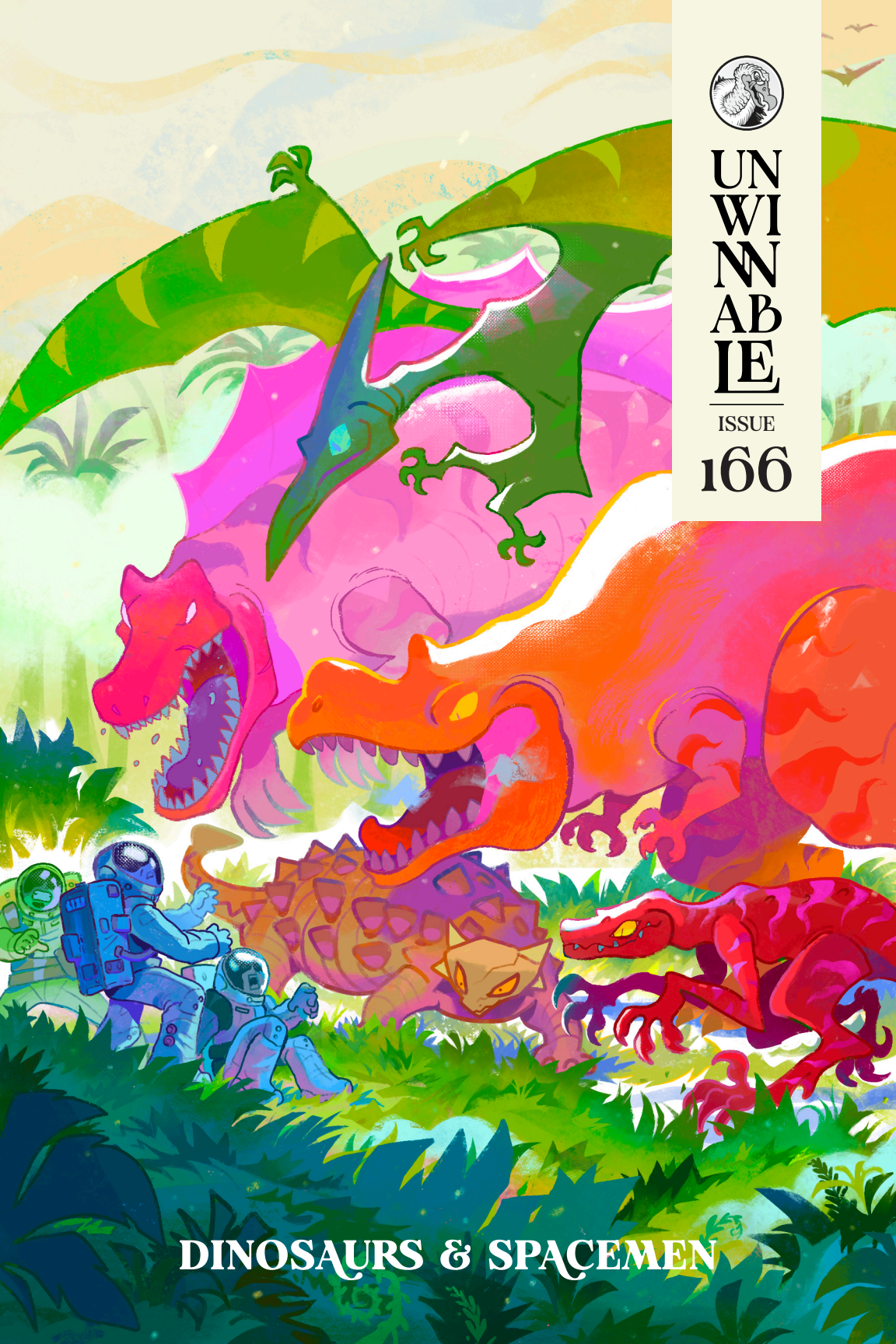

UNWINNABLE

ISSUE 166

DINOSAURS & SPACEMEN

welcome to ***volume ten, issue eight*** *of*

UNWINNABLE

magazine

DAVID SHIMOMURA BEN SAILER OLUWATAYO ADEWOLE EMILY PRICE AMANDA HUDGINS MADDI CHILTON DR. EMMA KOSTOPOULOS PHOENIX SIMMS STU HORVATH MATT MARRONE NOAH SPRINGER JUSTIN REEVE ROB RICH

This Machine Kills Fascists

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Dear Reader,

Do you smell that? That's the smell of a fully loaded, hot and ready PDF of your favorite columnists and features coming directly to you from the hardest working commie cesspool this side of Mars. Why? Because we love you.

In this month's cover feature (cover art by Alan Cortes) is a fellow David, David Busboom, on the greatest genre of all time, in any context. Honestly, I've been rearranging my entire personality around this since I read it. Also, this month, Holly Boson on the unique quality of the absolutely delirious dream soundtracks of *Hypnospace Outlaw* and *Slayers X: Terminal Aftermath: Vengance of the Slayer.*

For this month's Funeral Rites, brought to you by Exalted Funeral, is about bugs and dead things ewwwww.

Now, onto our regular rogues! Tayo takes us back to 1982. Everyone say "Hi!" to Tayo who I just got to say "Hi!" to in London this last week! Maddi Chilton builds out thoughts on Arkady Martine's latest novella, *Rose/House.* Stu Horvath is on about music again. Amanda Hudgins talks about family, the kind that kills for each other. Emma Kostopolus summons the Slenderman. Matt Marrone joins an elite club. Emily Price touches grass. Justin Reeve gets lost in Los Santos. Rob Rich does something everyone should do. Ben Sailer does something nu. Phoenix Simms continues to delve into the fae. Noah Springer reads books, with pictures!

See you all in a few weeks in Exploits!

Be good to yourselves, kind to others, and remember industrial action and strikes are great, actually. Also, a very great congratulations to our readers in Ohio for refusing to let their vote be diluted.

David Shimomura
Chicago, Illinois
August 13, 2023

NOISE COMPLAINT | **BEN SAILER**

NU-METAL MIGHT BE GOOD, ACTUALLY?

30 seconds after I put The Dillinger Escape Plan's *Calculating Infinity* into my CD player, nu-metal was dead to me. That's around the point on opening track "Sugar Coated Sour" where guitarist Ben Weinman launches into a shredding solo that infuses free jazz into the band's blend of hardcore, death metal and math rock. By the time the track cleared its 2:24 runtime, my expectations for heavy music had been permanently reset. I'd been leaning away from my Korn and Mudvayne albums more and more, and that was the final nail in that particular coffin.

It wasn't just the band's technical chops that turned them into an obsession. They had swagger and a take-no-shit attitude but without the meatheaded tough guy posturing of the more ignorant ends of hardcore and metal. Tales of unhinged live shows (which, by the time the band called it quits in 2017, had left Weinman with a laundry list of performance-related injuries) were proven accurate when I was able to see them in my senior year of high school. There were no fire breathing antics nor wild fights or crumbling ceilings, but the sheer intensity they brought to a packed crowd in a 200-capacity room remains almost unmatched by anyone else I've seen.

Back in the early 2000s, I wasn't alone in my search for heavy music that went beyond nu-metal's tired cliches of simplistic riffing and directionless angst. Guitar magazines started hailing "screamo" (a label worthy of

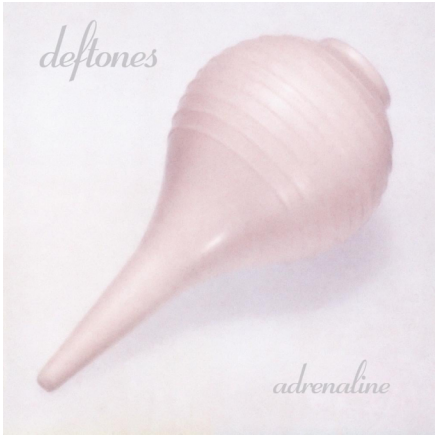
a column unto itself) as the future, and by the mid-2000s, nu-metal had become almost completely passe. Whether or not nu metal ever actually died out is a matter of subjective opinion, but its cultural significance had mostly dissipated.

Everything comes back around eventually, but nu-metal, I thought, was almost certainly destined to stay gone. It felt so much like a product of its time that there could be no way it'd age well, and unlike something such as, say, hair metal, it couldn't even coast on being fun. As file sharing (and later streaming) made it easier to access more music, kids looking for an outlet had less need to rely on whatever heavy bands were readily accessible through the radio or mainstream rock press. Nu-metal seemed like an improbable genre borne out of a specific set of circumstances that could never come together again and it didn't seem like anything that'd ever retain much retro appeal.

If hearing The Dillinger Escape Plan for the first time confirmed my suspicion that nu-metal sucked and there was better stuff out there, seeing a cover band playing Korn songs at a VFW bar a couple summers ago also disproved my theory that it was dead. It wasn't the fact that bands like Korn still had an audience that came as a shock, but the fact that a cover band was playing those songs in a VFW bar of all places was a sign that the genre had essentially entered its classic rock phase. Metalcore (using that term as loosely as possible) didn't kill nu-metal any more than grunge killed hair metal.

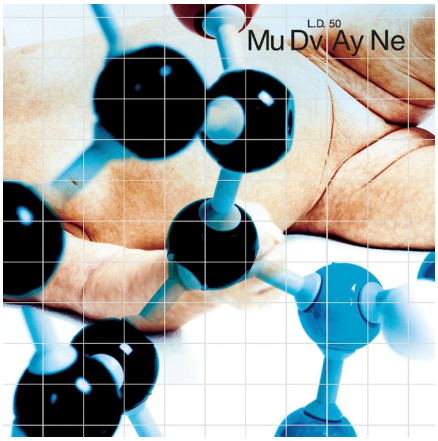
I don't remember exactly what I said to a friend I was with at the bar that night, but it was something to the effect that this band was beyond embarrassing. That there should have been no way grown ass adults would show up at a dive bar with seven-string guitars and unironically play "Falling Away From Me" in a fucking VFW. Read the room!

My friend responded (correctly) that there was a judgmental tone to what I was saying that probably wasn't entirely fair (and in a lot of ways was absolutely hypocritical). My wife and I had just been talking about how we spent the afternoon driving around town blasting System of a Down and remembering how some (emphasis on some) of that band's classics still held up. So, why the hell shouldn't a cover band play Korn? No one was going to argue that they were good per se, nor that it didn't feel like a joke. But that wasn't the point. The point was I had no place trying to put myself on a pedestal above them when I had no real grounds to do so.



It isn't just old heads who can't let go that are carrying the nu-metal torch. Rather, there's been several recent waves of bands borrowing influence from nu-metal, free from the stigma that had long surrounded the much-maligned genre. Code Orange introduced some light nu-metal influences on their second record *I Am King* in 2014 and they've responded to criticism by leaning into those influences even harder on subsequent records. Vein.fm's 2018 debut full-length *Errorzone* boldly blended elements of

the same sort of chaos that the Dillinger Escape Plan trailblazed with overt nu metal influences. Neither is an anomaly either in the way they mix nu-metal with metallic hardcore; if ex-nu-metal kids in the early 2000s left the genre's baggage behind for hardcore, it seems like hardcore kids today don't view it with the same stigma.



Nu-metal's low-key longevity shouldn't be that hard to understand. Relative to other forms of metal, it generally has a low barrier for entry in terms of technical skill, making it easily accessible both as a musician and as a listener for younger kids. While the genre became bloated and derivative, at its peak, it prized innovation and pushing the boundaries of what guitars could do through lowered tunings and effects pedals. Not all nu-metal bands were as intellectually brain-dead as the genre's stereotypes. Mudvayne's 2000 debut *L.D. 50* was heavily inspired by *2001: A Space Odyssey,* the Deftones Chino Moreno has always been a bit more poetic than, say, Fred Durst, and System of a Down's debut record might have been the first album I ever bought with explanations for some of its explicitly political lyrics.

I still love the Deftones and I can admit System of a Down are still fun, so who am I, really, to judge anyone for playing Korn covers? Before I heard *Calculating Infinity, L.D. 50* was my personal high-water mark for boundary-pushing heavy music. Its relatively progressive song structures and sci-fi themes stood out from most of the rest of their peers back in 2000. I'd mostly forgotten about them until I saw they're now playing their first headline tour in 14 years, and contrary to what I would have once assumed would be the case, they aren't hitting the state fair circuit and nor are they probably playing exclusively to dudes over 40. And after revisiting *L.D. 50* for the first time since high school, its aged better than I would have expected too. I might have thought I was done with nu-metal, but nu-metal might not be done with me yet.

RUN IT BACK | **OLUWATAYO ADEWOLE**

1982

This month, it's time to get our Forces on and step on over to 1982 to discuss two films which tell the stories of a Black relationship on each side of the Atlantic.

In Kathleen Collins' *Losing Ground,* we follow college professor Sara (Seret Scott) and her husband Victor (Bill Gunn) and see their vision for the future of themselves and their relationships strain as they go on holiday during the summer to a leafy mansion in the country. Fellow Black trailblazer Menelik Shabazz's film *Burning an Illusion* also covers a straining Black couple, this time with Pat (Cassie McFarlane) and Del (Victor Romero) dealing with the realities of being young, Black and in love in Thatcherite London.

In some ways Black Love has become marketing, something that can be attached to hashtags, put on t-shirts and covered in softly lit talking head documentaries. That marketing flattens complex realities and produces the idea that heterosexual individualized Black love can function as a sort of panacea. Where these two films find their success is in complicating these relationships and therefore showing their central characters as real full people not product, showing the sharp corners and complicated realities of what it means to be Black and in love, and how this kind of love doesn't exist outside of broader societal power and pressures.

At the core of both of these films is an understanding of the complexities of gendered power. In *Losing Ground* both halves of the central couple who drift away from each other, but it is Victor who is brazen and pushy with his attempted muse. In Shabazz's film it is Del's hand that brings the physical violence, to the relationship. Patriarchy pierces through perceived protective bubble and makes the lives of these women worse.

However, the misogynistic and sometimes violent behavior of these men is never shown to emerge from nowhere, or worse still some inherent component of Black masculinity. Instead, it is specifically situated within their individual personalities and broader structures. With Del, he feels disempowered by racism and reaches for the

power he can exert – patriarchy. There's a sort of petulance to Evans' performance which shows the pathetic grasping nature of his violence. And yet we are never allowed to forget that this male petulance can have serious violent outcomes.

Bill Gunn's incredible performance as Victor really emphasizes petulance as well. He showboats when he dances, he openly argues of a woman who isn't even dating him, his head is constantly in the clouds and far away from his wife's emotions. Yet Collins' portrayal is still empathetic and constricts this as emerging from a deep emotional dissatisfaction. He is desperately seeking a life where he can make art that clicks, that he believes in, that he is satisfied by, where he can find the inspiration that finally fixes things. So, until he gets that he will throw his toys out of the pram and onto to the head of his wife. He'll break sandcastles, he'll push boundaries, he'll be a nuisance in the lives of everyone around him till he gets there. And the beautiful tragedy of it all as constructed by Collins is that Sara is also asking many of the same questions in her own search for ecstasy and meaning.

Having these complicated dynamics brought through by the range of all the actors involved, means that we don't submit to a shallow understanding of Black liberation in which Black women are expected to ignore patriarchal violence for the sake of an abstract greater good. Here both films clearly draw on the work and discussions happening contemporaneously in Black feminism pushed by thinkers/activists like Olive Morris (who died a few years before the film was made) and Audre Lorde.

Love can't solve everything either. The external is always there. The trial judge who refuses to reduce Del's sentence does not budge just because he and Pat are in love with each other. Love alone cannot reconcile the fundamental differences at the core of Kathleen Collins' delicately crafted characters. Love can't block the bullet which embeds itself in Pat's leg.

Crucially the conclusion here isn't that Black love (in whatever form that takes) isn't worth it. Where Pat is able to find herself is in a radical political education and sisterhood with other Black women. It's that's sort of community which means that even when

Pat is shot by racists, she is able to be supported and have her people keep her going. There's no greater love to be found than that. That can't be found in the halls of the upstate quasi-gothic mansion which Victor is convinced will be his salvation.

The most emotionally resonant moment in *Burning an Illusion* (and certainly the most sensitive acting work from McFarlane) comes towards the end. Pat spots a worse-for-wear man on the street whose previous presence in the film had been as a menace who would persistently catcall her. He doesn't remember her – or pretends not to. She offers him a pamphlet for her organization and some resources to get him some help. He refuses the pamphlet and walks away.

It's the ultimate demonstration of the ideas of love and empowerment streaming through. Love and solidarity allows Pat to finally engage him on her own terms. And it doesn't work! Because even radical Black love is no panacea. But it's worth trying and it's worth fighting for.

PAST PRESENCE | **EMILY PRICE**

OBJECT LESSONS #1: FIELD

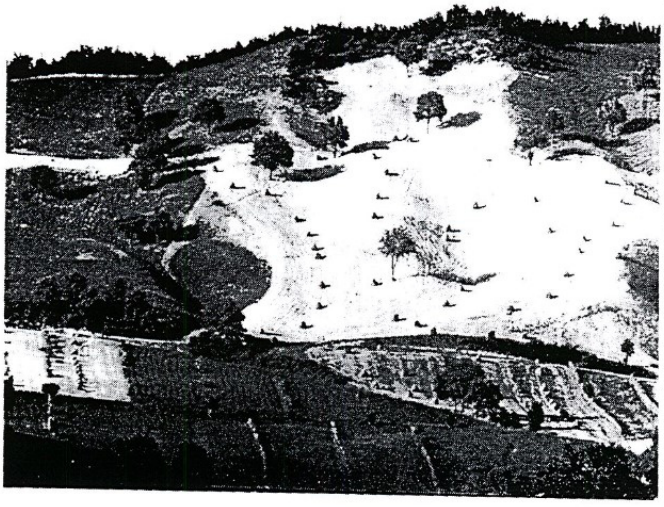
I've been writing this column for a year and a half now. That's not such a long time, but lately I've been feeling it's gotten a little unfocused, like a spiral maze someone got tired of constructing. Therefore, I want to get back to basics for the next couple months by running a sub-column where I consider a specific object, very closely, and think about how it shows up in videogames. To start us off, this month I'm writing about fields: the prototypical open spaces, digital and otherwise.

Art critic and novelist John Berger wrote an essay about the field next to his house, which he crossed occasionally to catch the train. Why, he asks, does he only cross the field when the other path is closed, despite loving it so much? His answer is that the field is a container for things to happen where "an experience of disinterested observation opens in its center."

Berger goes on to describe what makes the ideal field for this emotion. Most importantly, it must have a boundary, "yet within the area there should be a minimum of order, a minimum of planned events." This quality allows him to then talk about the progressive growth of attention: "Often the first experience which fixes your attention is more obvious than the subsequent ones. Having noticed the dog, you notice the butterfly."

Turnfollow's newest game *Before the Green Moon* interprets the field in a way that Berger might appreciate. As an explorer waiting to go to the moon on the next cycle of visitors, you have to plant a few crops every day and spend the rest of your time wandering around the neighborhood constructed under the astronauts' base. There's your house, your neighbors' houses and a mountaintop, as well as a lake for fishing and several roads. But there are other areas I spent minutes rummaging around failing to find their purpose.

For example, there's a field at the top of the map that serves as a hallway between your farm and the elevator going up to the spaceship. Apart from one other person and some ruins, it's made up of a bunch of tall grass, which you can get lost behind. At least



to the point that I've made it, there are no secrets in that grass. The field itself bleeds into a canyon and a group of pine trees, to the point that I almost feel uncomfortable calling it a field at all, but there's not a good name for it otherwise. The question then becomes what the purpose of the space is: here, to elaborate the possibility (not realized) of secret items and give you a few real discoveries (the presence of a cave, the way the grass looks as the light changes) to keep with you as you explore around.

Fields are, first of all, unremarkable. Unnamed fields in games are numerous, from the dry grasses of *Red Dead Redemption*'s valleys or the world map green squares of *Final Fantasy* or *Dragon Quest*. They are qualityless to the point that a green field is its own kind of "zone," in contrast to the fire area, the desert area, the frost area, et cetera. (Another quality Berger requires for the field to evoke attention is that it must not be winter.) The field is defined by what it doesn't contain: serious danger, elemental qualities.

Of course, with games specifically the word has another meaning: field of vision refers to "the extent of the game world that is seen on display at any given moment" (thanks Wikipedia for that definition). And there are literal fields built on this abstract field concept, where you're always constantly aware that what you're seeing isn't the full picture.

This is exemplified by the most famous of the famous game fields, *Breath of the Wild*'s Hyrule Field, which made the previous contender for most famous of the famous fields *(Ocarina of Time)* feel compact and even simple. *BOTW*'s environments have many of the qualities Berger ascribes to the field. They are stages where two stimuli come together (a monster frightens a deer; a digital butterfly bounces off your retinas). They have the actual potential for things to happen at any time. Even when you know the range of what those things can be, and even on occasions when those things don't happen, the possibility makes every new location more exciting to be in. In fact, the Great Plateau is even more of a Hyrule field than the field itself is, if the field is usually a place to learn how this iteration

of the world works (and if it needs to have extremely well-defined borders). In this light, every location is an extension of the plateau's explorative possibility, while the field's own possibility is reserved (thanks to Guardians) for most people until the very end of the game.

In turn, *Tears of the Kingdom* superseded its predecessor, returning Hyrule Field to an unexpected, unmoderated expanse. It's once again the first or second area you encounter, and whether or not you choose to stay, it impacts your expectation for the rest of the game's areas to be just as dense as the first. At the same time, the field is full of challenges ranging from beginner (find a man's horse) to seemingly expert (explore the bottomless pit). It contains the first comforting town you see and is neighbors with the scariest interior, the castle.

In contrast, *Twilight Princess*'s Hyrule Field is notoriously empty. Quintin O'Connor recently called it "negative space," more of a wheel with spokes that lead you to a destination than an attraction in itself. Youtuber Any Austin describes it as "very small but bigger." It certainly has clearer boundaries than BOTW's Hyrule Field does, either invisible walls or visible bottomless gorges. The recent surge of interest in *Twilight Princess*'s interpretation of the space is probably down to hype pre-release of *Tears of the Kingdom*. But both these pieces answer the question of why it works for some people even post-*Breath of the Wild* sea change in the same way. Both of them describe it as a place that leads to other things, not encountered purposefully, not a place where "anything could happen" but a place where very little does.

"At first I referred to the field as a space awaiting events," Berger writes. "Now I refer to it as an event in itself. But this inconsistency parallels exactly the apparently illogical nature of the experience."

While I was looking at opinions on Hyrule's most central space I came across Tevis Thompson's blog post, "Saving Zelda". Its central argument (every Zelda since the first has been on a downward trajectory) is demonstrated through a series of desirable premises from the first few games that the author hopes will return: unmarked bombable walls, for example, are a source for player creativity rather than frustrated repetition. I disagree, and anyway the essay almost prophetically predicts *Breath of the Wild,* which solved the linearity problem it discusses. However, the essay's argument against puzzle-box spaces concludes with this note: "A world is more than a space, more than a place; it is something to

inhabit and be inhabited by. What you infuse a space with to make it habitable, to make it memorable (since memory is profoundly spatial), gives the place its character, its soul."

Are fields a stage for action to take place on, or are they the action themselves? I'm most partial to the third option, the *Twilight Princess* approach, and the one Berger introduces only to discard in favor of field-as-event. Empty-ish fields make obvious the absence of a visual puzzle or a designed set piece. You're forced to find ever-smaller pieces of the landscape to pay attention to. This isn't to say I find these fields the most interesting to inhabit, but conceptually they're the most interesting to me. They're the places where the player has to realize that the qualities the landscape does have aren't puzzles or rewards, but flourishes designed to make the space feel real. Sometimes, real is boring, or empty.

Fields in games are manufactured in that they're built to mirror real spaces and in that (like real world fields) they're defined by what's outside them. Sometimes this means they become the background to more interesting things, sometimes they introduce events that link with the space, and sometimes they do nothing at all. And as much as I want a worthwhile experience when I play, as much as I like always understanding what a space is trying to get me to do, spaces with no clear purpose make me pause and find the answer to why I'm there for myself.

SELF INSERT | **AMANDA HUDGINS**

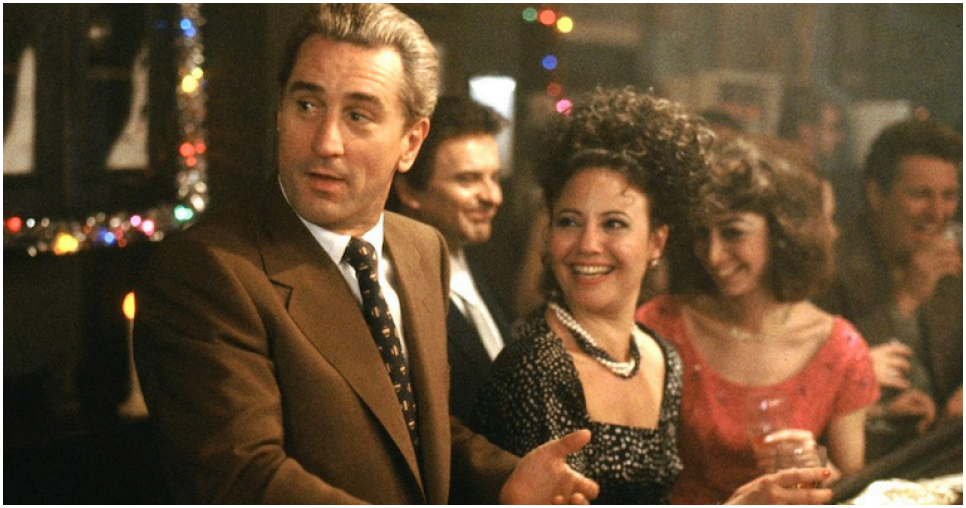
MAFIA

There are a few classics in fandom alternative universes that almost every fandom will see in a fic at least once. The coffee shop AU. Tattoo shop. Regency era if there is even a hint of romance. But the likeliest is, by far, the Mafia AU. Mafia AU's takes the Cullens from Twilight and re-imagines them as hitmen and crime families that work in seedy back rooms, drink dark liquor from expensive glasses and absolutely spoil their paramours while covered in blood. Bonus points for a knife to the neck, a *Casino Royale*-esque scene where a man in a suit cleans blood off his lover, or a threatening posture taken for a perceived slight.

The show *KinnPorsche* is probably the best example of the mafia alternative universe aesthetic. Everyone is beautiful and darkly dressed and prone to drinking and smoking in dark rooms and their actual criminal engagement is mostly an excuse for guns and knives. It also strikes to the heart of one of the biggest subversions of the mafia AU compared to real life crime families – they're frequently queer as hell. Heterosexual pairings on the subgenre tend to take a fairly toxic masculinity stance (man protect, woman faint), but a lot of fanfiction is queer, so instead you see one of the members of Exo punching a member of GOT7 for daring to hit on his boyfriend (another member of Exo). Is this toxic masculinity? Yes, of course it is. But pretty boys sleeping with each other while occasionally licking blood off a knife is pretty far removed from the actual horrors or reality of real-life crime.

Despite its extreme prevalence, the mafia AU has its detractors. There's a famous copypasta that hits to some of the arguments about it:

> IF YOU'RE NOT ITALIAN AND YOU'RE NOT EDUCATED ON WHAT MAFIA ACTUALLY IS U HAVE NO RIGHTS TO SPEAK OVER US! MAFIA IS NOT A GENRE TO USE FOR YOUR EDITS OR FANFICS IT'S A REAL CRUEL TERRIBLE ISSUE. SO IF AN ITALIAN PERSON TELLS U IT'S NOT OKAY TO DO THAT U SHOULD NOT SPEAK OVER THEM



But real-life Cosa Nostra is not what people are engaging with in the mafia takes on *Attack on Titan* or *Supernatural*. It's a game of visual telephone. The aesthetics of Scorsese films like *Goodfellas* twisted over decades and seen through media incarnation after media incarnation to effectively hide the reality of the situation. These works don't typically deal in heavier topics, or if they do, it's with such a wildly out of left field perspective on crime that it becomes clear that the writer has never engaged in either criminal enterprise or the criminal justice system at all. It's a Western teenage perspective on "samurai" honor, typically hyper-violent with an implication of duty. It's romanticized violence, dark romance, with a touch of found family. Your mileage may vary.

The idea that romanticization is a one-to-one direct endorsement is a, frankly, slippery slope that I'm not interested in falling down. There is an argument that good fiction should exist in a well-developed reality, one that at least is internally consistent, but mafia AU's tend to read more like high fantasy where the magic is not dying and there is endless gold, and less tied to the reality of criminal enterprise – drugs and sex trafficking.

The counter is a clear "fiction as escapism," wherein the reality of crime and the mafia in specific is one of terror and hyper-masculinity, while in practice the execution tends to still hold elements of that hyper-masculinity, but with a fixation on leather and guns. It's a BDSM-AU with more violence and a heavier societal weight.

MIND PALACES | **MADDI CHILTON**

ARCHITECTURAL INTENT

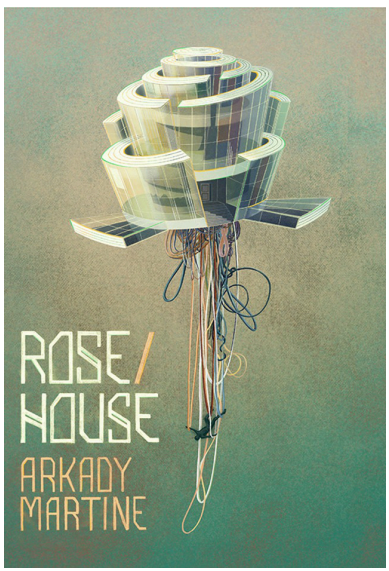
The premise of Arkady Martine's *Rose/House* is a haunting. Not a ghostly one – nothing supernatural is involved – but nonetheless a specter of the dead continuing to leave fingerprints, affecting the world it used to inhabit. And like all good hauntings, of course, it needs a house. Therein lies the problem.

Here is the rough plot of the book: Rose House, the masterpiece of the architect Basit Deniau, has been locked up since his death. The exception is his executor, Selene Gisil, a former student who hates him, who is allowed one week a year in his archives. A dead body appears on the premises, impossibly. Rose House informs the local police department, due to some Asimov's law-type strictures baked into its codes, and then spends the rest of the book intentionally impeding the investigation, occasionally quipping and threatening in a manner unconvincing from a system we're supposed to believe can be genuinely manipulated by logical loopholes. At some point within the 150 pages there is somehow time for a subplot about the detective's partner, a shady journalist, some questionable art dealers and, bizarrely, the Andorran government. Gisil stays reticent and unhelpful; Maritza Smith of the China Lake Police Precinct tries gamely to solve her murder mystery.

Part of the reason *Rose/House* struggles is that for a book that is nominally about the hubristic imaginings of a genius architect, it seems to have no actual interest in architecture. The descriptions of the house itself stay frustratingly vague, tending towards the non-Euclidian in the tradition of House of Leaves – but where *House of Leaves'* house-turned-labyrinth was implied to be almost an organic phenomenon, self-perpetuating and expansive, Rose House is supposed to be intentional. The design is the point; everything about the building of Deniau's myth leads us to believe that it is his work, his art and his creative process that leads to the genius and remarkable nature of Rose House. We are told this, however, but not shown it, and in fact as the book progresses it seems more like Rose House's uniqueness is not in the *architecture* at all but in the AI that lives within it, the one that talks and schemes and protects what is left of Deniau's mortal form

long after his death. We are told that Rose House and the AI referred to as Rose House are one and the same, but in practice they are meaningfully different – Rose House the AI can control the functions of Rose House the building, but it still relies on nanobots in order to manifest itself physically (which one would think would not be necessary were the house *itself* its physical form), and the art dealers whose attempted theft makes up one of the more important subplots are attempting to steal *not,* importantly, the blueprints of the house itself, but the algorithms that gave it life – attempting to replicate the AI, which is *not* the house.

The irrelevance of the house itself to *Rose/House* is at odds with the theme it seems interested in exploring, that of the symbiotic relationship between architect and architecture, and between architecture and inhabitant. What relationship does the occupant of a space have with the space itself? Can architecture influence action? The haunting, as *Rose/House* seems to present it, has to do with the danger within the house itself, where visitors are necessarily at the AI's mercy – but by falling back on the internal mechanism of an artificial intelligence, the question that was initially asked about the role of *architecture* is being ignored. It ignores the traditional approach of genre predecessors like *The Haunting of Hill House* – where the house's simple existence, its inhumanity and still its ability to influence and torment its occupants, is the source of horror – and also shows a lack of interest in engaging with the theories of social architecture, how built space affects the people within it, a topic that has been written on for decades.



The cover of the book brings to mind another story with similar thematic interests. *Rose/House* as depicted in this artwork – not, mind, how it's actually described in the story – is a prismatic glass rose, beautiful and surreal. The Polyhedron in the *Pathologic* games is almost identical: it rises above the town where it was built like a spindle, impossibly, in defiance of geometry and gravity. The Polyhedron, too, is an exercise in architectural hubris, that nearly destroyed the architects that built it and unknowingly condemned the town to plague and despair. Instead of the isolated, claustrophobic insularity of Rose House, though, the Polyhedron is actively inhabited, and its influence spreads outward into the community where it was built instead of being restricted to within its walls. *Pathologic* recognizes the power of monumental architecture and uses it to show how the Polyhedron stretches its fingers out through the community that looks up to it; *Rose/House,* on the other hand, seems to understand that residential architecture directs and effects the people that live within it, but expresses that as "the house can talk and tell people what to do" instead of exploring the deeper, more complicated approaches to that theme.

On one hand, *Rose/House* is a compelling idea, and a fresh take on the haunted house genre. It crosses through genre carelessly, and Martine's ability to clearly and vividly craft a plausible sci-fi world is on full display. Deniau's character, at his baseline, is engaging – European Frank Lloyd Wright, basically, mercurial and widely lauded and emphatically unlikable – and Rose House's loyalty and affection towards him even in death is satisfying uncomfortable. But it's hard not to read the vagaries of the book as lack of interest, and frustrating to see a talented author seemingly so lost as to the actual story they were writing. Like Rose House itself, we've been told that the design is intentional, but it just doesn't seem entirely convincing.

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

WE CAN'T GET OUT WITHOUT TALKING ABOUT SLENDERMAN

When you think about horror games, and the things that rise up from the mire of the internet to become the stuff of 21st-century legend, you cannot avoid, nay, are compelled, to talk about Slenderman. Born of a 2009 creepypasta and culminating in the 2014 violent assault of a twelve-year-old girl by two classmates, Slenderman was largely responsible for a digital Satanic Panic in miniature. Parents of young folks (and some of said young folk were my peers, as someone who graduated high school in 2011), flew into a tizzy over whether or not their children were accessing the specific dark corners of the internet where Slenderman lived.

Frankly, remembering my time on the internet circa 2012, Slenderman was hard to avoid even if you weren't particularly interested in him – he had a stranglehold on Tumblr and Reddit, and the sort of meta-fanfiction that happens when home content creation goes viral was omnipresent. Everyone, it seemed, wanted to contribute to the Slenderlore™. Enter *Slender: The Eight Pages,* a first-person survival horror game that launched in June of 2012. The game was created by an indie developer in Unity and released by Parsec Productions, the company headed and solely operated by the developer who made the game. I tell you all of this to establish both the incredible indie cred of this piece of work and to further cement the idea that Slenderman was a phenomenon that grabbed hold of the minds of the internet and simply would not let go.

The gameplay of *Slender: The Eight Pages* is simple – you wander a dark and endless forest, attempting to find pages from a book without being caught by the titular Slenderman. The general sense of anxiety that the game provokes in the player keeps it from seeming too repetitive and distracts from the low-quality graphics, though critics disagree on that front. The game is ultimately a very simple tribute to the cult figure that, at that point, ruled the internet with a creepily long-fingered fist.

So why devote a whole column to this game and the larger media presence of Slenderman? Well, for several reasons. First, I think this topic dovetails in nicely with my column from a few months ago about the SCP Foundation lore, and how the global haunted house of the internet can lead us into interesting play and narrative spaces in terms of horror. But also because Slenderman speaks to a particular style of information dissemination on the internet that has always existed, but has become increasingly concerning with the rise of white nationalist groups in forums everywhere that will allow them.

Part of the reason why Slenderman got as big as he did is because of the ways in which the internet allows for near-instantaneous circulation of a narrative, with people adding bits on or taking bits off every time they blog or repost. While comparing internet horror stories to the January 6th insurrection attempt may seem like a stretch, they operate under the same basic mechanism: See a thing that tickles a part of your brain, recirculate it to your internet acquaintances, watch it grow out of all control. And as the introduction to this column points out, the Slenderman myth did lead to acts of violence when people who had a particularly hard time discerning reality got ahold of the story – the comparisons begin to write themselves here.

So, I guess in a way Slenderman, his videogame and all of his associated mythos are somewhat of a cautionary tale about the perils of internet content, where everyone can be an author and credible editors are in relatively short supply. Back in the early days of Web 2.0, the internet was a lawless place, where everyone had to suss out credible content for themselves. And now, an entire decade later, the situation has not much improved, with late-adopters of social media technology left well behind on the curve of digital literacy (here's looking at you, all my uncles on Facebook). So, while the myth of the Slenderman may seem a harmless thing in itself, it speaks to a much larger and more damaging phenomenon that comes part and parcel, maybe unavoidably so, with the memes we all consume daily.

So, okay, this one wasn't really about videogames. But I do think that thinking about Slenderman as a test case in the fight for increased digital literacy can be illuminating. Perhaps this can prompt some slightly more critical consumption not just of the media we automatically think of as "art," but of the smaller stuff, too – creepypastas, chat forums, etc. It all ends up in our brains the same, and the brain is generally very bad at sorting out credible data from non-credible data, so its up to us to monitor and be skeptical about what we consume.

INTERLINKED | **PHOENIX SIMMS**

SQUALL IS EXTRADIMENSIONAL

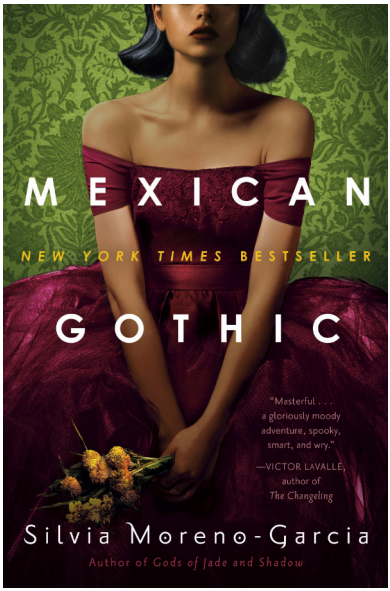
So…I may be trapped in the faerie realm. While I'm here indefinitely I will take advantage of the strange time loop I'm caught in and talk about a moment that dovetails somewhat with my last dispatch.

There's a moment that encapsulates the same uncanny feeling *Déraciné* is suffused with – of being felt but not perceived – in *Final Fantasy VIII* (hereafter *FFVIII).* While it's not necessarily the most straightforward of its series, *FFVIII*'s narrative involves a possible time loop and time travel (don't get me started on the Squall is Dead and Rinoa is Ultimecia theories).Throughout the gameplay you switch perspectives and time periods with Laguna Loire, a playable protagonist who has a sort of psychic connection with the main player character Squall. At first Squall and his chosen party members during these sequences are merely observers. But eventually Laguna starts to notice he has a heightened sense of his environment and is more successful in combat whenever Squall and co. are present.

In other more meta terms, Laguna is somewhat aware that the game has switched perspectives from Squall to his. He refers more than once to the player's unseen presence as faeries. This is a strong game memory for me precisely because it communicated the idea of the player as an unseen but felt presence giving input so strongly. In *Déraciné,* the way this concept is communicated is via the way that the fae can directly affect time and space, freezing each scene into a tableau vivant before interacting with people or their possessions (both physical and metaphysical). As for *FFVIII,* it shares with *Déraciné* the incorporeality of a fae presence, as Laguna is only aware of the SeeD trainees presence through a deep sense of intuition.

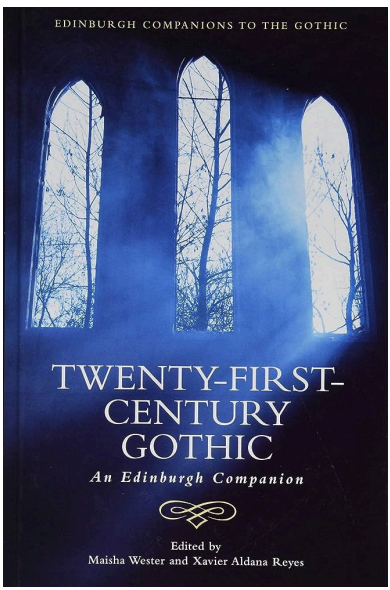
When he finally meets with Squall and his party in-person late in the game he describes the experience as, "it was like there were some kind of waves running through my head. They gave us so much power during battle. We thought they were some kind of faeries flying over us." As the quote suggests, there does seem to be a sim-

ilar awareness shared by Laguna's fellow soldiers and friends Kiros and Ward. The reason there's a connection between Laguna's mind and Squall's is explained albeit vaguely via Ellone, an orphan like Squall who is revealed to be his older step-sister and a powerful sorceress.



Ellone has the ability to send people's consciousnesses to the past or the future. She can also link with people's consciousnesses telepathically, a process she calls (in a rather charming Y2K era fashion) "connecting" and "disconnecting". When she's connected with a person's consciousness more than once she can also send a person's consciousness into someone else's mind. No matter where or when they are. The person who receives that consciousness will not be fully cognizant of that presence, but as mentioned above, will intuitively know someone or something is there.

What this makes me think of is how people often characterize new technologies of connection in miraculous terms. Especially technologies that facilitate social connection across time and space. The telegram, the phone, dial-up and wireless internet, etc. All of these technologies feel both intuitive and mystical. Intuitive in that humans love to find ever more ways to connect with one another near and far, mystical in that humans are pattern- and meaning-making creatures and that which is unseen yet acts upon us anyway feels powerful. Sometimes even ominous.

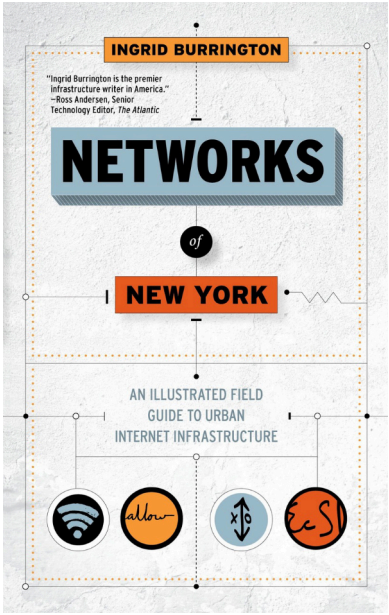


Brooklyn writer and artist Ingrid Burrington's work, like *Networks of New York: An Illustrated Field Guide to Urban Internet Infrastructure,* often critiques this notion of technology being ethereal and difficult to comprehend. She does this by explicitly mapping out the physical networks of the internet in her area and educating locals on how to make their own maps and read their environment to gain greater internet literacy and knowledge. Burrington also likes to physically represent the marketing jargon of the internet age in her art, like "the cloud", which often paints the internet and its processes with a thick coat of obscurity, presenting it as ephemeral and esoteric.

This language and its attendant imagery are deliberate of course, Burrington asserts, meant to keep laypeople at the mercy of the experts at the corporations that provide us with our essential everyday technology. In short, hiding the processes of the internet is about gatekeeping. And such gatekeeping is connected to a long-standing history of colonial narratives about who gets to be in control of land and resources and who is privileged enough to have a more embodied connection to technology and computation.

There's a concept important to EcoGothic literature that is related to the above power dynamics *FFVIII* and (tangentially) Burrington explore. Telesthesia. The term at its most sim-

plistic refers to extrasensory perception, similar to a sixth sense in that it doesn't discern information via any one traditional sensory organ, but different in one significant regard. According to Sharae Deckard, an associate professor in world literature at the University College Dublin in her overview of the EcoGothic genre in *Twenty-First Century Gothic: An Edinburgh Companion,* telesthesia is "the extension of perception beyond the normal range of the empirical senses **TO APPREHEND OTHER SITUATIONS IN TIME AND SPACE. TELESTHESIA CAN TELESCOPE MULTIPLE TEMPORALITIES**, capturing the way in which different moments of socio-ecological crisis over long historical periods are over-layered on fractured environments" (emphases mine).



Deckard's example of how telesthesia often occurs in EcoGothic media is Swamp Thing's ability to perceive and communicate with "all the forms of life across the Louisiana wetlands" and signify his "radical alterity of non-human nature." You might also associate telesthetic connection with how Will, Eleven and the beasties of *Stranger Things'* Upside Down have a connection that is entangled with both the environment in the present, past and future (albeit a warped version of those temporalities). In fiction, a further example still could be the Gloom, a supernatural mycorrhizzal network that members of a colonial-imperialist family exploit for their own nefarious ends in Silvia Moreno-Garcia's *Mexican Gothic.*

Telesthesia is a tricky thing to research the coining of because it's rooted in occultism and parapsychology. From what I can gather, however, the term was first used by F.W.H. Meyers, a British psychical researcher who included it in his two-volume work *Human Personality and Its Survival of Bodily Death*. The definition from *Human Personality*'s glossary differs somewhat from Deckard's EcoGothic take, but is essentially the same. Meyers' telesthesia consists of "any direct sensation or perception of objects or conditions independently of the recognized channels of sense, and also under such circumstances that no known mind external to the percipient's can

be suggested as the source of the knowledge thus gained."

While Ellone is not non-human, she is certainly more-than-human as a sorceress that can bend space and time to her will in a telesthetic way. And she isn't the only such being either in the game. Antagonists Edea, Adel and Ultimecia are also associated with time magic, although Ellone's powers of connection are unique and sought after by various forces in *FFVIII*'s world. Ultimecia, who wants to cast a spell known as Time Compression, which would effectively obliterate reality by allowing the sorceress to create a singularity of time and space in which only she exists and can recreate the universe according to her designs. But I'm getting off the rails a bit, so allow me to course correct.

What interests me about telesthesia and how it relates to Ellone, Laguna and Squall connecting psychically over time and space is that it's a way for *FFVIII*'s writers to reckon with the strangeness of early internet era socialization. Even if subtextually, *FFVIII* tackles how abstracted socialization was starting to become in the early internet era where everyday life was becoming increasingly more mediated by technology.

Think about what the protagonists of this game do or experience due to the technological advancements of their world: as teenage licensed SeeD mercenary operatives, they must take theory and field exams constantly to determine their rank (which affects their salary level). Squall and Seifer are the epitome of hustle culture within the SeeD system, to the point that they scar each other in battle trying to prove who's the best. Squall often feels dissociated from practically everyone and everything around him except his SeeD rank and missions. He feels this despite the eventual revelation that he and his classmates discover they all grew up in the same orphanage together, which was overseen by Edea before she became the antagonist they fight against in the present. The time paradoxes that Squall is a part of makes his world and its social network literally much smaller throughout the game. The protagonists are able to travel to space in a spaceship that's also a giant mecha and of course there's the above discussion of being able to telepathically link minds across space and time.

People often criticize the vagueness or heavily coincidental nature of the plot in *FFVIII,* especially with regards to the origin story of the orphanage. But in addition to this harkening back to earlier entries in the Final Fantasy series that centered a story around a group of orphans, if we think about such coincidences within a framework

of early internet networking, this plot point doesn't seem as absurd. If anything, this coincidence seems to me a deliberate decision to highlight how strange the world is when it's on the precipice of a new technological paradigm.

There's a third concept of telesthesia that I'd like to end off with, because I think it best explains why the faerie-like presence of Squall's connection to Laguna via Ellone still fascinates me. Mckenzie Wark, a media and culture studies professor at The New School and activist, posits that telesthesia has steadily become the way that people perceive and interact with the world. She describes telesthesia as a phenomenon made possible by technologies that connect us over long distances and "move information faster than the speed at which objects move" in physical space. Wark believes the capabilities of technologies like the telegram, telephone and smartphone and wireless internet to connect a mass amount of people and data has led social space to double or develop "a strange folded quality." We're living and interacting in our immediate physical environment but, simultaneously, we connect and interact with many minds in internet spaces we can access from practically everywhere in our physical environment.

When Ellone sends Squall's mind back in time to connect with Laguna's, it's at once a mystical act and a quotidian one. Even in 1999 dial-up internet kids like me had an inkling they'd performed a similar ritual before, but on a lesser scale. And when I read that Laguna knew Squall and his allies were there but felt that they were like faeries hovering in the ether unseen, wasn't that what early encounters on forums and instant chat services felt like? Like "some kind of waves running through" our heads, changing how we perceive our everyday lives. We are thoroughly disenchanted with the internet and social media now, but perhaps we could transform our relationship to these technologies if we commit to demystifying how they entranced us in the first place.

THE BURNT OFFERING | **STU HORVATH**

THE MUSIC AND THE DICE

Two hour and 44-minute companion playlist

1.

There are notable similarities between playing a tabletop roleplaying game and playing music in a band. In most cases, it takes a group (though solo play isn't out of the question) and the proceedings are collaborative. In Dungeons & Dragons, the Dungeon Master runs the game and serves as a sort of drummer, keeping the beat and drawing the game inexorably on, while the players, each in a unique role, contribute to the drama in a series of semi-mathematical causes and effects. There are solos and harmonies. And, like any live performance, its greatest power resides in the moment, experiencing the event as it happens. Describing the action after the fact, to someone absent from the heat and the press, always seems flat. Abstract.

2.

Iron Maiden was the first band I discovered that seemed to make music expressly for Dungeons & Dragons. This was in 1989, a propitious time to encounter the band, as the whole catalog of their heyday albums was already on store shelves. I was in 6th grade.

As a child reared on ghost stories and monster movies, there was little chance I wouldn't be drawn to heavy music, with its trappings of grim reapers and demons and spooky face paint. After a couple bleary-eyed Saturday nights watching *Headbanger's Ball* on MTV, I was trapped in the web. A friend let me dub his Metallica tapes (take that, Lars!) and I owned a legitimate copy of Guns N' Roses' *Appetite for Destruction,* an album that, thanks to all the cusswords and the lurid interior painting by Robert Williams, practically crackled with forbidden energies. Maiden sorta fit those newer bands, mostly in the surface aesthetics – Metallica's *Kill 'Em All* features a bloody hammer, *Appetite* has that Williams painting and Maiden's *Killers* is, well, called

Killers and features the immediate aftermath of an ax murder on the cover. But I fell in love with the *differences.*

Where most '80s metal is gloomy or driven by aggression and bad behavior, Maiden's music is bright and often triumphant; it wants to soar. And though hardly clean cut, Maiden stands apart from much of the debauchery that characterizes heavy music of the era. *Appetite for Destruction* features a song about a brand of fortified wine and moans recorded during a sexual encounter in a recording booth. Meanwhile, Maiden's primary songwriter, Steve Harris, draws inspiration from science fiction novels, horror movies, surreal British television programs and the poetry of Samuel Taylor Coleridge. The lads certainly got up to mischief, but that wasn't reflected in the nerdy content of their music (well, mostly – they've a trilogy of songs about a sex worker named Charlotte who eventually hooks up with a motorcycle-riding devil, but those seem quaint compared to even the tamest of Guns N' Roses songs).

Perhaps because of this literary wellspring, Maiden's music seemed to sync perfectly with Dungeons & Dragons (Gygax, after all, famously listed his favorite fantasy novels in Appendix N of the *Dungeon Masters Guide).* This isn't in the details – Maiden has no songs about fighting monsters and stealing their treasure – but resides entirely in the domain of *vibes.* The band's music captures the feeling of the game, the derring-do, the danger, the clash of swords. "Flash of the Blade" turns the frenzy of hand-to-hand combat in a laughing sort of riff, but more importantly, and unwittingly, it captures the true spirit of roleplaying games with its opening lyric: "As a young boy chasing dragons, with your wooden sword so mighty, you're St. George or you're David and you always killed the beast."

3.

It's easy to think of heavy metal as the cool older brother of Dungeons & Dragons. While the moniker was used earlier, "heavy metal" as we recognize it today coalesces in the opening chords of the song *"Black Sabbath,"* recorded in 1969 by the band Black

Sabbath, for their debut album, also dauntlessly named *Black Sabbath*. Those notes ring out with metaphysical menace, which only grows as the song's tale of occult peril unfolds. This is exactly the sort of stuff that stoked fearful Bible-thumpers into a moral panic in the '80s.

The success of Sabbath, coupled with the Tolkien-inspired songs on *Led Zeppelin IV* ("Misty Mountain Hop," and "The Battle of Evermore"), kicked off a wave of bands that made heavy music preoccupied with fantasy, horror and the occult. For every Iron Maiden, there was a score of obscure acts: Especially in the United States, high school kids with some weed and a pile of moldering Robert E. Howard paperbacks were inclined to lay down some riffs. Numero Group's *Warfaring Strangers: Darkscorch Canticles* (2014) collects sixteen tracks from long-forgotten bands with names like Gorgon Medusa, Stone Axe and Wizard. It's all painfully naïve and imitative, and only passably listenable, but it demonstrates a real underground current in the '70s that was fusing heavy music with fantasy.

That relationship would become even more deeply entwined aesthetically and commercially in the '80s. Cirith Ungol took their name from the home of Shelob the giant spider in *The Lord of the Rings* and, as if that weren't enough, also recycled the Michael Whelan paintings from Michael Moorcock's Elric novels for their album covers. Blue Öyster Cult went a step further and had Moorcock co-write a song, "Veteran of the Psychic Wars." Manowar's reputation was partly built on their enthusiasm for Conan cosplay. When the underground English band Slayer ran into trouble with the American thrash band of the same name, no problem, they just became *Dragon*slayer. Dio, meanwhile, battled an animatronic dragon on stage every night as part of his live show.

The silly camp of metal's embrace of fantasy was lost on the evangelical Christians behind the Satanic Panic, who conflated fantasy imagery with occultism and diablery (granted, all three flavors were routinely embraced by metal acts as intentionally transgressive – even Iron Maiden has the devil on several album covers, though he is

eventually beheaded by their mascot, Eddie). Thanks to shared aesthetics, a certain enthusiasm for demonic imagery and a zest for ambiguous moral systems, Dungeons & Dragons also fell afoul of allegations that this stuff was somehow dangerous to children, which further bound the game to heavy metal (and generated a lot of publicity and sales, despite the headaches). I suspect the scandals made RPGs more attractive to metal musicians; by the end of the '80s, the influential band Kyuss was comfortable taking its name from an undead monster from the *Fiend Folio* and the death metal band Bolt Thrower became the semi-official soundtrack of Warhammer 40k when they used John Sibbick's art from the rulebook as the cover of their 1989 album *Realm of Chaos* (a title shared with a line of Warhammer books and miniatures).

4.

It's mighty tempting to theorize that heavy music influenced the creation of Dungeons & Dragons. Alas, D&D was created by squares.

In 1972, the year the pair began their collaboration on what would become the first tabletop roleplaying game, Gary Gygax was 34, married, had five kids and had lived for most of his life in Lake Geneva, a resort town in Wisconsin. In 2001, he told RPGnet, "I listen mostly to classical, Spanish guitar, jazz, and some blues too. Of composers, I am drawn to Mozart and Beethoven. Segovia surely was master of the guitar, and the 'modern' jazz musicians are my favorites – Parker, Davis, Gillespie, Hinton, Rich, Anita O'Day, Billie Holliday, Stan Kenton – all that lot." Dave Arneson was 27 and resided in the Minneapolis-St. Paul metropolitan area. I've found no interviews that mention Arneson's musical tastes and the closest I can find to a Minneapolis metal band in the '70s is Hüsker Dü, which formed in '79 and isn't very heavy at all, despite the umlauts.

5.

The Bard is a character class in many versions of Dungeons & Dragons who sometimes has a connection to music. There is little consensus across the editions as to just what a Bard is or does, however. Sometimes they are loremasters or musicians or poets or mere jacks-of-all-trades, inspired, variously, by Will Scarlet, the Pied Piper of Hamlin, the Norse skalds, Taliesin, the troubadours, travelling minstrels and that noted Greek mercenary, Homer. There is no official Bard class in the original D&D and the one Gygax included in his Advanced version is essentially unplayable.

6.

While working on my book about tabletop RPGs, *Monsters, Aliens, and Holes in the*

Ground, I interviewed James M. Ward, designer of an RPG called *Gamma World* (1978). It's the first post-apocalyptic RPG, set in our own world after an unspecified cataclysm allows mutants run amok. These themes spring from a rich tradition in science fiction, but *Gamma World* is often a silly game as well. That sense of humor made me wonder if Ward was a fan of Devo. The art punk band emerged from Akron, Ohio, in the mid-'70s with a catchy combo of deadpan humor and a preoccupation with mutation that seemed similar to *Gamma World*.

Not only did Ward profess to not be a fan of Devo, he seemed perturbed that I even proposed such a connection.

7.

On the cover of the *Gamma World Referee's Screen* (1981) is a painting by Erol Otus that features a barbarian woman with a laser weapon and a hairstyle that can be credibly called a trihawk. She has a little eyeball friend, and they are looking out at a landscape of bizarre aspect, but the most jarring thing in the composition, is medallion she wears on her chest, which is clearly the red and silver logo of the Bay-area punk band Dead Kennedys.

"I liked the Dead Kennedys and I thought their logo would make a nice amulet," Erol explains. "I have a rebellious streak and it appealed to me to put it in knowing none of the TSR management would have any idea what it was."

8.

A few games in the '80s nodded to the nightlife. I'm confident many a session of Chaosium's *Stormbringer* (1981) began with the needle dropping on Deep Purple's song of the same name. A scenario for *Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles and Other Strangeness* (1985) is set during a performance by a band called 666, and an adventure for the horror game *Chill* called *Death on Tour* (1985) features a vampire using his band, ironically named Van Helsing, as a cover for his feeding. *Cyberpunk* (1988) and *Shadowrun* (1989) both incorporated the aesthetics and attitude of punk, goth and new wave wholesale.

In the '90s, people who took part in both musical subcultures and roleplaying games found themselves *making* RPGs that directly reflected their musical experiences. The first was the aptly titled *Nightlife* (1990), which saw monsters of all sorts partaking in the New York City club scene; one sourcebook, *In the Musical Vein,* assumed players would form their own band. The rulebook for the Swedish RPG *Kult* (1991) is peppered with quotes from bands like Killing Joke and Sisters of Mercy that inform the tone of its metaphysical mysteries.

White Wolf's *Vampire: The Masquerade* (1991) hit the clubs the hardest. Similar to *Nightlife,* the game proposes that a secret world of vampire clans and conspiracies exists in the shadows of every city in the world. Thanks to the gritty, photo-realistic art of Tim Bradstreet, *Vampire* fully embraced a gothic punk aesthetic unrivaled by other games (to the point that the company trademarked the term "Gothic-Punk"). *Vampire* was so successful that it purportedly outsold D&D for periods of time, a feat no other game had accomplished before. Perhaps even more impressive, it inspired enthusiasts to organize real-world "vampire" courts in some cities that paralleled the fiction, a live-action roleplaying experience that made good on the game's promise of a world hidden in from mundane club-goers.

9.

Dungeons & Dragons wasn't immune to the rise of music scenester. The *Dark Sun* campaign setting (1991) was aesthetically defined in large part by the art of Gerald Brom. Looking at his work, which often features mohawks, piercings, unusual make-up and what can only be described as fantasy versions of BDSM gear, it's no surprise that his bio namechecks a long list of bands like Gun Club, Joy Division, The Damned, Black Flag and many more.

A few years later, TSR released the metaphysically complex *Planescape* campaign setting (1994), which embraced a look in line with industrial music, complete with rusted and verdigris metals. My own *Planescape* campaign used Danzig's quasi-industrial instrumental album *Black Aria* (1992) on repeat as its soundtrack. I felt like the Universe was winking at me when I recently learned that Tony DiTerlizzi, the setting's primary artist, drew many of his illustrations listening to the same album.

10.

These days, the web of connections is so dense it's difficult to untangle who is influencing who. *Tales from the Loop* (2015), which mixes nostalgia, science fiction and mystery in '80s-era Sweden, encourages players to select a period-appropriate theme song to help define their characters. *Ultraviolet Grasslands* (2020) advertises itself as a

psychedelic heavy metal road trip where players might pass monolithic statues of hands throwing the horns. *MÖRK BORG* (2019) calls itself a doom metal RPG and issued a supplement, *Putrescence Regnant* (2021), that includes an LP full of ominous, ambient music; Greg Anderson of drone metal outfit Sunn O))) lays down thunderous guitars on one track. The same year, experimental metal band Kauan released *Ice Fleet,* which includes a thematically linked scenario complete with its own simple RPG system. Game authors regularly list albums that inspired their work. The word "punk" has become a workhorse genre suffix.

In the '70s, RPG-theming in music was coincidental, but now it's often intentional and blunt. In 2003, Slough Feg cut an epic concept album around the classic science fiction RPG *Traveller,* and not only used the game's aesthetics for the album art but just titled the album *Traveller!* Dungeon Weed has a song called "Beholder Gonna Fuck You Up," a plain-spoken reference to a classic D&D monster that is basically a ball of floating eyes that will, indeed, fuck you up. There are subtler efforts, too, like the albums of the Swedish adventure rock band Hällas – the band shares their name with the central character in the lyrics, a knight who journeys through time and space. Their crisply clean sound evokes a kind of anemoia for memories of a perfect '70s gaming table that never existed, or perhaps did in a parallel universe.

Last October, I checked out a metal showcase at TV Eye, a club in Queens. The three bands I saw all embody this new fusion between the nerdy pursuits of fantasy fiction and roleplaying games with frankly blistering metal. The first was Zorn, purveyors of crusty black metal; I've since traded some vintage Grenadier miniatures with the singer for a t-shirt. Shadowland performs clean, classic-style heavy metal that is a rarity these days – during the performance, singer Tanya Finder teasingly asked the audience if we liked Elric before launching into a song about one of Michael Moorcock's lesser-known protagonists, Ulrich von Bek. Even Final Gasp, a deathrock outfit inspired by Danzig's old band Samhain isn't too cool for tabletop – they may come out on stage covered in blood, but their first EP has some artwork that looks similar to Keith Parkinson's cover painting for the D&D module *H4: The Throne of Bloodstone* (1988), which implies deep knowledge of the hobby (and good taste).

11.

The thing about music sub-cultures is that they often exist as places of escape for folks who don't fit in with the primary culture. It used to all be shoved under one big umbrella – "the counterculture" – but it has becoming increasingly clear that there are many ways to be, and each of those ways merit their

own sub-culture where folks can find belonging, or at least a shared experience reflected in the rhythm of a song. It's because of this ability of music to bring people together that folks often call it a universal language. Music also trains us to accept different things over time; a song that was once transgressive naturally becomes prosaic. Throw on a punk record from '77 and see how these songs that were so caustic at the time, that were specifically designed to fly in the face of convention, have become rather inoffensive. It's easy to hear the influence of '50s and '60s rock. It's surprising how mid-tempo these supposed thrashers tend to be.

I don't think it is a coincidence that as the RPG hobby grew to reflect different sorts of music, the diversity of people creating and playing have similarly increased over time. The US version of *Kult,* a game wrapped in musical references, was imported by Terry K. Amthor, one of, if not the only, openly queer designer in the hobby at that time, and it's one of the earliest RPGs with clear queer themes—characters live in two worlds, an apparent one in which everyone exists, and a secret, *more true* one that is both dangerous and rewarding to explore. Since then, queer themed games, by queer creators, have grown to become a sizable slice of the contemporary RPG scene. A similar phenomenon has been taking place in the last ten years, where games using various punk suffixes—afropunk, hopepunk, solarpunk, and so on—have been used to make room for Black and indigenous cultures, often drawing on themes prevalent in hip-hop and its own varied musical sub-genres (a long overdue phenomenon—hip-hop is underrepresented in previous decades, even in urban, street level games like *Cyberpunk* or *Underground).*

12.

Out there, time slows down. In here, I becomes we, and the whole is stronger for it. It moves together, with a purpose, and time is plastic, faster, juttering, smooth, a dead halt, according to need rather than physics. There's meaning, even if it isn't plainly spoken, even if it's just a feeling that needs to be trusted. Music, games, out there, it's just reality; in here, it's the whole world.

ROOKIE OF THE YEAR | **MATT MARRONE**

THE NEWPORT PORK FESTIVAL

This year at the Newport Folk Festival, I joined the 10-Timers Club.

If you don't know what that means, it means it was my 10th Newport Folk Festival, and to show its appreciation, the Fest provided me with free multi-flavored cans of Nixie sparkling water all weekend long, unlimited sunshine and, yes, three days of live music on five stages, including an intimate, surprise performance by James Taylor.

In other words, I got the same stuff everyone else got, and the 10-Timers Club means exactly nothing to anyone except me (and my friend and fellow 10-Timer, Hannah). Still, I'm cool!

But what I really want to get across to my reader – as if I haven't already tried to do so several times before in the pages of Unwinnable – is *why* I've become a member of the 10-Timers Club, beyond the obvious heaping portions of privilege and luck.

I am a member of the 10-Timers Club because this event is magic. It feels like a family gathering. I discover a ton of new artists every time and hear familiar voices, too. And, after all these years, the Newport Folk Festival still manages to deliver things I've never seen before.

I already mentioned James Taylor – this year's bucket-lister after last year's famous unannounced Paul Simon and Joni Mitchell sets. Taylor, in his words, served as "emergency folk;" he was pulled off his yacht to play after Noah Kahan fell ill and had to cancel at the last minute.

But the 2023 NFF might just be remembered for something even more unexpected – one of the greatest surprise performers in its 64-year history: A barbecue.

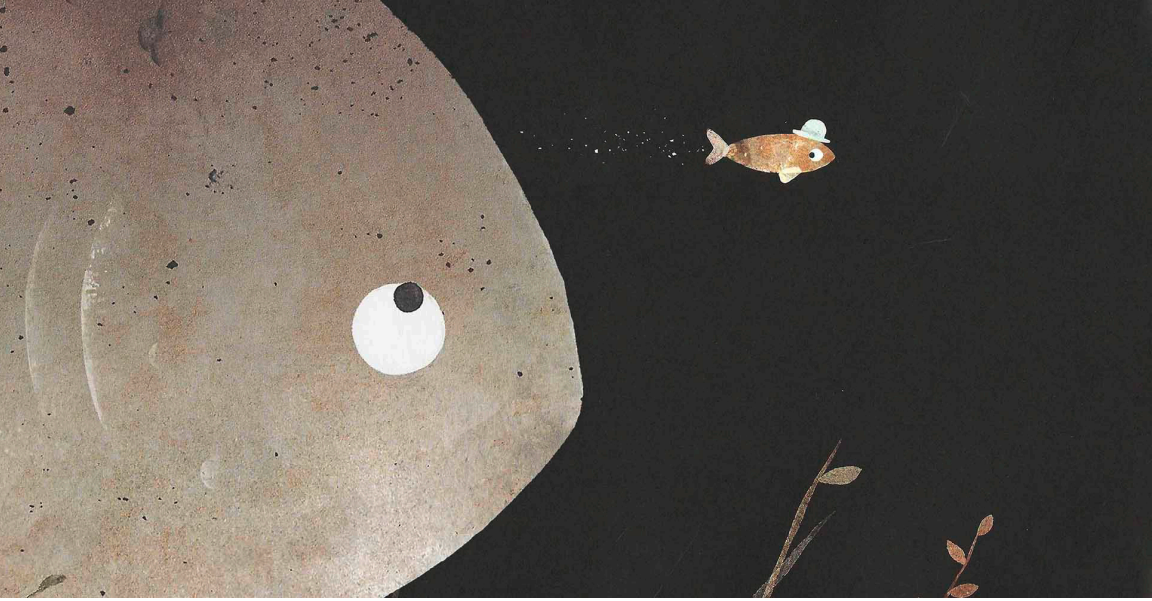
On Saturday, during an excellent Fort Stage closing set by Jon Batiste, I noticed some smoke coming from the left side of the stage. Either some of their instruments had caught fire, I thought, or the smoke was coming from . . . a smoker? And, wait, is that dude dressed as a chef? Sure, enough, throughout the set, while Batiste and friends

burned down the stage, they were also *barbecuing* on it.

Better yet: The set finished with a rollicking "When the Saints Go Marching In" during which Batiste & Co. marched into the crowd – playing and singing while handing out the freshly BBQ'ed ribs. At the end of a glorious Day 2, we were left not just with an empty stage overlooking the harbor, but with the sweet smell of charred pork (and a slight twist of cannabis).

So yeah, there was James Taylor. And Caamp. And Willi Carlisle. And Aimee Mann. And Billy Strings. Also, Lana Del Rey's set turned me into a fanboy (fight me). But wafting over it all was Jon Batiste's BBQ.

And that's what I'll still be smelling when – fingers crossed – I join the 11-Timers Club.



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

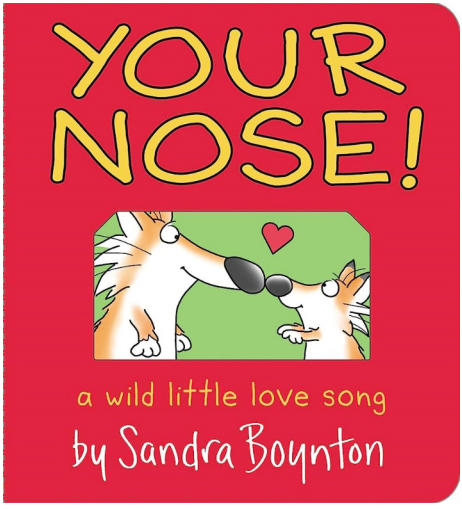
AN ADULT CRITIQUE OF BOOKS FOR CHILDREN

At my core, I'm fundamentally a hater. When this column was exclusively about hip hop, I tried to avoid negative reviews though. These artists were just releasing their music, and I didn't feel right throwing out a hit piece at some random rapper just because I didn't like what they put out. But now that this column has a bit of a larger remit, let the hating commence. And you know what doesn't get enough hate in my opinion: children's books.

With a two-year-old at home, I spend so much of my time reading, rereading, and re-rereading various board books and interactive flap books that I've started to have some opinions on them. Yes, some of them are classics for a reason, but some of these other books need to be taken down a peg, and I'm starting with one of the classic authors of the genre, Sandra Boynton.

Your Nose! - Sandra Boynton

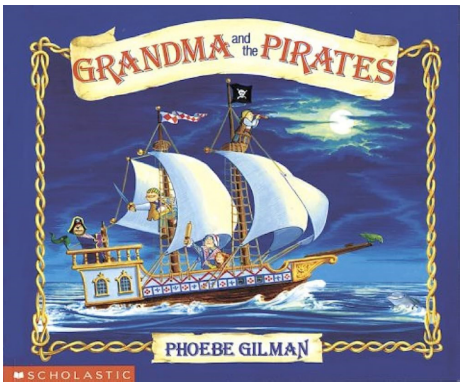
Anybody with a kid will tell you that Sandra Boynton is a fixture in the children's book scene with over 75 books to her name (not to mention greeting cards and albums). For the most part, I really enjoy Boynton's work: *Moo, Baa, La La La* and *The Going to Bed*



Book are already classics for my kid at this point, and books like *The Barnyard Dance* and *Let's Dance Little Pookie* are awesome as he starts to figure out what things like stomp, spin and strut mean.

But, with *Your Nose!* Boynton really dropped the ball. Ostensibly, *Your Nose!* is a nice song book about a mom and how much she loves her kid's nose. Cute, right! Except it's absolutely impossible to sing. There seems to be no rhythm in the words, no flow at all. I can kind of make the first couple pages work to the "Lightworks" beat by J Dilla, but that even falls apart by page three. My wife thinks it sounds more like Kim Zolciak's "The Ring Didn't Mean a Thing" (content warning: do not click that link if you have any appreciation for the art of tune or melody). After innumerable rereads of *Your Nose!,* I'm still absolutely flabbergasted about how this is supposed to sound, and that sucks because the little man has become obsessed with this book. Again, we still love most of Boynton's stuff over here, but if you have any desire to sing a song with any sort of pattern, maybe leave this one on the shelf.

Grandma and the Pirates - Phoebe Gillman



I'm not sure if *Grandma and the Pirates* is a classic of the children's genre, but it is definitely an odd entry. Essentially, a grandma, granddaughter and their parrot get human trafficked by pirates. The newly enslaved toil under the watchful eyes of the pirates as they pillage the high seas, until they trick the villains into leaving them alone on the boat, which they proceed to steal sail off into sunset. Honestly, I could have seen this being made into a movie in the heat of the 2000s after the success of *Pirates of the Caribbean*. However, I also understand why no one picked it up. Here's a quick list of my thoughts about what makes this book less than a classic:

1. Pirates, like 18th-century, fluffy shirt-wearing, flintlock pistol-toting buccaneers, kidnap a young girl named … Melissa? That name feels a bit too 20th-century to feel at home in this book.

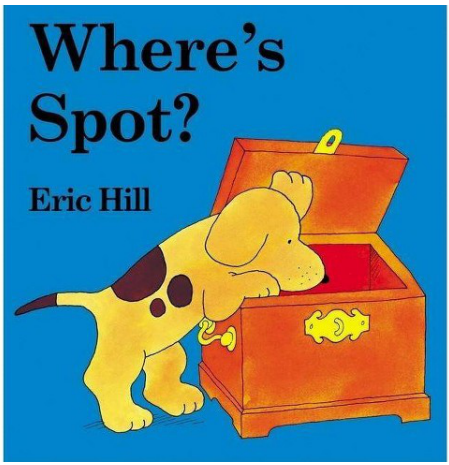
2. Grandma accidentally attracts the pirates to her house by cooking a noodle pudding and the "delicious noodly aroma" wafts out to see and draw them in. I, for one, have never associated the noodles with their smell, especially not a delicious smell.

3. After the pirates finish the noodles, they stuff the rest of Grandma's cabinet into their sack, and the writing turns into a quick little poem about all the food they steal. It feels strange to just bust into rhyme in the middle of a book which, other than one page, has absolutely no rhyme scheme.

4. The human trafficking victims trick the pirates into going onto the island of Boola Boola (love that name, though), and they end up sailing the ship away. The final page is the pirates exclaiming, "Egads! Where's my ship?" Shouldn't there be some sort of denouement though? Shouldn't we see Melissa and her grandma happily back at home with hordes of treasure or something? It's just an odd ending.

In the grand scheme of things, I don't hate *Grandma and the Pirates,* but I do find it a strange little book. A few highlights, but overall, it doesn't quite work.

Where's Spot? - Eric Hill



The Spot books are seemingly ubiquitous in the children's books section, and in the grand scheme of things, I do get the appeal. Of the Spot books I've read (and there have been a few), the basic plot is often the same: Spot goes missing somewhere (a house, a museum, a zoo) and the kids go through the book and open up little flaps in search of him, revealing various other animals that are not Spot, until the end, when they find him. Fundamentally harmless and fun for the kids, but formally I hate it. The writing is stiff and bland and the characters are weak and undefined.

Now you might ask yourself, "Noah, kids books aren't supposed to be high literature with great writing. How are you going to sit here and call out bad writing in a book meant for kids to read?" To you I say, why do we have to read this Spot drivel when well-written books for kids actually exist. Why am I reading and rereading this stiff, incredibly inane dialogue when books like the following exist in the exact same area and are, on all accounts, well written.

We Found a Hat, I Want My Hat Back, and This is Not My Hat - Jon Klassen

These books were some of the first we received when my son was born, and I couldn't be happier with them. The sweetest of the three, *We Found a Hat,* centers

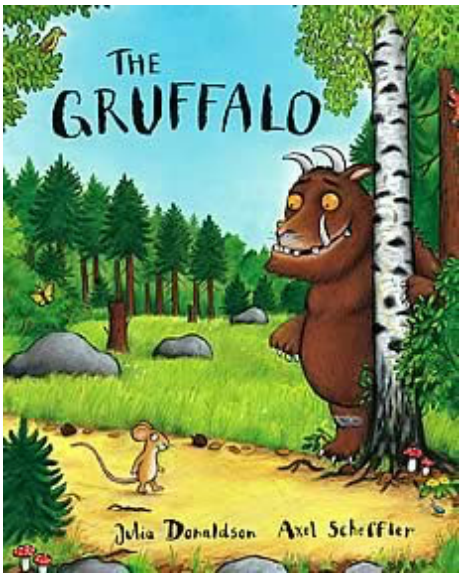
on a pair of turtles who find a hat and can't decide who should wear it. They try to forget about it, but one turtle can't. As our less magnanimous tortoise is about to take the hat while the other is sleeping, he decides it's better in dream land, where both of them get to wear hats and they both look very good.

I Want My Hat Back and *This Is Not My Hat* are both decidedly darker stories. In I Want My Hat Back, our bear protagonist has lost his red, pointy hat and asks a variety of animals if they have seen it. When all hope is lost, he realizes the rabbit he saw earlier was wearing it, and he proceeds to eat the rabbit and take his hat back. *This is Not My Hat* is almost the exact same story, inverted. A small fish steals a hat from a large fish and goes to hide in the bushes. He's sure the big fish will not find him, but a snitching-ass crab points the way. I'm a little haunted by the final words from the small fish as he goes into his hiding space among the plants that grow big and tall: "Nobody will ever find me." A page later, we see the large fish leaving the same place, wearing his hat. We never see the small fish again.

Overall, I think the morals of these books are nice (don't steal or you'll get eaten and share with your friends) and the illustrations are cute, but in the grand scheme of things, I think it's the writing that really sticks out. Klassen's prose is clear and direct, but also interesting. The dialogue feels precise and rhythmic – the books have a certain pace

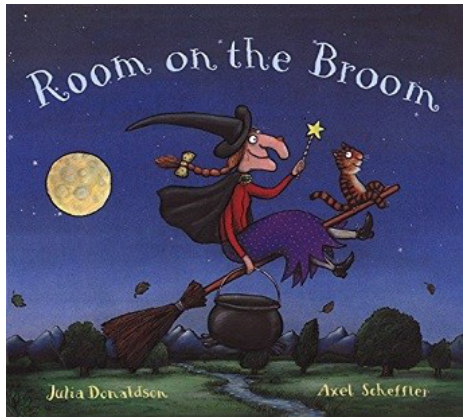
about them that makes rereading them a pleasure, not a chore.

The Gruffalo and Room on the Broom - Julia Donaldson and Axel Scheffler



Finally, I want to spend a little time writing about what may be my two favorite children's books this side of my own childhood. The *Gruffalo* follows a small mouse on his walk through the woods where he is harangued by predators, inviting him over for various types of meals. He brushes them off with stories of a terrible, made-up creature, the Gruffalo whose favorite food always seems to include the mouse's antagonist. Having successfully scared off a snake, the mouse actually runs into the monstrous Gruffalo, who is very interested in eating a little mouse. Instead, the mouse leads him back through the woods, scaring off the very same creatures who were interested in him earlier, and finally revealing his own favorite food, Gruffalo crumble. The Gruffalo runs away in fear and the mouse munches on a nice little nut.

In *Room on the Broom,* by the same author-illustrator team, a witch flies around on a broom, picking up various animals, until they weigh too much and the broom snaps in two. As the witch flies wildly away,



a dragon tries to eat her. But, once on the ground, the dog, cat, frog and bird arise out from a bog as a new kind of monster and scare the dragon away. The witch brews up a new broom and they fly merrily away.

So, why are these my favorite books? The illustrations are cute and all, and I really love the character design of the Gruffalo. However, I really like them because of the verses. Donaldson writes with a fantastic flow and rhythm. These are the opposite of *Your Nose!* Maybe it's my own love of rap that draws me to these two books the most, but I just think they feel like the best written. Certain turns of phrases ("Oh, sure said the Gruffalo, bursting with laughter' or "they dripped and they squelched as they strode from the ditch") just catch my ear, and the verse structure makes memorization easy and enjoyable. The narratives themselves are fun too!

* * *

I've spent a lot of time with these books over the last couple years, and it feels good to get some of these thoughts out in print. It also feels really good to let some of this hate out, for the first three books at least. Now, would my kid agree with me on these ratings? Doubtful. He seems bored with the Gruffalo and the witch. He seems to be moving onto a grumpy monkey, but I really think he just wants me to sing about his nose again.

FORMS IN LIGHT | **JUSTIN REEVE**

FINDING LOST SANTOS

Since the virtual city in *Grand Theft Auto 5,* Los Santos, was directly patterned after the physical city in California, Los Angeles, I've often wondered if the structure of the urban environment affected the behavior of players in the same way. The concept that constraints and affordances in the layout of the cities that surround us can impact our actions and interactions within them is well understood, but whether or not the phenomenon can be seen in game design remains an open question. The best way to go about answering this would have to be a comparison based on some of the more important theoretical work done on the topic in recent years.

The philosopher and sociologist Michel Foucault dedicated much of his life to understanding the intricate relationship between space, place, social order and power. Taking a deep dive into his thinking, we can embark upon a fairly comprehensive comparison between Los Santos and Los Angeles, exploring the minute details of their spatial configurations, mechanisms of social control and the profound impact which these environments have on those who interact with them.

The concept of heterotopia frequently appears in the publications produced by Foucault, representing a theoretical framework for understanding spaces that exist outside the received norms of everyday life. These possess their own rules, functions and behaviors that are distinct from those of society at large. Los Santos could be said to embody a heterotopian quality, as the city operates as a simulacrum of urban life, presenting a distorted reflection of Los Angeles. The virtual city meticulously recreates versions of real-world landmarks like the Hollywood Sign, Santa Monica Pier and the Hollywood Walk of Fame, but rearranges their spatial relations to accommodate the dynamics of narrative and gameplay. This manipulation of physical space within Los Santos creates a heterotopian reality in which social norms and structures differ from those found in the reality of Los Angeles.

The concept of disciplinary power proposed by Foucault is particularly relevant when examining mechanisms of social control in both Los Santos and Los Angeles. When it comes to Los Angeles, a multifaceted system of disciplinary mechanisms operates through the architectural design, zoning regulations and surveillance infrastructure. With its distinct neighborhoods and the segregation of residential, commercial and industrial zones, the urban layout establishes spatial boundaries which regulate the movement and behavior of individuals. The extensive surveillance network in Los Angeles, encompassing cameras and police patrols, also contributes to the disciplinary power which enforces social order, influences behavior and deters potential transgressions.

In much the same way, Los Santos employs disciplinary power to shape the behavior and actions of players within the game. The city features a dense network of interconnecting streets, bridges and tunnels, forming a complex spatial matrix that both guides and restrains free movement. The presence of law enforcement and constant surveillance of course establishes a panoptic atmosphere in which the player is constantly under scrutiny. This disciplinary power permeates the gameplay experience, influencing the decisions and actions of players, mirroring the real-world mechanisms of social control present in Los Angeles.

The concept of heterogeneous space can further enhance our understanding of the comparison. Heterogeneous space refers to the coexistence of places with distinct social functions, within a broader urban context. Los Angeles exemplifies this idea through its juxtaposition of glamorous residential neighborhoods, bustling commercial districts and socioeconomically diverse regions. The spatial heterogeneity creates social divisions, inequalities and hierarchies, shaping individual experiences, interactions and the distribution of power within the city.

Los Santos exhibits many of the same heterogeneous characteristics. The city accommodates affluent neighborhoods adorned with lavish mansions, impoverished districts marked by dilapidated buildings and vibrant urban centers teeming with pedestrians and commercial activity. These contrasting spaces within Los Santos reflect the social inequalities, divisions and spatial heterogeneity found in Los Angeles. When they navigate and otherwise interact with these spaces, players are exposed to a digital representation of heterogeneous urban life, underlining the ideas proposed by Foucault concerning spatial heterogeneity and its influence on social order, because the outcome is, of course, always chaos.

Foucault proposed a concept known as technologies of the self which offers insight

into the impact of these spaces on the subjectivities, identities and modes of self-expression held by their inhabitants. When it comes to Los Angeles, the physical environment, cultural institutions and social expectations of the city help to shape the self-perception, behavior and aspirations of its residents. The pursuit of success, fame and beauty which are so closely associated with Los Angeles has become an integral part of self-conception and the means through which individuals navigate and interact with the urban environment.

Players engage with various game mechanics in Los Santos that simulate technologies of the self. Customization options along the lines of clothing, vehicles and personal property allow players to mold the virtual identities of their characters and by extension themselves, expressing preferences, tastes and desired image within the game world. The structures, established norms and the overarching narrative influence their choices and actions, providing an experience in which technologies of the self are intimately intertwined with the digital environment.

Carrying out a detailed comparison of Los Santos and Los Angeles through the lens of Michel Foucault sheds light on the intricate interplay between space, place, social order and power. Both cities exhibit heterotopian qualities, deploy disciplinary power, demonstrate spatial heterogeneity and influence the subjectivity of individuals through technologies of the self. This hopefully serves to deepen our understanding of how urban spaces, physical or virtual, actively shape and govern our lives, underscoring the continued relevance of the ideas put forward by Foucault for understanding the complex dynamics of contemporary urban environments. By illuminating the connections and nuances between these two distinct yet interrelated realms, we gain valuable insight into the mechanisms of social control, construction of space and the impact of these factors on the varied experiences within the cities that surround us.

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

I'M FINALLY GOING TO THERAPY

Here's the Thing is where Rob dumps his random thoughts and strong opinions on all manner of nerdy subjects - from videogames and movies to board games and toys.

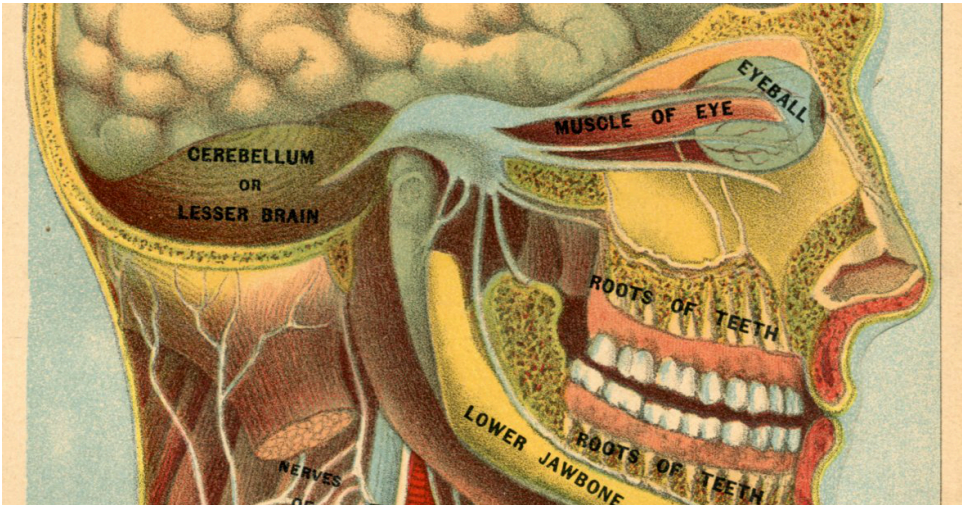
Therapy (and mental health in general, really) is still something of a taboo in our society, but now that Rob's finally started going himself he's started to realize how ridiculous that is.

I want to state up front that I didn't view therapy as "bad" or a "sign of weakness" or whatever other nonsense the more blatantly toxic portion of the United States might try to claim. Rather, therapy is something I (ignorantly) assumed just wouldn't benefit me, specifically. But here's the thing: That's objectively false, and since I've started seeing a therapist, I've come to learn how everyone (literally everyone) stands to benefit from it.

My life is by and large devoid of the kinds of significant events that we might see covered on TV or film. I mean obviously some great and terrible things have happened (I've been married to my best friend for 19 years, I've lost family members and cherished pets, etc.) but I'm not a Forbes-level success and I don't have a tragic backstory. For the most part my existence has been just that: Existence. So, for the longest time – like, about 39 years – I never believed I needed to go to therapy. Because, in my mind, nothing happened in my life that was big enough to justify it. Also that shit's usually expensive, but that's another story.

About halfway through 2020, my thoughts on the matter began to shift, particularly due to my work situation and how it was affected by the (still ongoing) pandemic, but even then, I resisted. After a lot of discussion with my wife, Diana, and a bit of work (mostly on her part, because she's amazing), we found a program that both wasn't a fly-by-night techbro scam and fit within my extremely modest budget.

The plan was to spend a few months (maybe I year, I dunno) talking to a professional about my newfound anxieties and the way my horrendous work situation had



impacted the way I react to seeing people in public without masks on. Of course, it's since gone way beyond that, which is the main reason why I wanted to write about this in the first place.

It's true that therapy has helped me to better understand and react to my feelings triggered (actually triggered, not the bullshit wrong way we use the term) by certain situations. It's also true that, as those in therapy often say, the process isn't about "fixing" so much as it is about understanding what's going on inside our own heads, then figuring out the tools we can use to better handle it all. What really surprised me is just how much more there was to discover.

Embarrassingly, I used to pride myself on being more self-aware than the average person – which to a degree is probably true (have you all seen Twitter lately?). But despite being so very in-touch with myself (insert beleaguered sigh at past me), turns out I was wrong and there's a ton of shit that's shaped my mentalities and behaviors over the years. For example, putting the pieces together as to why I sometimes lay awake at night while my brain force-feeds me a stream of unwanted (often violent) worst case scenarios involving our cats managed to finally make it stop. Or at least made it much easier for me to dispel those thoughts because I had a better handle on where they came from and why.

Understanding leading to more control is kind of the running theme with all that I've experienced since I started therapy in October of 2022. Some of our semi-guided discussion tricks have also bled into my own vernacular, which has made it easier to convey my thoughts to other people with fewer instances of words being interpreted in a way that I didn't intend. It's also given me both the terminology and the confidence to be more open with my thoughts and feelings, which has led to more trust, understanding and honesty with the people I'm closest to.

All this is to say that, if you have the means, I think you should consider finding a therapist that gels with you and try it out for a month or two. Even if you don't think you "need" therapy. Because therapy isn't always about unpacking trauma (trauma you didn't know you had) or treating mental health issues. Oftentimes it's more about helping you figure yourself out.

INVENTING A WORLD OF INSECTOID WONDERS

FEATURING EDUARDO CARABAÑO

by Justin Reeve

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

As the sun sets, a world veiled in darkness comes to life, inhabited by creatures of a fantastical nature. Welcome to *Settlers of a Dead God,* a tabletop RPG that transports players to an otherworldly universe, the decaying body of a celestial being. The person behind this interesting invention, a role-playing game enthusiast with a knack for adventure design, embarked on a bold and thrilling world-building journey, culminating in a realm dominated by insects and the enigmatic remnants of a deceased deity. For

this entry of Funeral Rites, we'll be delving into the mind of creator Eduardo Carabaño, exploring the history, philosophy, inspirations and design processes that carried *Settlers of a Dead God* from inception to publication.

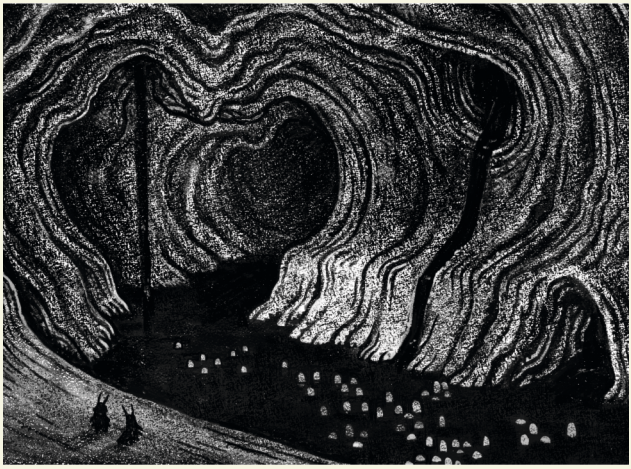
For several years, Carabaño honed his RPG design skills by crafting adventures for a tight-knit group of dedicated players, but an insatiable desire for more drove him to envision an entirely new world, one far removed from traditional high fantasy settings. The ambition to forge a realm uniquely his own led to an intriguing and unconventional universe brimming with insectoid wonders. While at the outset, the designer intended this creation to be a private playground for his gaming group, as the scope slowly expanded, he realized that other RPG enthusiasts might enjoy the mysterious world that eventually became *Settlers of a Dead God*. Taking to a variety of different social media platforms, Carabaño integrated himself into a thriving community of independent authors, always eager to lend a helping hand. "There's a huge community that is always willing to help," Carabaño explains. "I contacted François Licata because I found his art in Artstation. He is from Belgium and I have to say that he has been key in the development of the game."

Settlers of a Dead God presents players with intriguing questions that challenge their beliefs and perceptions about the world around them. Central to the game is the enigma of the eponymous dead god, its true nature shrouded in mystery. *Settlers of a Dead God* contemplates the varying interpretations of the dead god's origin, a theme that seamlessly intertwines religion and political conflict, providing a lush backdrop for players to explore. "The game is about a dead corpse and there are lots of different interpretations of its origin," the designer notes. "Some religions believe it's a dead god, another religion believes the god is alive, some other people believe it's not even a god. I wanted to bring the idea of religion and political conflict into the game." This dynamic exploration shapes the nar-

rative, revealing the multifaceted nature of faith and the complexities of belief systems.

The game also gives players a unique opportunity to engage with the world itself as a central concept. Breaking away from traditional high fantasy landscapes, Carabaño ingeniously crafted the world within a vast corpse. Mountains made of flesh, forests of hair and lakes composed of cornea invite players to embark upon a wild and immersive journey through a realm like no other. “I just wanted to make the world a characteristic and different concept, so I built it inside of a corpse,” Carabaño explains. “The possibilities are endless.”

When it comes to conception, *Settlers of a Dead God* features an eclectic array of inspirations. With all of their strange and unusual characteristics, the designer's curiosity about insects provided the creative impetus behind the game. Seeking to dispel the notion that insects are totally different from us, the game portrays them as entities that have more in common with human beings than you might expect. “I have always been very curious about insects,” Carabaño says.



"They are so different from other animals that I find them fascinating and intriguing. My idea was to show people that insects are not so different from us than we think."

As for the rules and systems of play, *Settlers of a Dead God* started with Carabaño's passion for diverse and compelling playable classes. Fueled by this interest, the idea of insectoid creatures as potential protagonists emerged, followed by the concept of an enormous corpse as the setting, a key element that offers ample resources and sparks considerable conflict. With the core ideas laid out, the writing process commenced, resulting in a comprehensive world, complete with species, factions, cities and of course the unexplored interior of the corpse.

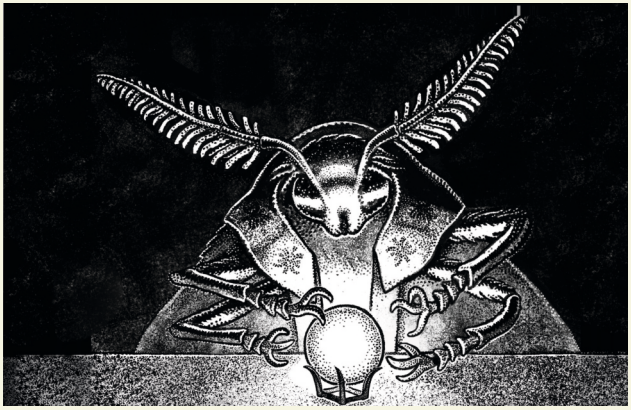
According to Carabaño, the whole endeavor came to life in written form over the course of about six months. In order to lend visuals to this imaginative world, Carabaño collaborated with a talented artist, Licata, whose dark fantasy style wonderfully complemented the game's aesthetic, enriching the player experience with captivating illustrations. Despite facing a few delays, the wait ultimately proved to be worthwhile, as the imagery breathed life into the game. "When he started drawing, his art adapted to my ideas," Carabaño points out. "He has some kind of a dark fantasy style that I really love."

Crafting the world in *Settlers of a Dead God* proved both challenging and exhilarating for Carabaño. The process began with the creation of several playable insect species including beetles, worms and wasps. The designer then went about establishing a perfect habitat for these insectoid settlers, leading him to conceptualize the vast corpse. This imaginative foundation opened a treasure trove of possibilities, dividing powerful groups based on the body parts they inhabit, creating religions influenced by their interpretations

of the corpse's origin and charting unexplored regions within its interior. This world-building extended to the development of insectoid societies, drawing parallels to human civilizations. As he pondered the concept of humans evolving from early primates, the designer playfully considered the alternative, a world where insects held the potential to evolve into complex beings, much like their human counterparts.

The game is based on Old-School Essentials, but *Settlers of a Dead God* contains custom rules for exploring the corpse's interior, complete with radioactivity, perils and stress mechanics, all of which result in a dangerous and thrilling adventure. This balance of familiar mechanics with creative additions makes the game a unique experience. "The insects have some funny rules on skills or how stress can affect them," the designer exclaims. "Yes, insects can be stressed too!" Starting with the flexible OSE, the designer chose a streamlined, approachable framework that welcomes both veterans and newcomers to the RPG world. The simplicity and also lethality of OSE perfectly aligned with the designer's vision, allowing him to focus on world-building and storytelling. This decision allows players to immerse themselves in a universe removed from the familiar trappings of high fantasy. Ensuring internal consistency in the game world was paramount, so Carabaño meticulously crafted a history brimming with plausible explanations, but he also gave the Game Master sufficient freedom to modify and shape the narrative as needed. Tables for generating cities and exploring the origin of the dead god empowers GMs to mold the lore while preserving overall coherence.

Having finally completed *Settlers of a Dead God,* the designer set his sights on finding a suitable publisher for the game. Enter at this point Exalted Funeral, an RPG indie distributor which is renowned for their support, guidance and keen eye for high quality projects. The partnership with Exalted Funeral ensured that *Settlers of a Dead God* received the best possible post-launch treatment, opening doors to a much wider audience than Carabaño could have discovered on his own. "They have been amazing from the very beginning with all their help, orientation and editing," he remarks. "I can't say enough how helpful they've been in



developing the game. For me, they were from the very beginning my first option as a publisher."

The response to *Settlers of a Dead God* so far has been overwhelmingly positive, with players praising this singular world, rich narrative and engaging gameplay mechanics. From the designer's intimate gaming group to the broader RPG community, folks have been embracing *Settlers of a Dead God* with enthusiasm. While the positive feedback has been encouraging, the designer humbly acknowledges the challenge of meeting expectations, but he remains hopeful that *Settlers of a Dead God* inspires players to explore the boundaries of their imagination and craft universes of their own. "I hope that anyone who gets the game enjoys reading and playing it and also gives inspiration to other people to create new worlds."

Settlers of a Dead God stands as a testament to the potential of the tabletop RPG to continue crafting unique worlds. Its enthralling universe, complemented by expressive artwork and innovative gameplay mechanics, has already captured the hearts of players worldwide. The journey of a first-time designer exploring insectoid wonders and a corpse made of mysteries has unveiled an exceptional adventure that offers the world in this book to all those looking for a fresh and interesting experience. As the game enthralls players and leaves a lasting impact, *Settlers of a Dead God* serves as a shining example of the limitless possibilities of the tabletop RPG.

* * *

Follow the development blog. Settlers of a Dead God *is coming soon from Exalted Funeral!*

ODES OF THE BOOMERSHOOTER

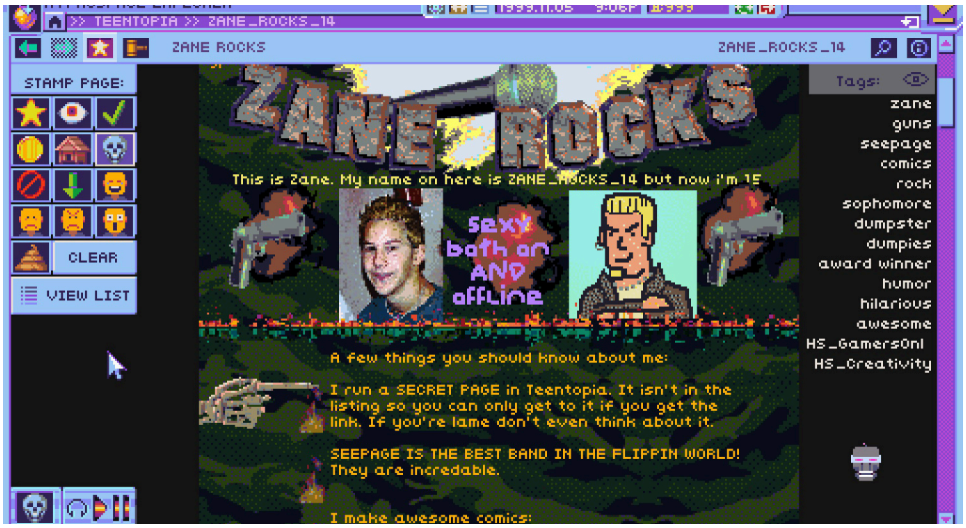
by HOLLY BOSON

Early in the 2019 game *Hypnospace Outlaw,* the player encounters Zane Lofton. *Hypnospace* is set in a psychedelic dream of the Y2K-era internet, but the first few areas explored feel more like aesthetically bent versions of the present – Merchantsoft is as slickly incompetent as Tesla and Goodtime Valley has the mothball stench of Boomer Facebook, down to the tepid memes and skeleton gifs. But Zane reflects somebody who no longer exists. A 15-year-old webcomic artist and troll, his homepage is a raised middle finger of camo print, animated explosions and autoplaying nu-metal. As soon as you hear those heavy guitars, whiny vocals and effects-pedal rapping, you know you're dealing with a character who only makes sense in 1999.

At the turn of the Millennium, Zane Lofton's archetype seemed like the embodiment of the end of history malaise; angry white suburban teens abandoned by their divorced parents, to be raised instead by gory mass media spectacles. Busybodies and op-ed writers believed this diet of poison would eventually spew back out of them as bullets. Like all generational subcultures, this child was defined by their music, a commercial blend of rock and rap as accessible as the teen pop it served as an alternative to, yet as raucous as the underground. Even the music videos portrayed their audience as endlessly duplicated and fungible – Papa Roach's wrist-slitting teenagers motionless in suburban bedrooms; Eminem's peroxide imitators all standing up; P.O.D.'s dead-eyed gospel choir of school shooters and teen suicides. But unlike the stock character, Zane doesn't seem all that depressed or violent. He's a creative kid, in love with the gibs and sewage running through '90s pop culture, but not caring about what it means, which makes him kind of cute.

"I like writing characters that are easily written off as a type," said Jay Tholen, the director of *Hypnospace Outlaw,* and Zane's creator. "Everything I do creatively is informed by how I believe things are ordered cosmically: All humans having inherent worth, Christ being who he said he was, the sickness of Wealth, Kingdom vs. Empire, etc. I can't write a pure joke character because I don't believe any real humans are just joke humans. It'd weaken the material because it wouldn't ring true."

Back when *Hypnospace Outlaw* was released, Jay told *Variety* that "nu-metal is basically such a joke now," but in the years since, it's come back like big jeans. Rappers like Coi Leray and Lil Uzi Vert, and pop stars like Rina Sawayama and 100 Gecs, have revived the genre as an ironic-except-not excuse to play with angst, guitars and gross out comedy. TikTok has made Deftones and KoЯn into high school classics, influencers



like Holiday Kirk's playful @numetal_moment Twitter account make the genre unembarrassing and Machine Gun Kelly's System of a Down cover has made the original seem more sacred.

"Most of the people I know who grew out of nu-metal were college-educated academics or artists or professionals, while the people who never stopped enjoying it were the dudes I grew up with in middle school or high school who never left our hometown," said Jay. (There's a strain of classism to nu-metal's rejection; nu-metal appealed to a more populist, gender-equal and hip-hop-literate fanbase that led collegiate metal purists to dismiss it as corporate slop for tween girls, trailer-dwellers and culturally-insensitive – or racially-treacherous – white people.) "I can't think of many subgenres that dipped so hard out of fashion, so I kinda see it as vindication for the people who never let the zeitgeist dictate what they were allowed to enjoy. Sadly, I was not that cool."

* * *

Between the nu-metal, suburban rage and Christian agape, it seems inevitable that Zane would return in 2023, in the game *Slayers X: Terminal Aftermath: Vengance* [sic] *of the Slayer*. Now in his 30s, Zane's releasing a game based on his teenage mods he made for *Kataklysm,* an obvious stand-in for *DOOM*. *DOOM* might symbolize the span of the '90s better than any other single artwork, evoking Tipper Gore's hated heavy metal and the demonic villains of the Satanic Panic but flourishing in the era of Internet file-sharing and – after Eric Harris's hobby of *DOOM* modding was publicized – getting the blame for the 1999 Columbine mass shooting.

DOOM's design philosophy of shareable user-created content parallels nu-metal's embrace of the new medium. Both Linkin Park and Limp Bizkit defended the embattled music piracy application Napster, and KoЯn's Jonathan Davis predicted that one day the Internet would be the main music distribution platform. Y2K brat-masculinity is embodied by nu-metal's anxiety about gender roles and its fascination with toilet humor – when fighting a giant toilet boss in Slayers X, it's almost impossible not to think of the 13-foot toilet that Fred Durst of Limp Bizkit rose out of at his live shows, and the kernels of corn fired at you by the poop monsters evoke the gay anal sex urban legend that inspired KoЯn's name.

In a year where stars like Lil Uzi Vert, Rina Sawayama and Coi Leray are embracing nu-metal sounds and aesthetics in their music, it couldn't be more appropriate for *Slayers X* to have a banging nu-metal soundtrack. Nu-metal is an expensive genre to make – it

requires full bands, and was likely only a commercial prospect due to how bloated the record industry was off the back of the introduction of CDs. This makes it remarkable that a group of indie musicians were able to create such an authentic sound, essentially solo.

Most of the game's soundtrack was composed by Bubblegum Octopus, despite the fact that they didn't have a background in nu-metal beyond its reflection in Japanese visual kei. "My taste in heavy music had already gone all the way into the fastest grind and death metal that I could get my hands on," they admitted. But Jay thought they would be a perfect fit; he'd opened for them at a show in the early 2010s, and thought their music had a "screamy tone" that fit *Slayers X*'s spirit.

Jay allowed Bubblegum Octopus a huge amount of freedom, allowing them to put their range to good use. "I don't think most people would have decided they wanted a nu-metal soundtrack and then let me get away with a breakbeat/shoegaze guitar/old synthesizer bells section, or wacky funk with a theremin."

But it's this which makes Bubblegum Octopus's contributions, as the band Gurrgle, sound authentically of the turn of the Millennium. "With any genre, there's a dangerous possibility that people simply settle for [making more of what they like], and it'll just reiterate itself until it's trash," they said. "If you're gonna start a band inspired by a band or a style, consider not starting with the genre as the predicate, or at the very least don't let it become the ceiling."

Octopus's only snag was getting the brief wrong and writing "straight up circus music" for a stage set in a fairground, though the circus version was instead manipulated heavily to create the ambient X-mix version of "Outside Freaker," an eccentric jazz-funk track that is my personal favorite.

Bubblegum Octopus used mostly real hardware, relying on their collection of synths and guitar pedals. However, disc scratching – the most obvious nu-metal signifier – required Octopus to invent a new instrument.

"It took me a long time to figure out how to do scratches without a record player, but I realized I could probably dismantle a portable cassette player in such a way that the playhead would stay engaged with the tape while I advanced the tape manually with two taped-up hex keys. Then I had to edit the heck out of it to get it just a little closer sonically to vinyl."

"I didn't get to fully appreciate what is good about [nu-metal] until much more recently," said Bubblegum Octopus, who admires the genre's emphasis on visuals. "It's so fun to palm-mute the low end of a down tuned guitar and hit pinch harmonics with ridiculous high gain distortion. I still love slap bass, and halftime drumbeats with double-kick fills… all that stuff rules."

"If we're entering an age of renewed zeal for nu-metal, I think *Slayers X* deserves to be mentioned within the first breaths of the conversation," said Bubblegum Octopus. "It may be a game full of tongue-in-cheek humor and parody, but it's also not an inauthentic or ironic experience at the expense of that moment in time."

* * *

"I would have aspired to be like Zane if I met him as a 13-year-old," said Jay Tholen, the director of *Slayers X* and *Hypnospace Outlaw*. "I did front like a tough kid online for a brief period but I was sheepish in real life," he acknowledged.

In addition to writing the game, Jay contributed to the soundtrack as the fictional metal band Versperum Lacrimae. "Their" song "Snatched" has a level of technical fireworks, with snarly devil's-chord riffs and a passage which uses a bar of irregular length to create a disorientating illusion of a change in the track's rhythmic emphasis – perfect chiaroscuro for Zane's poop jokes.

"Even Limp Bizkit had odd time sigs and weird modal changes, so I felt I could probably get away with a bit of musicianship as long as the sonic elements felt appropriately nu-metallic," Jay explained.

* * *

"For years and years, there's been a lot of, *'Oh my god, you're Seepage?!'*" says Jazz Mickle. She's the composer behind "Nothing Left for Me," attributed in *Hypnospace Outlaw* to a band called Seepage that Zane's fascinated with – even using their frontman Mikey Sykey as a character in the comics which *Slayers X* is based on. She also wrote Seepage's other songs, the *TRL*-anthemic "Against the Wall" and the grungey "Break Me".

Jay Tholen met Jazz nearly a decade ago at Fantastic Arcade, a Texas retro-gaming festival. Jazz's original music is influenced by videogame music, bringing chip textures into woozy hyperpop and dubsteppy electronics, but, as Jay said, "there was a bit of a nu-metal streak there" – her yearning synthesizer melodies evoke brooding Linkin Park intros, and her style of vocal cut ups recall Mike Shinoda's digitally-assisted stuttering.

"So, when *Hypnospace* was in development and I needed a faux nu-metal group, I knew who to call," Jay said.

"It's only in the past few years that I've been writing lyrics in my own music," Jazz said, "and it was a struggle to figure out how to do that for a Linkin Park-type song – it was more like trying to figure out a puzzle than finding inspiration."

The lyrics of "Nothing Left for Me" ended up being coded references to her own turn-of-the-Millennium childhood. The lyric *"Deck stacked like the rest of them… but I tried like the best of them!",* the climax of the rap verse in "Nothing Left for Me," appears as a marquee on Zane's Hypnopage and in another *Slayers X* track, "Deck Stacked" by Danimal Cannon. "That's a Yu-Gi-Oh reference," Jazz explains, referring to the card-battling anime series in which duelists can draw the right card in the nick of time through having faith in their deck. The names of campaigns from *DOOM* – "Knee Deep in the Dead," "The Shores of Hell," "Inferno" – appear as rap adlibs in the hook. "The lyrics were the only place where the silly aspects came in. I love the source material so much and I want to reach the same kind of quality that [Linkin Park] did."

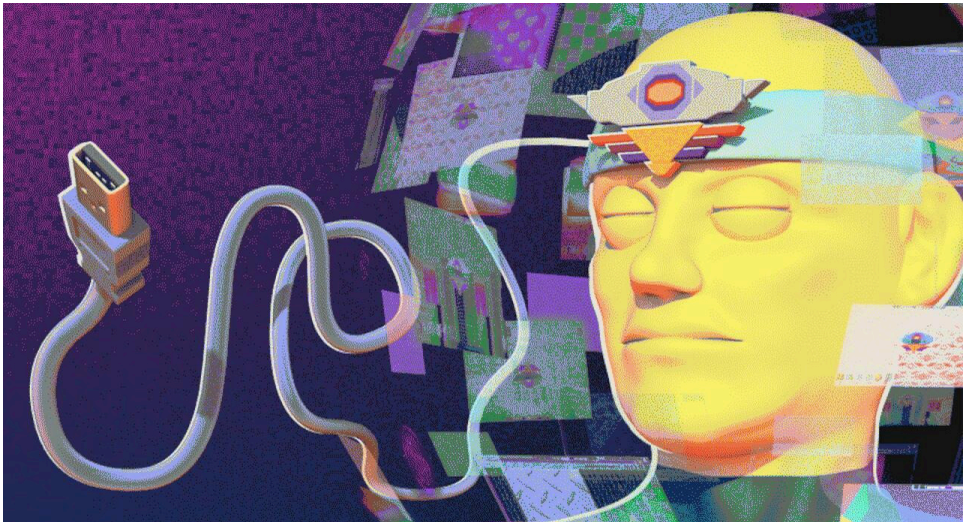
The Seepage songs were entirely performed by Jazz, apart from a session singer hired by Jay for some of the vocals. Everything is sequenced apart from the vocals and guitar. "[The nu-metal sound] is so deeply ingrained in my brain that it comes out naturally," she said, "but I had to learn how to pick out specific chord shapes to get it to sound right. They use weird ninths and inversions."

When I asked Jazz how she imagined Zane listening to Seepage – with one earbud from a smuggled-in CD player in school? Throwing it on in his room after having a fight with his mother? Sequencing it in beeps as his ringtone? – she said, "all of the above. And he's sending it over Bluetooth to his friend in 64kbps MP3."

* * *

A couple of *Slayers X*'s bonus stages are presented as Zane's unfinished *Kataklysm* mods. The stages are full message board-attachment subject matter – a novelty level shape ("because you edit the level top down, it's almost as fast as drawing a picture," observed Jazz) and a Doomcute reconstruction of a family home (unfortunately, it's Groverhaus). The *Kataklysm* stages are soundtracked with music that falls outside of Zane's CD collection, being – quite literally – from a different game.

"We wanted to invent the sound of a 90's/00's sound card that does not exist," said



FLOOR BABA, who contributed two of the game's *Kataklysm* pieces. "All sounds used in my tracks were resampled or synthesized by myself in my studio, and then I used them as a limited palette to compose the tracks with."

If the nu-metal pastiche of the main game is able to go beyond caricature, the *Kataklysm* songs go the other way – they are such an authentic recreation of the *DOOM* soundtrack that it provokes a cringe of recognition.

"I'm passionate about recontextualizing and modernizing older sounds and styles, outside of this project, too," FLOOR BABA said. "Some call this approach retro-futurism. Basically, I like to learn what myself and others feel familiar with, and then subvert expectations."

Some diegetic music was contributed by Linda's Electronic Orchestra, a synthwave musician. Most of her contributions are dance beats for rat strip clubs and trailer-park parties, but her 80s sounds work best as Mevin's jam at "Trennis" [sic] practice – his aspirations cast as tinny and outdated in comparison to Zane's overdriven guitars. She was recruited from the *Hypnospace Outlaw* fandom, where Jay – initially impressed by the "Steely Dan-esque" tunes she made in the game's bonus sequencer utility – spotted that she was also a *DOOM* mapper and asked her to contribute *Slayers X* maps. Her music was woven in as a part of her own level design process.

* * *

One of Bubblegum Octopus's albums, Perfect Life & Other Stuff, is a collaboration with their past self, based on music they made as a teen in the 2000s. When I asked Octopus if they saw any parallel between themselves and Zane, a thirtysomething finishing off the game he made when he was 16, Octopus hadn't noticed it – "I'm gonna think about that for way too long now."

Disclosure – Holly Boson is a founder of Axile Studio, which contributed coding to Slayers X. She did not work on the game herself and no member of Axile Studio contributed to the soundtrack.

SPACEMEN & DINOSAURS

by DAVID BUSBOOM

The recent Adam Driver SF/action vehicle *65* is about a space pilot from a long time ago in a faraway star system, if not galaxy, who crashes on Earth in the hours preceding the Cretaceous-Paleogene extinction event. ("65 million years ago" as the movie laboriously spells out.)

With this premise, *66* would have been a more accurate title, but that might've befuddled *Star Wars* fans there to see Kylo Ren fight a *T. rex,* and anyway one look at this film's prehistoric fauna is enough to know that scientific rigor is the least of its concerns.

Driver's character, Mills, meets the crash's only other survivor – a young girl named Koa, played by Ariana Greenblatt – and spends the rest of the runtime protecting her from "dinosaurs" that often look and behave more like hybrid monsters from a rejected *Jurassic World* spinoff. Despite being arguably better than the latest installment of *that* franchise, *65* is not a very good movie. It goes down a lot easier, though, if you're a fan of a particular microgenre: that of spacefaring humans (or, in this case, humanoid aliens) encountering dinosaurs on an unfamiliar world. It's a small and unglamorous field, but more persistent than one might think.

Interplanetary explorers have been encountering dinosaurs or dinosaur-like creatures in fiction for more than a century, but the originator of this premise in cinema seems to be *King Dinosaur.* Released in 1955, this directorial debut of the recently late B-movie monarch Bert I. Gordon has all the core elements: four astronauts travel to a rogue planet newly arrived in our solar system (dubbed "Nova") and discover a variety of Earth-like animals including carrion birds, prehistoric mammals and reptiles, and the titular "king" himself – really a gigantic iguana, depicted as all the big creatures are via enlarged "slurpasaur" effects.

After escaping their immediate peril, the astronauts decide to set off a nuclear device as their parting gift, wiping out an entire island of wildlife in their zeal to "bring civilization to planet Nova." *King Dinosaur* was cheaply made with a small cast and liberal use of stock footage, and the result is both sillier and less entertaining than it sounds, especially considering the obvious harm done to some of the animals used.

The cheap trend continued with America's next film of this type, Curtis Harrington's *Voyage to the Prehistoric Planet* (1965), itself the first of two Roger Corman-produced direct-to-TV adaptations of the 1962

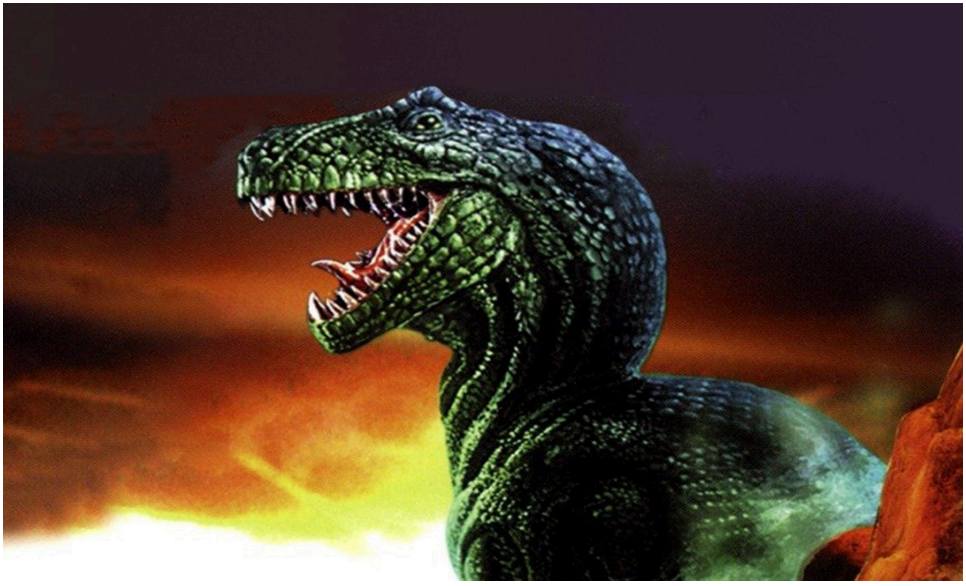
Soviet film *Planeta Bur (Planet of Storms* in English, directed by Pavel Klushantsev). The original depicts a manned expedition to Venus that is crippled by a meteor. The remaining cosmonauts land to find a poison-aired world of misty swamps and rocky volcanoes, populated by sluggish sauropods, floppy pterosaurs and hopping, man-sized predators brought to life by actors in rubber suits.

I assume these last are meant to evoke some kind of large dromaeosaur or small tyrannosaur, though more than either they bear a delightful resemblance to Godzilla – or at least the Big G's underpaid stunt double. Harrington's version reused most of the original footage, dubbing over the Soviet actors and editing in new scenes with horror notables Basil Rathbone and Faith Domergue as a pair of scientists monitoring the mission from afar.

The second adaptation, directed (and narrated) by Peter Bogdonavich in 1968, swapped these for even more new footage starring Mamie Van Doren and several other attractive actresses as beach-dwelling Venusians. The resulting *Voyage to the Planet of Prehistoric Women,* as its title suggests, shifts the focus somewhat from rubbery beasts to seashell-clad babes. Both films are pseudonymous splice-jobs, with the American-filmed scenes diluting more often than adding substance. Each is worth checking out if you're a Corman completist or just into this sort of thing; if you only have patience for one, I'd skip both in favor of the Russian original.

Perhaps the jewel in the Spacemen & Dinosaurs crown came in 1977, with James Shea's *Planet of Dinosaurs.* In this take on the formula, a spaceship crashes on an Earthlike planet many lightyears from our solar system. The stranded crew, having lost their only means of interplanetary communication, resolve to survive in their new environment while battling or evading an impressive menagerie of stop-motion dinosaurs featuring stegosaurs and ceratopsians, sauropods and theropods (including a *Tyrannosaurus* that actually looks the part, at least by 1970s standards), and even a stunted *Rhedosaurus* in tribute to Shea's obvious inspiration, Ray Harryhausen.

As in many Harryhausen films, *Planet of Dinosaurs* put most of its resources into its nonhuman cast, but in this case the people are more stilted than the models, resulting in some awkward and unintentionally hilarious dialogue. This is no *Beast from 20,000 Fathoms* or *Valley of Gwangi,* but its best



moments spark a similar joy. Aside from having the best beasts of the Spacemen & Dinosaurs canon, *Planet of Dinosaurs* is also unique among these films in that the astronauts don't blast off to safety after their initial adventure; they remain on the dinosaur planet for years, maybe even the rest of their lives.

With the release of the CGI-reliant *65* this year, the chronology of Spacemen & Dinosaur movies is also a history of special effects in miniature (no pun intended), and there's an iteration for every preference of low-budget spectacle. These movies are always cheap, often poorly acted and shot, and universally destined to circulate on YouTube, Tubi and bargain-bin DVD. But they are rarely altogether boring – at least for too long – and, like the feathered dinosaurs that hop and fly among us today, they've endured.

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