Bloodborne*. Both deal with death as

a punishment for failure, and also structure the gameplay after death to reflect the consequences of that failure, but do so in slightly different ways. Both, though, are horrifying in a Sisyphian sense, because they set up the following idea: death is inevitable and characterized by loss, and it is furthermore not a release from the labor of life.

Let's look first at *Returnal*, a member of the roguelike genre. In roguelikes, all death is (semi)permanent: every death in *Returnal* returns you to the start of the game, so you must attempt to complete the length of the game in a single run with very little margin for error. While you are never allowed to save your progress at any point during a run, sometimes games lets certain things carry over into your next run, such as a permanent upgrade to your character. It's also made explicit in the narrative (as a key part of the story) that the main character is aware that they are dying over and over, and are being forced to re-live their attempts to escape this alien planet, perhaps forever. If you cock your head and squint even a little, there's a pretty easy case to be made for *Returnal* painting a pretty compelling portrait of what Hell might be like.

The other game here that I think is really interesting is *Bloodborne*. Not quite a roguelike, because there are options to save throughout, *Bloodborne* also makes the player pay a high price for death – each death means the player loses all of the “blood echoes” they've accumulated since their last save, which means they've lost any ability to level up or purchase new equipment. The game does allow you one more life to go retrieve your blood echoes from the exact spot you died in, but if you die before you get there, they're lost forever. While in *Returnal*, the death and continued trial itself is the punishment, *Bloodborne* demands near immediate improvement from the player in terms of raw skill if there is any hope of advancing your character and actually continuing the game. Players can easily get caught in a vicious cycle of dying at the exact same spot over and over, because to avoid that spot is to lose precious hard-earned currency. Another interesting potential portrait of Hell.

Something it would feel remiss not to note is that neither of these games engage in any meaningful way with difficulty scaling. The games are brutally hard by design, and death is not simply an inevitability but a common expectation. The games are both, in important ways, designed around death. Players are punished for dying, but death is also the game's fundamental mechanic. If you never died in either game, the experiences would be short and largely unenjoyable, though the line between “enjoyable” and “frustrating” is admittedly razor-thin. But across these experiences, and all experiences in gaming more broadly, we see the horror of death's uncertainty play out in our games. 





## Eat, Prey, Love

By the time the player gains control of the protagonist of *Prey* (2017), Morgan Yu, Talos I has already been irrevocably changed. The physical evidence of alien infiltration is everywhere: beyond half-open doors, on the walls, in the air. The space station has been cracked open like a lock and laid out for show; the Typhon float through it, barely concerned with any physical barrier, and the human crew hide like rats.

It's a sharp contrast with Arkane Studio's earlier work. In the *Dishonored* series, the protagonists *were* the rats, often literally – Corvo, Daud, Emily and Billie ghosted across the landscapes of Dunwall and Karnaca and left only shadows in their wake. If they were particularly bloody-minded, they could influence surges of violence, plague and physical darkness brought about by a narratively-relevant change in the weather, but you'd never find their actual bodies leaving as much as a fingerprint. *Prey* is the opposite. Morgan's trademark weapon is the GLOO gun, the game's favored gimmick, which spits popcorn-like handholds across any static surface in the game; the recycler charges that the game encourages you to throw chew up not only enemies but scenery, reducing them to their component parts and leaving carefully-designed interiors looking like empty sets. The Typhon enemies are flamboyantly organic excess, content not only to roam the levels but to expand within them, testing always for the weak spots of the cage that contains them, whether that's through the effervescent, harmless coral or the monstrous Nightmare, hunting Morgan at random and constrained only by time.

The central concern of *Prey*, of course, is matter. The flagship enemies, mimics, are a great example of this: they can take the shape of anything smaller than themselves in a room, blurring the lines between kinetic and static shapes, organic and material matter. Morgan also straddles this line, in a playthrough-defining battle between human and alien, between development of their natural skills and those of the Typhon. If Morgan invests too much in their alien abilities, the systems of Talos I will turn against them, no longer recognizing them as entirely human (and therefore friendly) – but isn't that a small price to pay for the ability to hide amongst the mimics, to out-alien the aliens? Morgan becomes a physical intermediary, a gray space between the human interfaces of Talos I and the Typhon parasites that inhabit them, resembling both but accepted by neither.



Morgan navigates that uncertainty by executing their agency in a war of aggressive simplification. The primary creation mechanics of the game are fabricators and recyclers, machines that quite literally create and destroy: recyclers reduce objects to their most basic components (organic, synthetic, mineral, exotic) and fabricators assemble those components into useful items, from bullets to keys to neuromods. An enemy, then, becomes a factory: a dead Phantom might provide a Typhon organ, for example, which can be recycled into a set amount of alien matter, which is a certain percentage of the ingredients necessary to craft a neuromod. A broken hard drive left on an abandoned desk might be the last vestiges of mineral material necessary to create much-needed GLOO. Even alcohol, which provides stat boosts at high costs and is plentiful in the trafficked levels of the game, is valuable when you crunch it into organic material and use that to assemble a medkit. All of these functions are executed by perfect, quiet little cubes. Slotted into

the welcoming ports of a fabricator, they overcome the human/alien divide to contribute to a greater whole. Everyone participates equally in the beautiful process of Creation.

Even as Morgan overcomes this difference, though, the Typhon and human crew draw further apart. The humans are constrained by limits of their physical environment; the Typhon, it seems, frighteningly, are not. Ease of access becomes alien. The Typhon are able to control great swaths of humans without a second thought; they close and lock doors, block electricity, and break the complex interlocking systems of Talos I almost on instinct. Humans are confined to increasingly finicky analog interfaces – the safest way across a room might genuinely be shooting a computer screen with a sequence of NERF darts until it unlocks a door that leads the way to safety. Every time Morgan chooses these complicated, inefficient methods of environmental interaction they assert their humanity; every time they blast their way through a level with kinetic energy or take control of an electronic device from far away, they grow closer to the Typhon enemy.

There's a similarity, here, to the pursuit by current tech companies of eternal simplification. Anyone remember the chaos when Apple removed the headphone jack? The current goal seems to be an absolute lack of friction, a pursuit – often to the detriment of the user – of some perfect, unblemished form. Whether or not that translates to actual, understandable use is often secondary. It often happens that more analog is better for the user – something as simple as volume buttons or a headphone jack, yes, but consider also something like a car, where the carryover instruments of pedals, a wheel and a gearshift are so ubiquitous to make anyone who steps into any vehicle able to carry out the general presets of operation. The current fetish for sleekness actually makes operating modern gadgets *harder*, with the natural tactile interface sacrificed for a smooth nothingness that requires everything be carefully read.

The question at the heart of *Prey* is whether Morgan is more human than alien. That's decided by biology, but it's also decided by movement and interaction, by the relationship between Morgan and their environment, how they choose to traverse space and play with it. It's not as simple as friction vs. efficiency, but it does operate within that binary – as Morgan simplifies their world, takes the parts of each element that suits them and builds it into a form that they find pleasing, they say something about themselves, and about the material shape of their reality. How they live, how they intend to live, who they are. 🍷



## Light the Beam

2<sup>7th Most Popular Team at This Location.”</sup>

That’s the message that shows up when I pick the Sacramento Kings on *NBA Jam* at my [local barcade](#). Given that the game came out when the NBA only had 27 teams, this means my favorite team is also the least popular team on the machine. This isn’t surprising considering that I live in the frozen tundra, far away from where I spent my early elementary school years in northern California. It’s doubly unsurprising given that the Kings were, until very recently, [comically inept in almost all facets of being a professional basketball team, to an extent that is almost hard to believe](#).

To understand the Sacramento Kings is to understand the irrational and torturous essence of fandom itself. They have [failed to make the playoffs in 16 consecutive seasons](#), the longest current post-season drought of any major sports franchise in North America. Their front office has long been a revolving door of ineptitude, with 12 different head coaches having led the team since 2006 (and the word “led” is doing a lot of work here). Aside from an eight-year run between 1998 and 2006, they have not posted a winning record since relocating from Kansas City to Sacramento in 1985.

Whenever the Kings (or [the Kangz as they’re called whenever they screw something up](#)) have looked like they were figuring things out, they’ve blown it. Former head coach [Dave Joerger](#) (who was also an ex-player at my alma mater, a fact that no one at my alma mater seems to know or care about) had the team on the verge of sneaking into the playoffs in 2019, only to [get fired](#) in favor of [Luke Walton](#), a [man with a short fuse](#) who [probably got away with](#)

sexual assault. When they had the opportunity to [select Luka Doncic in the 2018 NBA draft](#), who is currently growing into one of the best players in league history, [they picked Marvin Bagley, who is no longer on their roster](#) (and was so mistreated by the team that he [once refused to play in the middle of a game](#)).

For most teams, these would be isolated miscues. For the Kings, [they're footnotes in a long history of never doing anything right](#). Whenever everyone thought they had hit rock bottom, they would grab their shovels and keep digging deeper.

The Kings have been seen as so undeserving of respect that there are [credible accusations of the NBA and referees favoring their opponents](#). When they won in a recent double overtime thriller that ended with the [second-highest score in NBA history](#), league commissioner Adam Silver announced they would be [considering changes to overtime rules](#) that would prevent such an outcome from happening again. What should have been a feel-good story was instead treated as a problem because it involved a team that is not allowed to succeed. Lots of fanbases think they're a target for bias and bad calls, but in the case of the Kings, they really do seem to be on the NBA's shit list.

While it's hard to overstate how bad the Kings have been, it's even harder to explain how anyone could support them through so many years of embarrassment. The Kings and the Kangz are two sides of the same coin, one that instills intense pride in the fanbase, and one that was once a travelling clown show that brought shame everywhere it went. An anonymous Reddit user may have best summed up the agonizing dichotomy of being a Kings fan when they said, "[The Kings are a respectable small market franchise with die hard fans. The KANGZ are a fucking fiasco.](#)" The Kings are the Kangz, the Kangz are the Kings, and together we are all mentally unwell.

So, when I tell people that I follow the Kings, I shouldn't be surprised when I get questioned on why I bother with such a snakebitten franchise. The short answer is that I loved the Kings and loved basketball as a kid growing up in Sacramento in the late 1980s and early 1990s. They were the hometown team, and in a city with no other major pro sports to support, I didn't know why you'd back any other team.

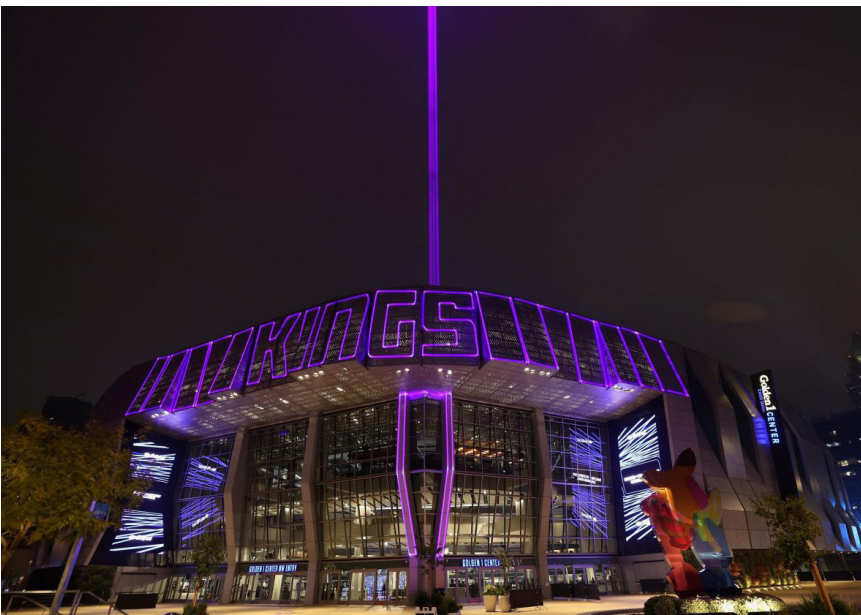
This was also the same era that the Chicago Bulls were as historically great as the Kings were historically terrible. When I got clowned by other kids for liking the Kings, I felt like I needed to pick a different team that could earn their respect, and decided I'd be a Kings fan and a Los Angeles Lakers fan ([there was no real rivalry between the two teams at the time, though that would change later in the decade](#)). This instead earned me a well-deserved talking to from my dad about not being a fair-weather fan, which went straight over

my head. I didn't get why you couldn't like two teams at once, just like I didn't get why kids who couldn't find Illinois on a map would decide to be Bulls fans.

When my family left California, I held onto my Lakers fandom while my interest in the Kings lapsed. This was mostly because the Lakers were a global brand in a way that the Kings weren't. I could still find Lakers merchandise in far-flung places like England and North Dakota (where we relocated for my dad's job as an enlisted Air Force serviceman), while the Kings were strictly a regional concern in northern California. Eventually, my interest in basketball slipped away entirely. I was a tall but unathletic kid, and when I couldn't keep up on the court, my love for the sport turned into resentment.

I came back around to basketball later as an adult, realizing that [basketball is, in fact, very good](#). The Golden State Warriors and Cleveland Cavaliers showdown in the [2016 NBA Finals](#) wasn't just good sports television, but good television in general. That series brought me back to the game I loved when I was growing up and left me wondering why I ever stopped watching in the first place.

If I was going to keep watching, then I needed to have a rooting interest. That led me back to my roots and to rediscover the Kings, who should have been my one and only team all along, even though they were, at the time, just as bad as they had ever been. They are deeply nostalgic for me and a way to maintain some sense of connection to the place where I made most of my earliest memories. The fact that they are one of the best teams in the NBA this season – [one that celebrates every win by lighting a beam that is literally visible from space](#) – is just a bonus. And if they keep it up, they might not be the least popular team on that *NBA Jam* machine for much longer. 🍷





The sequel isn't too much different in premise from the first game, from what I can gather. You're still performing the same actions of rolling up everything under the sun and proving it's all made of starstuff. The King of All Cosmos is still an ass to the Prince, although now he has a redeeming backstory about *his* toxic filial relationship, so history eats its own tail. The soundtrack is still fire. One of the only differences I can remember is that this time around the Prince has some of his fellow hammer-headed cousins help with his task as well. I remember the one who looked like a strawberry the most.



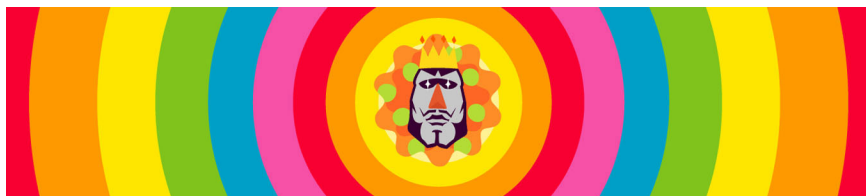
This sequel was [themed around fan-service](#) but not the typical bikini-clad fare people tend to associate with the term. Since *Katamari Damacy* was a sleeper hit and one with an atypical development story, the creator Takahashi Keita wanted to thank his passionate fans by making the second game a more refined version of what they loved from the first game. As well there's a meta-narrative in the game of people being fans with requests for Katamari projects from the King of All Cosmos. This despite the fact that the royal family was responsible for a lot of chaos and mayhem, rolling up anything and everything (including humans and animals) to turn into star matter to replace what the King destroyed during a bender with his friends.

I continue to be fascinated by game creators who incorporate multimedia inspirations and practices into their design. When I was studying different schools of thought as a literature and culture student, there were often what I found to be strange divides between different media forms and their attendant discourses. Previously, I spent my second column for this fine publication dishing on what I loved about Uchikoshi Kotaro's game design and his various inspirations because said creator doesn't really give a damn if theoretically those inspirations came from formally similar media. Writing [that column](#),



which was comprised almost completely of spoilers (sorry, but mostly for my lack of a warning), made me realize how frustrating it is that AAA games have become less experimental in aesthetics and more dedicated to tried-and-true homogenous design trends. To get back to *We Love Katamari*, Takahashi is one such creator who has drawn from his unique history as a fine artist to create a game that achieves a rare level of balance between play and artistic expression.

Takahashi has a pragmatic philosophy when it comes to art. Previous to being a renowned game designer he was a sculptor who focused his efforts on making whimsical yet useful everyday objects. L.E. Hall relates in their Boss Fight Books entry on the history and making of *Katamari Damacy* that as an artist Takahashi often expressed that nature was capable of creating more breathtaking structures than humans can and that his art should be useful and accessible to many people. Part of what led him to choose the path of a game designer was this philosophy, since games are a commercial art form that (at least at the time of making his sleeper-hit title) weren't too expensive for people to afford.



There has certainly been a lot of discussion about the [melancholy](#) of creators like Takahashi, who use their projects to help process their conflicted feelings as an artist in these late capitalist times. But I have seen less discussion about how *Katamari*'s main mechanics and story beats deftly handle themes of transmuting mundane objects and everyday drudgery into something more elevated. The closest to this discussion I've seen is Hamish Black of Writing On Games' video essay entitled "[The Dark Heart of Katamari Damacy](#)." But Black focuses on how one could read the game as a way to symbolize the absurdity of game development as a creator who wants to change such a commercial art form for the better.

Recently, I finally read *The Little Prince* and was rather disappointed by it. For an author who found Africa so fascinating as a pilot postman who flew to cities like Dakar, I was taken aback at how de Saint-Exupery demonized Baobab trees (which are sacred to several African cultures and traditions) in his narrative. I did find something strange though as I whizzed through a system of mini planets constructed to alleviate the author's guilt about how he treated his wife horribly and confronted a "tyranny of petty things". I began

to see certain parallels between formal elements of the Naïve art style of de Saint-Exupery's work and Takahashi's.

Both creators feature childish green-clad Princes in their respective works who are dealing with an absurd, yet philosophical, world based off of their personal zeitgeists. These diminutive yet determined Princes are foils to disillusioned or highly critical adult characters, which often have a self-referential quality to them (the Pilot and the King of All Cosmos). Though these are not one-to-one, I'd say it's still safe to say that such figures represent these creators' inner critics, who have internalized the jaded nature of their peers and bosses throughout the years. Both creators also deal with existential themes about how humans (especially those dastardly grown-ups) place too much value on objects or in concepts that, in the end, don't truly matter. Like money, consumer goods or a so-called right to authority, whether divine or otherwise.



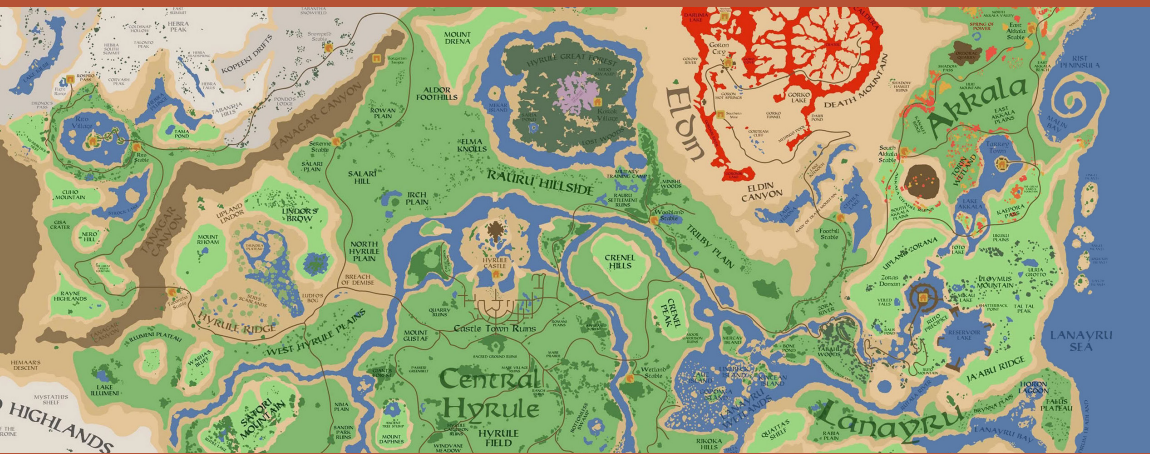
I should mention briefly that I certainly don't mean to equate the two creators by mentioning these parallels between them. Takahashi's work is primarily rooted in Japanese culture and his experiences within that culture as artist and designer, even if his work pushes against societal norms. If anything, comparing de Saint-Exupery and Takahashi is a comment on my own thought process, which bounces between whatever media I'm currently consuming (but especially books) and my fascination with the possible cross-pollination of ideas between different culture's multimedia. Japan and France also have a long history of inspiring each other's art and literary scenes as well, especially regarding [surrealism](#), which often worked with the free association of subconscious ideas.

*We Love Katamari* and the series it's a part of is about the alchemy of persistence at its core. You take what's available to you and turn it into a star. No matter if it's so much prosaic dross or inspiration from unlikely places,

like the Japanese children's cooperative ball game tamakorogashi that L.E. Hall learns of during their research and interviews with Takahashi. Sometimes you persist for your own personal creative goals, other times you do this for others who have respectively requested your skills.

Writers who have previously picked up on the subtle darkness that paradoxically boosts the euphoric highs of the signature *Katamari* gameplay experience, are keenly aware of how Takahashi nails the often-Sisyphian nature of artistic development. The act of rolling up many objects in *Katamari* and the characters in the second game who want you to clean up or collect specific items are a [comment on consumerism](#). If I was one of those characters, I'd ask if it's possible to make a Katamari ball of my cluttered pre-spring brain and all its intertextual ideas. That would be nice. But I know the other lesson of this series is that allowing ourselves to play in a whimsical manner is transformative. So I will be at peace with the constellation in my mind and observe what I can of it. 🍷





## Breath of the Elevator

Use the map! Use the map!”

As I wrote last month (well, as ChatGPT wrote last month, at least), there is great freedom in playing *Breath of the Wild*. I'm a completist, biding my time until *Tears of the Kingdom* working on the DLC and hunting dragons to level up my armor. My 7-year-old is more the easily distracted type, never really getting very much farther than a tight radius around his Hateno Village homestead. He can't help but stop for every battle and then double back when he's running low on hearts to cook up a few new dishes at his fire pit.

But my 4-year-old? His style of play is . . . unique. Since the first time he saw his brother play, he's been obsessed with the world map. I take all the blame for this, as I was enthusiastically advising my 7-year-old to use the map when he was frustrated about not being able to find the next town. My 4-year-old loves to torment his older brother, so he echoed me. "Use the map! Use the map!"

But I had no idea how much this was capturing his imagination. Last night, when he saw me on the couch with the Switch, he surprised me by asking to play *Zelda*. Using my character, the full map was at his disposal. I assumed he'd check out the snowy peaks, perhaps hit the desert for a while, maybe head out toward the coast. I was right. He did all that.

Except he didn't stay around to look.

Sure, once or twice, at my prodding, he walked away from a shrine and maybe stepped into a lava flow or fell into a pit. "Am I dead?" is his favorite *Zelda*-related question. Mostly, though, my 4-year-old's chosen path in *Breath of the Wild* was simply to open the map, warp to a shrine, then open the map again and warp to another shrine.

He loves this. He even asked if he could pause the game when he was called for dinner and pick it up again after he got into his PJs, a practice heretofore reserved for his favorite television shows. “I went to the ocean!” he breathlessly told his mother after warping to a DLC shrine southeast of Ankel Island. He’s learned he must hit the minus button and select the blue spots on the map. And off he goes.

Me being his dad, and trying to help him learn and grow and maybe not drive me insane and all that silly stuff, suggested perhaps he try walking around a bit more. So he walked to the *back* of a shrine and, with Link in the darkness, asked me, “Is this a wall?” I explained that, yes, it is a wall, but underneath him is an elevator, and if he takes it down, there will be a puzzle waiting for him. “I want to go down the elevator!” he announced.

So, he went down the elevator. I worried that the puzzle would be way too much for him, and I was right: He walked out of the elevator, took a few steps, and fell to his death. “Am I dead?” he asked.

When he respawned, he simply spun around and returned to the elevator, then rode it back to the surface. But instead of opening the map, he went right back down the elevator again. Then he went up again. Then down. Then up. Then, at last, he opened the map, traveled to another shrine, and went down *that* elevator. I mentioned to my wife that our younger son now seems to prefer a part of the game that wisely presents players with the option to skip.

At the bottom of one elevator, he came upon a Modest Test of Strength – so with nothing to lose I convinced him to walk further inside to see the bad guy. With my armor and weapons, he was actually holding his own in battle for a bit. But after striking a few blows, the guardian clash became too dull, at least compared to his other options, and he ran in a wide circle around the arena, lest the enemy get in the way of Lift’s, er, Link’s true goal: to ride up and down the elevator some more. Which he did. Again and again.

Which is when it hit me. Watching all the elevator rides was so brutal, I looked at my son, paused for a moment, and pleaded:

“Use the map! Use the map!” 🗺️





## Moving Sitting Still

**O***ctopath Traveller 2*'s 2.5D world is undeniably gorgeous. I chose the beastling hunter Ochette as my starting character and spent the first chapter luxuriating in the forests of her island home. Every new screen gave a chance to dawdle and take in the way the sunlight filtered through the leaves or glittered off the water.

And then my own world started to shrink. Because I was playing the game for review, I was pouring most of my time into it. But due to a long and boring set of circumstances, my Switch is basically neither portable nor dockable. The only real way to tackle a long play session is to leave it plugged in. In short, for almost all of *Octopath 2*'s 70-something hour runtime, I sat, round-backed, knees to chest, on the floor near the socket.

Dawdling no longer crossed my mind, and not just because of the circumstances. Reviewing any game that lasts more than a few hours is a marathon – sure, you don't want to sprint, but you don't want to make it any longer than it needs to be, either.

But while this is always a weird artifact of the review process, *Octopath 2* pushes against that fact more than most games. It's playable on both console and PC, but it feels designed for Switch – for chipping away at on the go. A couple of battles on a delayed bus, maybe a whole chapter on a plane.

Maybe it's because it's a game *about* movement. Skipping between the individual characters' stories requires continent-hopping, back and forth over and over across the map. It's not especially cohesive, but the constant shifting between locations lends the game an ongoing momentum.

Whatever the reason, it seems to want to be on the move. But what I could give it was a haze of consecutive hours, glued in place by a lack of time and equipment issues.

Almost as soon as the review was over and I found myself in the whiplash aftermath, apparent acres of free time stretching out in front of me, I fell into a rabbit hole of watching train-hopping videos on YouTube. In the comments section of every video, people would thank the creators for giving them a sense of travel, adventure and freedom from the stillness of their own homes.

That's certainly part of the appeal for me, too. But I know it isn't the only thing, because [the one that keeps circling my mind](#) is one where the hoppers are stranded. With no suitable trains leaving the city, the YouTubers wait for what must have been several intensely boring days. They sit on the floor, round-backed, knees to chest.

But, god, the trees are green and the sky is blue, and maybe it's just the end of a long winter, but I could stare at them all day.

Maybe what made me keep thinking about this video was the direct reversal of the experience of binging *Octopath 2*. In both cases, I was actually just sitting, either watching or playing. But in *Octopath*, I was moving, digitally speaking, as fast as possible. There was no time to pause, to test out different team combinations, run small errands for NPCs, take in the tiny pixel clutter of their homes. Watching through the YouTubers' eyes, on the other hand, I was stuck still, but getting to soak in the space.

They could have cut all of the waiting out of the video; could have edited out all but the most exciting parts. But like *Octopath*, lingering in the dawdling adds a necessary depth. The journey can be the destination, and the journey can be watching a YouTube video or sitting unmoving over a handheld console for six straight hours. But it still needs space. 🍷





## A New Era

I put a lot of hours into the city builder *Pharaoh* back in the day, something which may or may not have influenced my decision to become an Egyptologist later in life. When I heard about a remastered version called *A New Era*, I was naturally intrigued and immediately decided to give the game a go.

You can't go very long in city builders without running into a natural disaster like an earthquake or a flood. Since you have to build up their level over time, houses in *Pharaoh* basically start out as nothing more than shacks, meaning of course that within about an hour of playing the game, I found my settlement crumbling on account of a seemingly unquenchable fire. While this was definitely bothersome, I couldn't stop thinking about how fires are frequently a source of positive change in the real world, at least from an historical perspective. They often pave the way for better things in terms of safety measures and quality of construction. I've seen this repeated countless times over the years and the argument certainly holds, but at the same time, fires are still, well, destructive. They've always been substantial disturbances, most notably for working class families. You can see what I mean by spending some time studying Chicago.

The Great Chicago Fire was a devastating event that caused significant destruction and loss of life. The fire burned for a total of three days, destroying over 17,000 buildings and leaving more than 100,000 people homeless. The majority of the city was affected with the most significant damage occurring in the working-class neighborhoods on the west side of Chicago.



The fire started on the evening of October 8, 1871, inside of a barn located in the southwest corner of the city. The flames quickly spread on account of strong winds and the prevailing dry weather conditions. The fire was first noticed by Catherine and Patrick O'Leary, a pair of recent immigrants and owners of the barn where the blaze began. They were just one of many working-class families in Chicago struggling to make ends meet. While the cause of the fire has long been attributed to a cow knocking over a lantern, the actual cause remains completely unknown.

As the fire spread, the flames quickly reached the areas near the farm belonging to Catherine and Patrick O'Leary, parts of the city where the buildings were made of wood and closely packed together. The flames rapidly consumed these wooden structures, making the fire practically impossible to control. People frantically tried to evacuate their homes and businesses, but many were trapped inside, unable to escape the raging inferno. The firefighters who responded to the blaze were soon overwhelmed, leaving their efforts to put out the flames largely futile. The problem was exacerbated by a series of misdirections during dispatch and woefully inadequate equipment including broken pumps and leaky hoses.



The flames continued to rage out of control on the second day of the fire. Many families had already lost everything they owned and the fire was still spreading. People were forced to flee for their lives, leaving behind their homes, businesses and possessions, apart from whatever they could carry. The fire department was struggling to contain the flames and there soon developed a shortage of water to fight the fire, the building which housed

the waterworks having been destroyed. People began to congregate in open spaces like public parks, desperately searching for safety from the fire. Many were left with neither food nor shelter amidst the growing panic. Several charitable organizations began to arrive in the city, providing aid to victims of the fire, but getting supplies to those in need was difficult on account of the widespread destruction and consequent chaos.

By the third day of the fire, the flames had cut through a broad swath of the city, destroying everything in their path. The working-class neighborhoods were of course hit the hardest with entire blocks of buildings having been burned to the ground. People were still fleeing the city and the streets were crowded with those trying to escape the approaching flames, rendering efforts to fight the fire even less effective. The death toll continued to rise and many families were devastated by the loss of loved ones. When the flames were finally extinguished by a sudden onset of rain, those who survived the fire were left to pick up the pieces of their shattered lives. The city was in ruins and would take years to rebuild.



The Great Chicago Fire was a turning point in American history, causing widespread destruction and loss of life, forever changing the city. The working-class neighborhoods that consisted almost entirely of wood and other flammable materials were of course the most badly damaged and the impact of the fire was felt in these parts of Chicago for years to come, countless families being left without homes or possessions, relying on a groundswell of support from people across the country to rebuild their lives. Several different charities played a role in providing aid and assistance to victims of

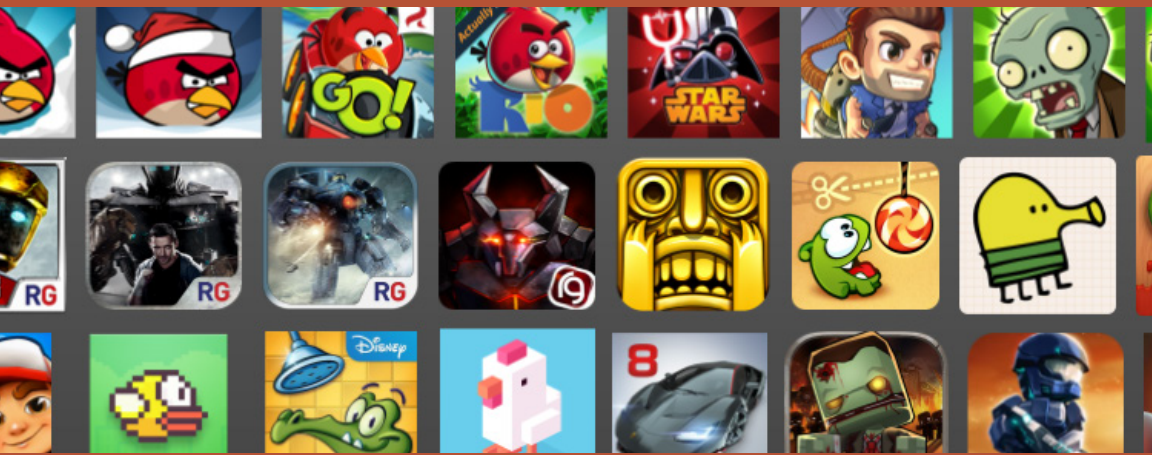
the fire, accepting donations from concerned individuals almost everywhere. The process of rebuilding the city was on the other hand incredibly slow and thousands of working-class families struggled to recover from the disaster, many never truly managing.

Chicago was rebuilt with a renewed focus on safety and infrastructure, the affected neighborhoods being remade with less flammable materials. The fire department was modernized and finally received proper funding. While the blaze definitely had a few positive outcomes, the process of rebuilding brought about significant changes to the demographics and economy of Chicago. As the city began to emerge from its own ashes, a substantial number of people were forced to move into other neighborhoods by developers looking for cheap land. This of course led to gentrification and the displacement of many working-class families who could no longer live in the city. The problem was compounded by a series of new construction rules requiring the use of fire-resistant materials, entirely unaffordable for the people most impacted by the disaster. The result was of course that Chicago was remade to suit the needs and interests of the investment class even despite the ordinances in question being partially relaxed.

In addition to the demographics, the fire also had a significant impact on the economy of Chicago. The city was a major transportation hub and the fire destroyed many of its factories, warehouses and rail yards. This resulted in a significant loss of jobs and a slowing down of economic activity, at least until the efforts to rebuild brought about new opportunities, particularly in the construction industry.

The Great Chicago Fire deeply affected working class communities throughout the city. The fire devastated these neighborhoods, leaving thousands of people homeless and in many cases destitute. The aftermath of the fire was a period of significant change and transformation for Chicago, but the process of rebuilding impacted its demographics and economy, leading to the displacement of countless working-class families. The legacy lives on even today in the history books, being used as a symbol of resilience and renewal in the face of adversity, something which caught on almost immediately after the fire subsided. I could probably say the same thing about my settlement in *Pharaoh*, but I still feel a slight pang of regret when I think about the blaze. 🇺🇸





# You're Not Actually Mad At Mobile Games

Did I ever tell you all that my first paid games writing gig was centered around iPhone games? I may have, I don't remember, but a very big chunk of my career was very focused on the iOS App Store, and it was always frustrating to see so many people dismiss what I came to realize was an (often unfairly) overlooked gaming platform. What really sucks is that frustration never really went away, because to this day I still see people use "mobile game" as some kind of derisive shorthand. It doesn't just bug me because it's mean and, in my experience, unfair – it also bugs me because it's wrong. Because here's the thing: What everyone's mad at isn't really "mobile games."

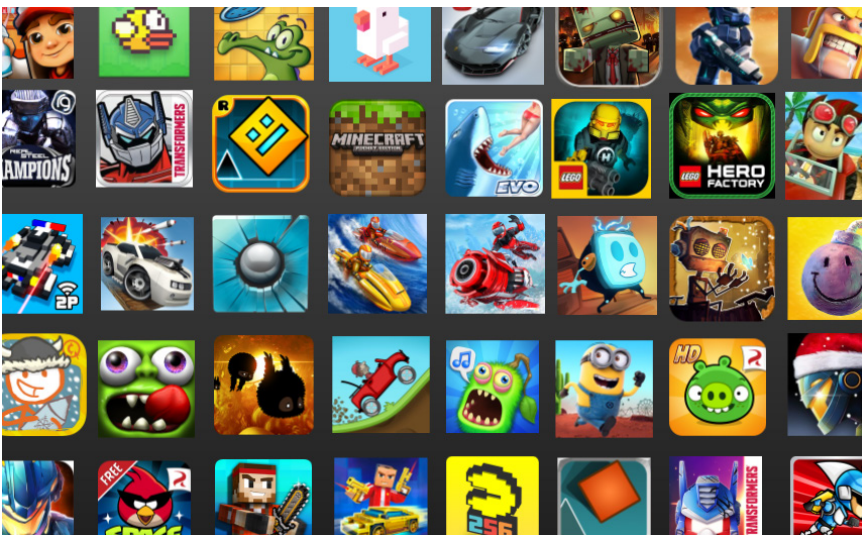
I'm sure it will be easy for folks to hand-wave past what I have to say on the subject because I spent a good six to seven years writing almost exclusively about mobile gaming, and I do understand why there might be expectations of bias. Hell, I can't even completely deny that because this stuff was a huge part of my life for years, so of course I still feel defensive about it. But wouldn't someone who actually spent several years in that space (specifically that space) have a bit more insight on it as well? Something to remember about mobile games is that they (I'm generalizing here) started off pretty basic and slowly expanded in scope over time due to a combination of technological advancements and more people starting to take them seriously – or at least play them. It was kind of like a fast-track of videogame history in a way; being dismissed as mere toys or a waste of time, then eventually carving out a niche in the wider public consciousness.

Unfortunately, said fast-tracking also resulted in one of the worst things modern game players have to endure: Monetization and the “games as a service” model.

I will never deny that these types of games have problems. They’re obnoxious at best, or downright vile and predatory at worst. It’s an awful thing that became popular thanks in no small part to mobile games raking in, just, disgusting amounts of money. And I fully agree with anyone who may harbor resentment towards them because of that fact. But even then, mobile games aren’t the real problem here. Corporate greed (and predatory monetization structures that are almost guaranteed to make bank) are what everyone should really be mad at.

It’s so easy to write-off a game being on mobile because, yes, much of the time that translates to “free to download but you have to pay through the nose to get anywhere and it’s a blurry shadow of the franchise it’s based on.” Again, not denying that. However, that’s not always the case with mobile games, and a lot of these issues are just as bad in some console and PC games. Not saying that makes it okay, because it’s absolutely not okay, but it’s not just a mobile games thing.

Also, I want to be clear that I don’t believe anyone is bad or misguided for being disappointed when a beloved series announces a mobile spin-off. Particularly because when it’s a license owned by a big company it’s almost guaranteed to be a “free-to-play” affair crammed with psychological tricks designed to suck money out of your bank account. But just try to keep a more open mind about the platform in general, yeah? There have been, and still are, loads of fantastic games on mobile that don’t use any of those shitty concepts, and I think to ignore them purely because they’re made for your phone is doing them (and yourself) a disservice. 🙄



*Features*



# HOPE & SACRIFICE

By Kiernan Elam





Disney's series *Andor* diverges from the path taken by the sequel trilogy – and even from the trajectory of its own canonical movie, *Rogue One* – in its singular focus on the ideologies and power structures behind its villains. The vision of hope that the show offers is substantiated by the sacrifices its characters endure and the threat they all face. *Andor* paints a clear and lucid picture of the absolute power authoritarians can wield over people and how cruel fascism must be in order to preserve that power.

While Star Wars as a franchise has always revolved around the dynamic between good and evil, and around the balance between light and dark, there is something about lightsabers and Force lightning that keeps these concepts confined to the world of fantasy. Over time, the mainline movies have become increasingly self-referential and reliant on their connections back to those iconic heroes from the original films in order

to instill meaning and substance in their own narratives.

*Andor's* best quality, however, is its ability to make Star Wars feel human – to make the consequences in its world feel tangible, and to detail those systems of oppression with horrifying clarity. It is less interested in who the Emperor is, he is hardly mentioned more than once in the entire season, than it is in the fascist Empire he has created. In this, *Andor* revitalizes the motifs of hope and sacrifice that are at the core of the franchise.

The central conflict that Cassian faces as a reluctant protagonist is this question of what to do once fascism becomes inescapable. Every character in *Andor* holds out hope for an alternative, but each comes to realize how futile that effort is. Before Cassian Andor is convinced to take on the Aldhani heist, rebel conspirator Luthen Rael deconstructs his choices for him and shatters the illusion of escape: “They’ll use the same



rope to hang you whether it's for a plasma coil or 20 million credits . . . Wouldn't you rather give it all at once for something real than carve off useless pieces 'til there's nothing left?"

There is no foretold prophecy or secret lineage of "chosen" predecessors to help guide Cassian through accepting his role as a protagonist and revolutionary; the show refuses to rely on any narrative crutch to explain his development as a character. That change is forged in loss and sacrifice, and *Andor's* own message about hope is largely shaped by who these characters are after they confront the fact that they will not survive their fight against the Empire.

Two distinct instances of characters pushing past this realization come from Coruscant, the capital planet of the Empire. The double lives of both Mon Mothma and Luthen allow them to strategize and fund resistance efforts from the heart of the fascist system. As the rebel activity

becomes more coordinated, and the impacts of the Aldhani heist are felt across the galaxy, the stakes for their collusion are heightened. Both of them, clearly positioned as protagonists in the narrative, end up sacrificing moral clarity in their commitment to a greater cause.

The choices these characters make are complex because of the amassed power of the Empire; there is no uncomplicated way to resist it. At one point, Luthen is confronted with the opportunity to either let an accomplice and dozens of his men die in an Imperial attack, or risk losing his informant in the Imperial Security Bureau. When the ISB informant confronts Luthen about the dilemma, he discovers that not only is Luthen willing to let them die for the cause, but that his role as an informant is no longer voluntary. Luthen bluntly admits to him that he has become too valuable to the rebellion and that releasing him from his service was not an option. The conversation does





not delve into what is right, and there is no pretense about whether or not Luthen's justifications are dignified. Luthen admits solidarity with the informant and sums up his fight against the Empire: "... my unwillingness to yield, my eagerness to fight. They've set me on a path from which there is no escape."

Senator Mon Mothma, in an attempt to disguise her funneling money towards rebel efforts, ends up implicating one of the few senators sympathetic to her cause and potentially endangering her daughter. Usually a voice of virtue and uncompromising morality, she managed to navigate the political dangers of Coruscant almost without fault. The slightest misstep, just "one empty ledger at the end of the line" compromises her entire operation. How quickly and completely desperation consumes her is justified by the cruelty the Empire shows to its dissidents.

Recent sequel films seem to begin with the same dwindling group of resistance fighters looking for their big break against an insurmountable, unconquer-

able force. Yet the latent threat in *An-dor*, the suspense of being boxed in and constantly under surveillance, is more effective and more daunting than any lightsaber-wielding Sith lord. Watching Mon Mothma's morals break down as she considers leveraging her daughter as collateral for a misstep in her fight against the Empire is brutal to watch. The toll for resistance becomes proportional to the force it opposes, and as fascism takes an increasingly aggressive hold over the galaxy it is crushing to watch well-meaning leaders sacrifice their integrity and morals for a greater cause.

The formation of an organized rebellion is not a linear process, though. It forces leaders to compromise values, to forge unsavory alliances and to endlessly ask personal sacrifices for the sake of collective action. It involves a life of sacrifice. By its nature it must be fought with the tools of the enemy, as fascism is incompatible with political negotiation, responding only to power and violence itself. Luthen, and the other key figures in this first season, come to understand

why “burning my life to make a sunrise I know I’ll never see” is the only natural response to the tyranny they face.

Ferrix, the planet where adult Cassian first appears, parallels his struggle as its occupying force grows more aggressive and controlling. The planet changes and grows with the narrative, creating a sort of organic relationship between the protagonist and his de facto home-world that makes it feel lived-in and believable. Ferrix serves less as a backdrop or setting and more as a character in its own right; it remains one of the clearest examples of how the environments in *Andor* reflect the relationship between the physical world and the unnatural forces that extort it.

After Cassian flees the familiar sights of Ferrix following the murder of two corrupt security officers, the Corporate Tactical Forces – a subset of the larger Imperial power – lose jurisdiction over the area. Now under the purview of the Empire, the relatively manageable po-

lice presence gives way to a full-blown military occupation. This transition is swift and overly severe, but it highlights one of the salient truths that pushes Andor towards rebellion – that there is no sustainable way to exist under Imperial rule, and that denying that is delaying the inevitable. The realization that there is only “one way out” is ultimately what radicalizes Cassian, and strengthens his resolve.

Out of this same escalation, however, the people of Ferrix become galvanized, and the heart of the Rebellion is founded on breaking points like these. While initially the community resists corporate officers by banging metal objects and sounding alarms across the city, it becomes clear that these tactics are as much a form of dissent as they are an alarm. By the season’s end the people of Ferrix are united by the death of an activist and leader, Cassian’s adoptive mother, Maarva Andor.

Under intense military scrutiny, the Empire exploits this moment in an effort



to pull Andor out of hiding and expose a rebel conspiracy. The funeral procession weaves through the city streets as harrowing, remorseful notes sound from the trumpets and customary instruments in the crowd. The score builds and the somber unity among those in attendance is solidified by this diegetic sound. The tension and emotional weight of this scene feel so authentic because the music, the march and the funeral itself is a form of resistance; it is the people accepting the totality and necessity of what they are going to sacrifice. Maarva's hologram delivering her final words is enough to shatter that lingering illusion of escape, and the community of Ferrix rises to meet its occupying force with a new resolve.

The brightest moments in this season look unflinchingly beyond sacrifice and towards a real, tangible hope that lies on the other side. *Andor* is unafraid to display the darkness of a truly evil and oppressive system, but it does so in order to instill meaning and weight to the Rebellion that so much of Star Wars is based on. The same symbols, phrases and motifs that litter the most recent Star Wars films are revitalized in the expanses of *Andor's* gritty, suspenseful world. I can only hope that the acclaim this show has earned will push more content in this direction, and I look forward to seeing how the next season bridges the gap between *Andor* and *Rogue One*. 🍷



# The ENVIRONMENTAL HORROR of ELDEN RING

By Kathryn Hemmann





Many post-apocalyptic open-world games, such as *Breath of the Wild* and *Horizon Zero Dawn*, present the player with a thriving green landscape to explore. *Elden Ring*, despite the dark tone of its story, initially seems to offer similarly beautiful vistas – until the player arrives in Caelid. The environmental storytelling of Caelid, where a hellish catastrophe is still ongoing, delivers an effective message regarding the destruction of the natural world. Caelid resists the post-apocalyptic fantasy that the detrimental effects of human activity on the environment are temporary and reversible, thereby underscoring *Elden Ring*'s brutal critique of the abuse of power.

Gary Butterfield of the *Bonfireside Chat* podcast has called the world of *Elden Ring* “a postapocalyptic heaven.” When the player first steps out of an underground tomb in the ruined kingdom of Limgrave, the Lands Between certainly seem like paradise. The luminous Erdtree

rises above the distant horizon, and its golden leaves flutter delicately on the wind. At the edge of the player's vision is a forest with a luxuriant canopy. The bushes that surround your tomb are resplendent with flowers and berries. This is still a FromSoftware game, so the NPC who greets your arrival to the Lands Between is a murderous war surgeon in a bloodstained smock, but you may be able to spot a few plump and carefree bunny-squirrels hopping across the field during his cryptic monologue.

As the player progresses along the journey to gather the shards of the Elden Ring, the game presents a series of equally elysian landscapes. Mist rises from a shallow lake at the base of the postcard-perfect Academy of Raya Lucaria. Lush autumnal forests frame the windmills dotting the edges of the Altus Plateau. Ornate pavilions nestle in the boughs of the dying but still grand Haligtree. Between its bouts of intense and punishing

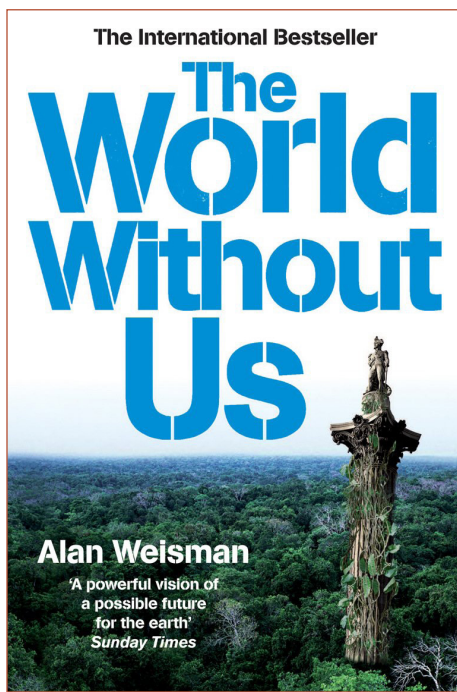
ultraviolence, *Elden Ring* is a quiet and contemplative game that allows the player ample opportunities to study the details of the environment closely. Attentive players are rewarded not only with tactical advantages, but also with hints of story hidden in the ruins.

Before an event called “the Shattering,” which involved the assassination of a prince and the wars that followed, the members of the royal family of the Lands Between were tasked with maintaining the Golden Order of their dynasty. However, the player is presented with numerous pieces of evidence that suggest their enforcement of the Golden Order was far from benevolent. Multiple categories of people were enslaved or otherwise mistreated; and, now that the Golden Order no longer prevails, these people are free to live as they wish. Many players have wondered if perhaps, now that the warlords have perished or fled, the common people might be able to govern themselves as balance is restored to nature.

During the summer following the global outbreak of the Coronavirus pandemic in 2020, the tongue-in-cheek sentiment that “nature is healing” mushroomed across social media platforms. Writing in July 2020 for the online environmental activism magazine *Grist*, Kate Yoder documents how photos and videos of animals in urban spaces became a meme. This meme quickly devolved into a parody of itself as freshly-minted urban explorers affixed humorous captions to images of the garbage that accumulated while sanitation workers oper-

ated on safer pandemic schedules. One of the most widely shared variations of this meme is a photo of a flock of plastic clogs floating on the surface of an unmaintained pool bearing the caption, “Nature is healing; the Crocs are finally returning to the rivers.”

Memes aside, the concept that “nature is healing” stems from the pervasive assumption that the planet’s ecosystem is so large and complex that it will repair itself no matter how great the impact of human activity. In 2007, Alan Weisman captivated readers with his bestselling thought experiment *The World Without Us*, which describes in fascinating detail how a city like New York or London could return to nature in a matter of months. Mounting concerns over climate change during the 2000s also resulted in a mainstream interest in human extinction theory. This interest was expressed through popular-audience books such as Eliza-





both Kolbert's *The Sixth Extinction: An Unnatural History*, which won a Pulitzer Prize in 2014. The fantasy presented by these books is that, one day, all that will remain of twenty-first century human civilization is our ceramic coffee mugs.

Meanwhile, the concomitant rise of image-based social media in the mid-2010s created accessible platforms for urban exploration photography, which depicted subjects ranging from abandoned malls in the suburbs of Ohio to abandoned amusement parks in Japan's depopulated northern Tōhoku region. Photographers in London prowled the streets after dark to document the city's feral fox population, while photographers in Ukraine hopped barbed-wire fences to document feral hogs and chickens in Chernobyl.

This digital fantasy of a posthuman world has been modeled in numerous videogames, from the overgrown parking lots of Boston in *The Last of Us* to the

ruins of a futuristic city in *Nier Automata*. Because these environments are mostly devoid of human life, the player can enjoy the scenery with a minimum of distractions. Indie art games have embraced the posthuman aesthetic as well, allowing the player to swim through healthy coral reefs growing over rusted metal in *Abzû* (2016) or to stroll through a deserted yet still bucolic English village in *Everybody's Gone to the Rapture* (2015).

*Elden Ring* seems as though it offers a similarly stunning walk through a post-apocalyptic nature park – until you get to Caelid. When the player arrives in the region, it's clear that something is very wrong. The sky is red. The earth is black. Frantic soldiers burn piles of bodies. Fleshy pink fungus has overtaken the buildings, the trees and even a few roaming dragons. Caelid's ruins suggest that it was once a thriving kingdom, but now it's little more than a barely-contained disaster. Something bad has happened here.



That “something bad” was a woman named Malenia, a member of the royal family who fought her half-brother Radahn to a standstill. She won the battle by means of the magical equivalent of setting off a nuclear bomb, blasting most of the continent to dust and sand in the process. The forests of Caelid will likely never return, nor will the people and animals who once lived there. In its striking visual ugliness and extreme hostility to the player, Caelid is a viscerally upsetting reminder that the ability of nature to heal itself should not be taken for granted.

The idea that human activity has no long-term consequences is a comforting fantasy, especially when presented in an unthreatening digital format. Moreover, the effect of many types of pollution on the environment is largely invisible, which is perhaps why Chernobyl has become something of a poster child of the posthuman fantasy. The same might be said of Fukushima, where photographers

such as Manabu Sekine, Toru Anzai and Kim Kyung-Hoon have documented the cats, monkeys and other animals who now occupy the abandoned houses. Documentaries such as Anne Bogart and Holly Morris’s *The Babushkas of Chernobyl* (2015) and Mayu Nakamura’s *Alone in Fukushima* (2015) are forthright about the challenges of living in a nuclear disaster zone, yet it’s difficult not to be entranced by serene images of humans peacefully interacting with animals against a gorgeous backdrop of healthy trees and plants.

Other types of human activity have resulted in markedly less photogenic changes to the natural environment, however. Subtropical regions of Brazil and Indonesia have lost vast percentages of their forests since the 1990s, permanently reducing global biodiversity. Throughout the Middle East and Central Asia, desertification caused by climate change and industrial agribusiness has irreversibly drained the rivers and






marshes that once sustained the cradles of human civilization. Densely populated coastal areas from Bangladesh to Florida have already been disrupted by rising sea levels, with humans leaving behind unsightly tangles of ruins in the wake of rapid migration.

These real-life environmental horrors are evoked in the blasted landscape of Caelid, where the last remaining soldiers struggle to contain the Scarlet Rot, a deadly fungal infection that metastasizes across the body's cells like cancer. Great warriors like Malenia may have been able to wield the Scarlet Rot like a weapon, but most people in Caelid died horrible and painful deaths because of this biochemical attack. The toxic aftermath of the battle leached into the earth, and the fungal towers that subsequently rose from the sandy soil are utterly alien to the forests that once covered the region.

It is easy for the player to admire the charismatic Malenia and the other larger-than-life members of the royal family, especially while exploring the monumental castles and golden cities they've left behind. At the fringes of the Lands

Between, however, Caelid reminds the player that the elite's abuse of power has resulted in real and lasting consequences. To paraphrase the infamous nuclear waste warning message, no highly esteemed deed is commemorated in Caelid. This place is not a place of honor.

As a kingdom fallen from glory, the Lands Between are tarnished. The forests and wildlife may have returned to some areas, but the damage done to Caelid cannot be healed. The consequences of human activity were disastrous to the Lands Between and the people who lived there, just as the new Anthropocene geologic era will visit large-scale environmental changes to our own earth.

As an atmospheric work of digital storytelling, *Elden Ring* is fundamentally about change and the passing of an old order. The anxieties expressed by *Elden Ring* are not merely contained within the game's spectacles of violence and bloodshed. Rather, the true horror of *Elden Ring* lies in the quiet dread of its ruins, which attest that we will all be forgotten in the future if we fail in our stewardship of the present. 



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## THE NEON NIGHTMARE OF PORTENTS OF THE DEGLOVED HAND

FEATURING MATT JOHNSON

by Emily Price

In his introduction to *Melancology: Black Metal Theory and Ecology*, Scott Wilson writes that “black metal is both terrestrial and cosmic – indeed subterranean and infernal – inhabiting a dead forest that is at once both mythic and material.”

*MÖRK BORG* exists in a similar space, where resources are harshly limited and everything around you, nearly, is undead. The similarity isn’t surprising

when you learn the hardcore TTRPG is inspired by extreme music, a fact which appears in the credits to bands such as Godspeed You! Black Emperor and Mammoth Weed Wizard Bastard. Its English writing credits include Patrick Stuart, whose *Veins of the Earth* has a similar reputation for gutting, exhausting tone. (Levi Rubeck recently wrote about *MÖRK BORG*'s particular cruelty [here](#).)

In *MÖRK BORG*, you create a character to rummage through the scraps of a dying world, until you're killed off by a cataclysmic Misery, a monster, or simply your own mistakes. Fights work by rolling initiative and then rolling again for your attacks and defenses. Rolls in fights or the field are called "tests," with difficulty depending on whether the action is simple, impossible, or in-between. The game makes use of lots of status effects as well as a system called Morale: most enemies can be battered until they run away. Spells can have unintended effects, making you transmit a magic plague or grow fingers from your mouth. In every avenue, it's easy, and common, to make very consequential mistakes.





In contrast to the harshness of its play experience, *MÖRK BORG* has a library of additional resources that make getting started easy. [The monster approaches](#) is a monster-generating tool marked with a shaking, bursting egg and gothic text that describes whatever creation you birthed for players to deal with. [This black metal playlist](#) gives a soundtrack for your adventures. And [SCVMBIRTHEER](#) is a character creator that generates classes and attributes fast, although as the manual says of your identity, “Most likely, it makes little difference.”

Up to now the game hasn’t gotten any official supplements, though third-party publications are encouraged and thriving thanks to the [MÖRK BORG license](#). And of these, soon a set of three third-party licensed expansions will be arriving, with the first, *Portents of the Degloved Hand*, going live on Kickstarter on April 5 with an intended release in the fall.

*Portents* is a collection of four decks, each with 13 cards. Characters sacrifice a resource from the base game known as Omens in order to have one of a

range of effects, all of them bizarre and risky. The deck's promotional material describes its purpose as adding "additional chaos, misfortune, and even dark humor" to the base game.

*Portents'* creator Matt Johnson was introduced to TTRPGs in 1981, when his older brother got a copy of the solo RPG *Barbarian Prince*. After discovering Dungeons & Dragons with some neighbors, he was hooked. However, the Satanic Panic soon hit in a personal way: living in a conservative evangelical home, Johnson was forbidden from playing D&D. This led to his exploring and playing other TTRPGs, and eventually to his continuing passion for the genre.

In the last few years, that passion was reignited when a friend recommended *MÖRK BORG*. Like *Barbarian Prince* forty years earlier, the game immediately appealed to him. One of his favorite things about the game was the Omen system, which functions as a saving throw for players who have gotten into trouble. But as he played, he started thinking about another way the ritualistic aspect of Omens could work: "Rather than just make a table or list additional things you could do with an Omen, I wanted it to be something that requires



sacrifice but that also held a heavy element of taking a risk or paying a price. The balance of risk and reward is an overarching theme with this deck and one that I think accurately reflects the environment that is *MÖRK BORG*.”

*Portents*' four decks – Disaster, Disease, Destruction, and Death – each hew to certain themes in line with *MÖRK BORG*'s oppressive atmosphere. One card, Limb of Maggots, turns your weapon permanently into a rotting limb: hitting an enemy with it reduces their Morale to 0, but “maggots and flies torment you the remainder of the day. DR+2 to all Presence tests.” This combination of a new power and a punishment that fundamentally changes your character adds the potential for many different play experiences, and also expands what players can do with their Omens, which are normally used for dealing maximum damage or retrying a roll. Johnson described a session where a player used a Portent card to turn certain death into a dramatically-paced survival story. “It was something that would never have come into the game otherwise,” Johnson said. “It made the session much more epic than it would have been.”


Each card in the deck has its own illustration, which tend to be more colorful than the base game's black-and-white (and yellow) horrors. Skeletons peer out from behind masks with pink-tinted muscle in their faces; regular human faces have purples and blues that feel off, suggesting mold, disease or just ill humor. The brightly colored cards lean into a more vibrant but no less unsettling feeling than vanilla *MÖRK BORG* gives you, with gels with the expansion's intention: to explode basic gameplay with over-the-top, grotesque style.

The physical nature of the decks, as well as their varied contents, appealed to Johnson's style of workflow. “During any given work session, I might draw the art for a card, run a packaging test through my Cricut and jot down some ideas, only to end by messing around with some clay. It's a balancing act of focusing on the different stages while still being open to explore.” In addition to the four decks, the set includes a four-sided die and an .STL file of a 3D hand sculpture designed by Steven James Taylor.

While Johnson produced much of the material for *Portents* alone, he never lost sight of the OSR community that was behind him. Now, he hopes this project will be the first of many. “It feels really good – almost like a homecoming – to finally contribute back to a community that has given me so much over the decades.”



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The [Kickstarter for Portents of the Degloved Hand](#) launches on April 5.  
For further updates, you can follow along on the  
[Raven Portents site](#) and [Instagram](#). 



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## Illustrations

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