UNDERGROUND/MAINSTREAM

welcome to **volume eleven, issue two** *of*

UNWINNABLE

magazine

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This Machine Kills Fascists

Dear Reader,

Living in the American Midwest I used to joke that "February was for the strong." Sure, December and January are cold but the *really* weird stuff happens in February. But in putting this issue together there were long stretches where I did not see the sun. Anyway, if you live anywhere where that can happen for you, I hope that this little magazine may provide you some light and warmth as we approach longer days.

This month we have Holly Boson (welcome back Holly!) on *Fortnite* and its fusion of the kid-friendly and the transgressive. Also Justin Kim ruminates on the beautiful and funky world of a particular flavor of anime mashup!

For this month's Funeral Rites, brought to you by our friends at Exalted Funeral, Alyssa Wejebe quacks with Darcy Percy about *DuckQuest*.

As for our regular rogues . . . Oluwatayo Adewole parties like it's 1995. Jay Castello finds some beasts of a (possibly southern?) isle. Madi Chilton plays for blood(sport). Emma Kostopolus jumps, jives and wails. Matt Marrone ponders a giant orb in the desert. Emily Price can't shake the feeling she's been here before. Justin Reeve gets into the architecture of the self. Rob Rich has stopped dreaming but still wants nice things for everyone! Levi Rubeck watches a movie that I thought was *Dirty Dancing.* Ben Sailer gets really into a Taco Bell commercial. Phoenix Simms winds back the sands of time. And Noah Springer is here once more to remind us that all work and no play make us all dull.

Lots of goodness here for you all and more exciting things to announce as the year rolls on. Remember to speak truth to power, fight oppression and speak for those whose voices are silenced by that oppression.

See you all in the next Exploits!

David Shimomura
Chicago, Illinois
February 5, 2024

NOISE COMPLAINT | **BEN SAILER**

MILITARIE GUN RINGS THE BELL

I almost couldn't believe it when I first heard Militarie Gun on a Taco Bell commercial. I wasn't paying attention until I heard something that sounded vaguely familiar come from the TV and my wife asked, "What's this hardcore song doing on this ad?" It took a moment for my brain to register that I wasn't losing my mind and were, in fact, hearing the band's single "Do It Faster" being used to sell fast food, with vocalist Ian Shelton's trademark bark blasting through the speakers while images from a house party flashed across the screen.

Whoever pitched this campaign to Taco Bell knows exactly what they're doing. Militarie Gun aren't the first emerging punk band to be included as part of the chain's Feed the Beat campaign, which sponsors artists with free food on the road, and in the last year has also featured Turnstile, White Reaper and Scowl in national TV spots. If the goal was to find underground bands on the cusp of a mainstream breakout, then they're building an incredible track record.

When I mentioned the ad on Threads (it feels weird to say Threads and not Twitter), a friend responded that there was once a time where they would have disowned a band like Militarie Gun for being in a commercial. While I was spending all my brain power trying to process how the hell these commercials were even getting made, I hadn't considered the fact that I would have reacted the same way when I was younger. They wouldn't have felt like they were "mine" anymore, having traded their artistic ideals for the shallow rewards of capitalism, and thus would have to be branded sellouts.

In a November issue of his recently revived zine Antimatter, writer and Texas is the Reason guitarist Norman Brannon wrote about how the pressure of being called a sellout led his band (and several others) to break up right when they were on the verge of major label success back in the mid-1990s. There was a collective sense that punk and hardcore bands belonged to the community that had cultivated spaces for them to grow, and leaving the world of basement shows and independent labels was an unforgivable

betrayal. The piece called to mind former VICE editor Dan Ozzi's *Sellout* (which is an excellent read), a tome that catalogs several stories from bands that found themselves in similar situations.

The concept of selling out is mostly silly for reasons that most grown adults can see. But when you're young and this music is what your life is oriented around, these are the things that matter to you. For bands that are used to playing small venues on self-funded tours in vans, there are risks to accepting offers from corporations and major labels, and there are also ethical and existential implications for shaking hands with the devil so to speak. But sometimes what holds punk and hardcore bands back isn't just actual concerns about keeping creative control and staying true to their roots, but simply worrying about what their peers would think if they made the leap.

As a case in point, Brannon writes that Texas is the Reason thought no one would care about them if they signed to a major label when they had the chance. That thought was proven incorrect when they reunited years later and played to thousands of people in New York City, most of whom never got to see them and had only heard the band after they split up. In an alternate universe, they might have been as big as Weezer or Jimmy Eat World. The songs were good enough. But other internal and external forces held them back.

Forget the hypocrisy inherent in how either my friend or myself would have decided what forms of "selling out" were or weren't acceptable (it's helpful to understand that both of us come from a generation that was introduced to punk rock in part through the early Tony Hawk Pro Skater series of videogames, which weren't exactly scrappy indie titles). My friend was right. I can 100% see a younger version of myself throwing a crunchwrap supreme on the ground and declaring Militarie Gun dead to the world (or at least dead to myself). At the very least, that commercial would have forced me into an uncomfortable compromise on the loose

collection of beliefs that I would have called my "ethics," and if I kept listening to them, I'd at least have to complain about how their old stuff was better.

Looking back, I can't help but think that so much of the music I grew up loving was held back because of this attitude. I used to spend hours reading the review sections of music magazines, digging through the "thank you" sections of CD liner notes, and going to shows to see bands I'd never heard before, all in the hopes of finding the next band that would show me something I'd never heard before. When you have to go digging to find the stuff you like, every band you "discover" feels like they're "yours." Any time one of those bands escapes their underground scene, it feels like theft.

I want honest music to be given the opportunity to grow and find new audiences in a social and economic environment that's doing everything it can to make survival impossible for artists. If we need Taco Bell of all places to help tip the scales in favor of artists while buying themselves relatively cheap PR and backing tracks for TV spots, then that's telling of a broader problem, but frankly I'm glad bands today aren't afraid to take that money. I'd like to live in a world where the music I love doesn't need corporations for distribution. Until we create sustainable infrastructure for independent music to thrive, Taco Bell might not be the hero we want, but they're probably the weird corporate benefactor we deserve. 👅

1995

*"**You may think we make a lot of money, but how much is a human life worth, demand comes and goes**"*

There are movies where every drop of blood counts. Each drop has its own story, every person felled has a requiem. These are the opposite.

In *The Doom Generation,* the leading trio ends up covered in each other's blood after the inciting incident that brings them together. While they wipe some of it off, there's still a drop or a streak somewhere. As the death and violence mounts there is always fresh blood to replace it. Eventually, you just get used to there always being a drop or two of red clinging to something in the frame.

In *Fallen Angels,* our assassin is entirely detached from the lives he takes. Instead, he's drifting thinking about his entanglement with his business partner and whether she'd make a good wife. We never learn any names of the dead, any reasons, we just know

that he has been paid to kill them and so he does. For him, it's just as mentally involved as flipping fast food burgers or color-coding a spreadsheet. In a different film, we'd see him quitting because the mental toll is too much, or worried because he'd had his family threatened, but Wong Kar Wai isn't interested in creating a moral pretense for any of this. Instead, the hitman is just bored.

The detachment pulls through to how the violence is shot as well. Wong Kar-Wai/ Christopher Doyle are pulling on the slick camera techniques that Hong Kong cinema is known for while also playing intensely with frame rate, motion blur and harsh cuts. Distortion taken to 11 pushes us past cool suave action and into a chaotic blur that overwhelms you instead. Araki's approach to violence, while a little less inspired by gritty crime thrillers, is no less frenetic. The sharp editing makes each act of violence feel like a frantic fever dream and before you even really register the death we've moved forward. The exception to this comes with the final

act of violence, where the pacing and focus on faces force you to sit in the discomfort of it all.

Living in the lap of empire, it's hard not to feel some of this detachment soak in. After all, we are shown violence done in our name on the screens that surround us every day. More specifically, as someone who lives in a rapidly gentrifying city, it feels like you wander through the ghosts of communities plucked apart by vultures. There is blood all around us – would we even know ourselves without it?

"There just is no place for us in the world"

In both *Fallen Angels* and *Doom Generation* we follow dreamers. Wong's Killer (Leon Lai) and Araki's Jordan (James Duval) pontificate about something better being on the horizon. We see Lai's look soften a little from the cultivated hardened exterior to wonder about what it would take to open up a bar. Duval's boyish charm makes you buy into his melancholy entirely.

In Wong's Hong Kong everyone's hearts are so hungry, lost in the ever-shifting urban density. Desperate to find love, desperate to be remembered – even going so far as biting to make sure the mark is left somewhere,

that there's some record you existed at all. As with his other films, despite the packed proximity of the city, there is a constant feeling of distance between those inside.

By contrast, when Jordan dreams, he looks out into open vistas of California, full of color and possibility. It is particularly interesting to position Duval as the dreamer in comparison to his white counterparts. The colonial promise of California (and the American West) as a land of opportunity isn't exclusive to white people, but the reality of what happens to those who try to cash in those promises is very different. And when we reach the conclusion of the film, he is well and truly punished for dreaming and existing in a space claimed by white America.

In the end those dreams don't protect either of them from death. Jordan is murdered by the gang of his girlfriend's Nazi ex, hellbent on revenge while covered in American regalia. The Killer's dreams are ended after his now-former business partner puts a bounty on his head that the city is all too glad to take. Yet when they die the world doesn't stop. It can't, if all are doomed what's another dead dream really worth?
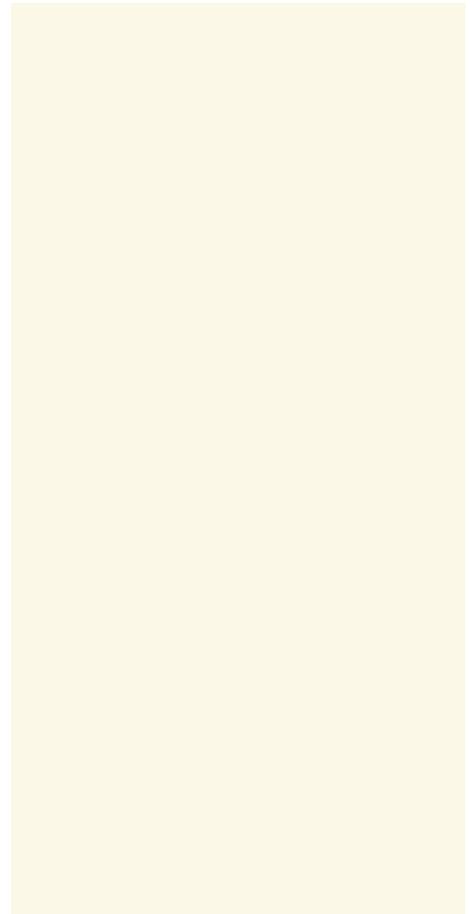
"The road wasn't that long, and I knew I'd be getting off soon. But at that moment I felt such warmth."

Nobody in these films remains stationary long, whether rushing around the streets of Hong Kong or riding along the highway. Motion seems to be the only thing that keeps the doom away. I'm no good at stillness either.

What I appreciate about both these filmmakers is that there's still value in the transitory moments. The desperate reaching means something. So does the brimming homoerotic desire in Arakii's picture even when never completely fulfilled. The complicated love between He Zhiwu (Takeshi Kaneshiro) and his father (played by Man-Lei Chain) is not made worthless by the indirectness of their expression or the fleeting nature of their interactions. The warmth and bonds found, however messy and unconventional and temporary, still have weight.

Both *Fallen Angels* and *The Doom Generation* end with characters riding on into the proverbial sunset, they keep moving long after the film reel runs out. I don't know whether to be encouraged or depressed by this. It's been nearly thirty years, and it still feels like we're doomed. Maybe it's the fate of each gen-eration to feel uniquely doomed, or maybe things have just never gotten any better. But hey, maybe we can just keep riding until we hit something that half resembles a future. 🎺

WHAT TIME LOOPS MEAN TO ME

I get déjà vu a lot. Semi-frequently I find myself standing in front of the produce aisle looking at a crate of apples I swear I saw in a dream. When someone finishes a sentence, I'll sometimes get the feeling I could predict what they're about to say. As I understand it, the science behind déjà vu is that it's basically a brain fart, not a predictive vision. Still, whenever it happens, I have a moment of thinking, as I'm sure everyone has, what if I've been here before?

As someone prone to this line of thinking, it seems natural that I like time loop stories. However, time loops can be difficult to love. Like time travel, time loops have a lot of fiddly details (do characters retain their memories? Do the time loop selves live after their loops end?). Personally, I don't have patience for much beyond the basic formula of "you're stuck in time, and you need to do something about it." They are repetitive by definition, which is something that can also be frustrating.

And yet, time loops have been a Thing for a while now in all kinds of media, and particu-larly in games. The late 2010s were an inflection point in the genre: *Outer Wilds, Minit* and *Elsinore* all released within a year of each other. Since then, there's been *Loop Hero, Twelve Minutes* and the mod-to-game *The Forgotten City* to name just a few. These games constitute two categories of time loop games: those which treat it as a mechanical device, like a temporal metroid-vania where each loop gives you new abilities, and those which treat it as a narrative experience. Of course, there are games that do both, like *Majora's Mask,* where the process of time looping is a gameplay tool as well as a key part of the story.

2023 wasn't as big a year for time loop games as, for example, 2019. But the games that came out last year represent a tipping of the scales toward the narrative extreme, where characters' interior feelings about being in a time loop come out. For example, *Slay the Princess,* which launched at the end of the year, has its Hero remember his past actions, which understandably causes some trauma. It brings up an important aspect of time

(Who knew being frozen in time just felt like a nice nap.)

loops as a concept: viewed more deeply, they're pretty disturbing.

This was a theme echoed in another time loop game of 2023: *In Stars and Time,* an RPG where the protagonist Siffrin gets trapped trying to kill an evil king over and over. The game starts at the end of an adventure; your whole experience is going through a final dungeon, the House of Change, figuring out how to progress and maybe, this time, beat the final boss. Of course, this ends up being more complicated than you'd expect; where I thought I'd go through ten or fewer loops, I went through dozens, each one going slightly more wrong than the last.

The game's creator Adrienne Bazir agrees that time loops have an underexplored sinister side. "I'm a big fan of time loop and time travel stories in general," she told me over email. "But in most of the media that I've personally seen, time loop and time travel are used as means for the story to somehow get somewhere, and don't necessarily go deep into how horrifying those would be." Siffrin themself slips into hopelessness over the course of the game, isolating themselves from their friends and refusing to tell them about the time loops (this game's lesson: be emotionally vulnerable with your friends!). Of course, Siffrin's friends notice something's up before long and there's a race against the clock to figure it out, which brings its own difficulties.

Bazir sells the relationship between these characters through a *lot* of writing. While there is repetition in the dialogue, most events have at least two or three variations depending on how many times you've seen them, what you've done in the loop so far, and what items you have. "I had so much fun writing all those variations, and how those variations shape the character of Siffrin and their party members," Bazir said. "Seeing how all those characters react to those small changes helps the player figure out what kind of people they are! Really, time loops are a great way to do character studies, which are my favorite part of writing."

Aside from being windows into characters, time loops can also offer a way of making videogame systems feel more integrated. Bazir identified systems like game overs, new game + and even saves as things that time loops are uniquely suited to represent. This utility is present in non-digital games, too. I asked Max Kämmerer, the creator of *What's so cool about time loops?,* a hack of the system *What's so cool about outer space?*, what he felt time loops offered TTRPG players. "What I like about the idea of time loops is that the characters and players gain knowledge that they can use in the next iteration and in the end to create kind of a perfect iteration when they essentially solved the puzzle of the loop," he said.

Overcoming obstacles and learning from them is a major theme of *What's so cool about time loops?*. Sample scenarios include an alien invasion, the last day of a war and an

Alright! Who I am, right?

awkward family dinner. After you create your own time loop, you try to "solve" it again and again. At first, players might know things about the world that their characters don't; however, after a few loops they'll begin to wise up. This process of gaining more knowledge corresponds with the process in other RPGs of leveling up and growing stronger. Like puzzle games, you're dependent on your mind rather than your stats.

Kämmerer also noted the freedom time loops can offer players to make mistakes without lasting consequences, or in spite of them. "I like systems that let the players 'fail forward' or 'succeed at a cost.' The player may fail a roll but still get what they want, it just comes with a problem or other disadvantage. Time loops are also kind of like that, by failing something during the first iteration, even with very bad consequences, the characters learn something about the world or situation to use in the future."

One danger of time loop games is that they become boring for the player. I had this experience when I tried *Outer Wilds,* whose freedom of exploration couldn't make up for all the running back and forth I needed to do. *In Stars and Time* faced the same problem. Since the whole game involves repeating the same maps and conversations, letting players skip dialogue and travel to particular places in the dungeon at will was especially important. However, Bazir wanted to avoid making a playthrough too smooth. After all, Siffrin's experience of the time loops is far from seamless: while they feel invulnerable

at first, the process of having experiences with their friends that only they can remember eventually wears them down, to the point where each new loop becomes painful. "The player *should* feel that the game is repetitive, or boring, or even infuriating, because that's how Siffrin feels."

These conversations helped me to realize what I find most interesting about time loop games is that they give me the opportunity to grow alongside the character. When little about my external environment changes, I'm forced to look inward and use my brain, and my memories, to find out where to go next. As many of these games demonstrate, that growth can sometimes be quite painful. Yet, the way mechanics and stories combine provides a nice metaphor for the experience of struggling through something you're not the best at, but that you're obliged to keep trying again and again.

Bazir sees those more painful moments as almost therapeutic. "Of course, we can't experience a time loop in real life, but a lot of us do feel similar emotions to those narratives. The routine of a 9-5, an endless job, the solitude of working from home, feeling removed from society, having difficulty communicating with loved ones . . . Those are feelings that most people have gone through in one way or another, and being able to experience those in a game with magic and fantasy in it is very beneficial, I think." 🔥

AND THE CROWD GOES WILD

The first slice of narrative in *Rollerdrome* takes place in an empty locker room. Kara Hassan is the freshest meat in 2030's favorite blood sport. She can poke around the possessions of her competitors, read notices intended for the athletes on the walls and check her messages at a wall-mounted computer terminal before heading into the rink, where she straps on a pair of roller skates and shoots the shit out of some people. Every time you enter a new set of levels in *Rollerdrome* you're met with a similar snippet of story – Kara, alone in a room, poking through the detritus of others before skating into the arena to meet her fate. The act of wandering through these spaces where people used to be and aren't proves to be oddly isolating, especially when Kara then leaves them to enter a place where she is the opposite of alone, where she is the focus of pointed, violent attention.

These peaceful establishing shots are an interesting choice for this kind of future blood sport. Rollerdrome's obvious inspirations (as cited by the development team) are *Rollerball* and *The Running Man,* classics of the genre, both of which allow few moments of quiet reflection for their protagonists. The closest similarity is *Rollerball*'s Jonathan's scenes of frustrated conversation outside of the context of the titular game, as he tries to decipher the machinations of his corporate owners that are pushing for his premature retirement; but of course, once he goes back to the rink, he has a team crowded around him and spectators right past the barriers, baying for blood. Kara has no team; her competitors, friendly and unfriendly, are never seen; her audience is far away, watching on a screen. The only other life in *Rollerdrome* is the House players who try to bring her down, and each one is masked and impersonal. Her only companions are an anonymous mass of focused violence.

Most future sport media establishes the violence of the sport as an approved outlet for societal pressure, a way for the general public to collectively release unsavory feelings and energy in a way that doesn't upset the larger system in which they live. The existence of the sport within a larger society is key to its relevance – it wouldn't be played

without an audience. Screaming fans and crowds constantly tuning in heighten the spectacle, encourage more blood and exert psychological pressure on the athletes to meet their demands. In *Rollerdrome,* with these pressures only implied, not seen, Kara's story becomes one of acute isolation. The game progresses, the difficulty curve grows steeper and Kara throws herself over and over into the meat grinder of swirling, ruthless sport for – for what? For glory? For money? For her own satisfaction, just to win, to have that feeling of it? There are revolutionaries who want to do something about the structure of their society that makes a game like *Rollerdrome* even possible, but Kara keeps her mouth shut about them enough to stay friendly for television – not like Lola Igwe, who is removed from the running early on for being too vocal about her support for the New Action Army, or Morgan Fray, the best to ever skate and shoot, whose ignominious death before the semifinals is a little too convenient to have come from fair play. Kept separate from her audience, the spectacle Kara creates echoes emptily – to what end, we don't know.

The running theme between most of these future sports is that the players are both dangerous and in danger. In order for these games to work as an outlet of antisocial energy, they themselves have to be kept sanitized: the athletes are controlled, the score ends up where it should and the game never gets out of hand. The players' fame protects them even as it reduces their agency, their personal freedom, and keeps them firmly in debt to the powers that be in their sport. The standard of violence in the various games serves as easy cover; their voluntary participation in blood sports absolves controlling interests of suspicion if something goes wrong. They take their lives in their hands

every time they enter the arena. If a player is getting out of line – like Jonathan in *Rollerball,* whose longevity and high profile angered executives who wanted the game to reinforce the futility of individual action – the bloodletting gets sent in their direction. Jonathan's teammates become the sacrificial lambs in *Rollerball* as the movie hurtles towards its nihilistic conclusion, every one of them wiped out so he can score one uncelebrated goal in a smoldering, blood-smeared rink, the howling crowd finally quiet, perhaps finally realizing what exactly they'd been cheering for. *Rollerdrome* couldn't be more different. Kara has no teammates to protect her or avenge her; the arenas are quiet until the moment she enters and if she dies, she dies alone, under the watchful eyes of the House players and the camera.

It's never quite established what *Rollerdrome's* sport is reflecting in the society that watches it. Are the general public kept sedate under the heavy hand of the corporate overlords? Do they watch because it's how they can bare their teeth, how they can rebel without rebelling, feel something real and still go home at the end of the day? Or are the cities filthy and riotous like the gluttonous crowd in *The Running Man,* the game simply mirroring the everyday violence of dystopian life? All we know is their demand. Their willingness to watch and the International Rollerdrome Federation's willingness to supply and Kara's willingness to walk through those quiet hallways and throw herself, again and again, into the deadly fray. 🪗

IN DEFENSE OF THE JUMP SCARE: A MANIFESTO

Picture This: You're a teenager, bored on a Friday night. You and your friends decide to go see whatever mid-budget horror film is playing at the movies that weekend. You get there, fully intending to exercise your adolescent bravado, because you are officially Too Cool to Be Scared. But as the film continues along, you start to feel slightly tense. Then incredibly tense. Then absolutely unbearably tense until – WHAM. The bad guy suddenly appears right behind the hapless protagonist. You literally (as befits the name) jump in your seat. But then the moment passes, and the shock of this unexpected-but-totally-expected presence fades. You open your mouth and you laugh. How stupid that was.

I would assume that this is how most of us experienced jump scares in horror media – as objects of ridicule, only good fodder for adolescent derision. The case against jump scares is long and storied, and rests on the idea that a jump scare is the lowest common denominator of horror. A jump scare does nothing to provide a lingering sense of

unease – you aren't thinking about the jump scare later that night when you can't sleep. The second they are over, they disappear, leaving very little residue. Jump scares are the cotton candy of horror, or so the argument goes. And because they do not linger on the palate, we think of them as something lesser than true horror and suspense, something that is beneath the true auteurs. This attitude is particularly damaging for videogame horror, because of how common generic expectations for combat predispose gameplay toward these moments of enemies suddenly appearing.

This is where I disembark. I personally adore the jump scare, but beyond just liking it, I think it serves an incredibly important purpose in the horror genre, and horror games specifically, to provide a dynamic pressure gauge for the tension of the experience. Consider, for example, a horror movie with few to no jump scares (and there are several good ones). The experience of watching one of these movies, like a Peele

DEAD SPACE

or an Aster, is very much a process of endurance. You spend the entire two hours in a state of dread that inexorably increases as the film progresses. You leave the experience potentially moved or unsettled by the things you saw, true, but you also leave exhausted, because you were just put through an emotional gauntlet.

So, here's my argument – I believe jump scares function as a necessary pressure-release valve for the experience of watching horror, thus allowing the experience to be less unrelentingly tiring. Films or games with carefully timed jump scares place them at moments of peak tension, and the aftermath of the jump scare resets our internal anxiety to some degree – we jump, but then we laugh, and we settle back into the experience noticeably calmer, until the tension of the experience ramps up again. In this way, jump scares actually work to make consuming horror content a more emotionally sustainable practice.

Additionally, and more specific to the work of gaming in horror, jump scares also serve a very important mechanical purpose of increasing the difficulty of engaging in precise input. Last month I waxed poetic about the revolver-loading mechanic in *Amnesia: The Bunker,* and here I guess I'm making a sort of similar point – when you're really freaked out, even if that is a momentary

feeling, you tend to get worse at stuff. So, in a game like *Dead Space,* which I feel is the undisputed king of the videogame jump scare, not only does it release an emotional pressure valve for the player, it also tests the player's ability to do things like aim, reload and move their character such that Isaac Clarke doesn't get dismembered. This added layer of functionality means that jump scares serve the dual purpose of emotional sustainability and a quantifiable difficulty scaling mechanic.

Obviously, at the end of the day, whether or not jump scares are your cup of tea remains a personal preference. Some people find the physical reaction of a jump scare more distinctly unpleasant than a two-hour slog through an arthouse horror film – sort of like how you can decide to swallow the bad-tasting medicine or live with the stomachache (I personally detest Pepto-Bismol). But I think considering the jump scare to be an inherently inferior tactic of cheap or kitschy media productions misunderstands what it does to and for the audience, particularly in a games setting. 🎺
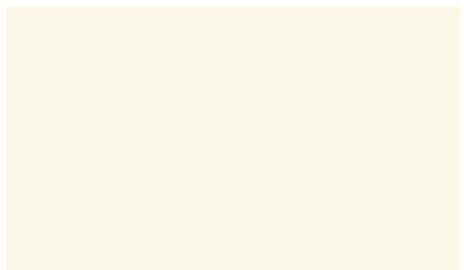
MAKING LEAPS

It's still deep winter in my neck of the woods, which means that my mind is hibernating. This time of the year it's difficult to pull oneself out from one's heavy quilt of preoccupations and hopeful reveries. This last January, I haven't been gaming very actively or widely. Partially this is due to one of my gigs, as a historical archivist. I'm often dealing with mountains of data and designing a metadata system for said data. Doing so has made coming home to play something digital and manage more data (even if in a creative aspect) a little overwhelming at times.

Yet engaging with historical documents on a regular basis has made me a lot more aware of how important and influential historical records and their preservation are on many levels. The level I'm currently most concerned with is our responsibility, whether we work directly with historical records like I do, or indirectly as individuals who curate what personal and public records we choose to engage with and preserve. I've been on both sides, and I can safely say now that both positions are equally culpable with regards to collective memory and posterity. The current push on social media to keep people actively aware of the interconnectedness of the genocides happening around the world and what collective liberation means is one example of this.

Whether we are raising awareness of these issues offline in our local communities, or reminding people of current events from journalists and activists on the ground via social media platforms, the daily emphasis on remembrance and archiving mindfully nowadays is strong. Especially considering how many bad actors there are out there, including the heads of said social media platforms, trying to exploit the attention economy with propaganda and heavily skewed facts.

What in the world is she going on about? Well, I'm an older player now and you've probably noticed that a few of my recent pieces have been about returning to the roots of what made me interested in games. Or what they've taught me, both creatively and politically over time. More specifically, I'm fascinated by how sometimes a certain
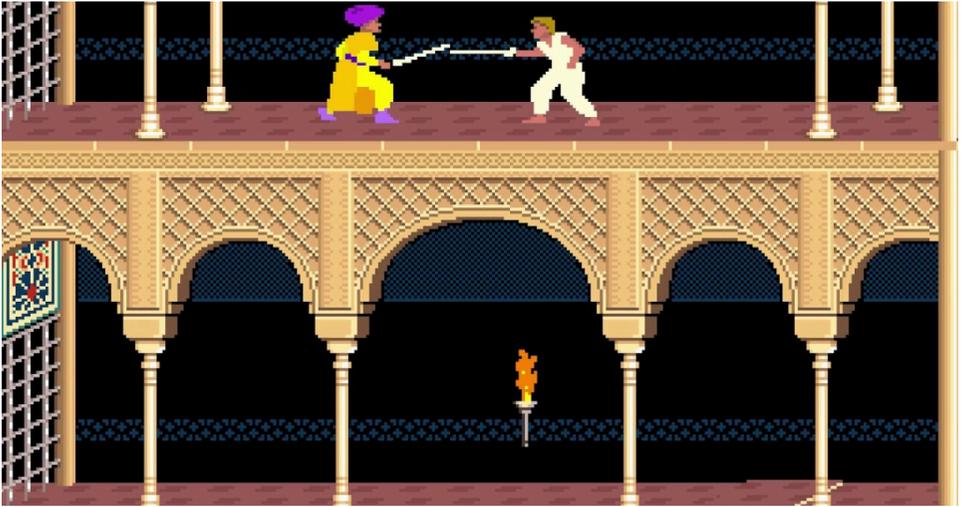
long-running series will grow alongside you, its relationship with you and your associated subtexts with it morphing over time.

Last month, Ubisoft released *Prince of Persia: The Lost Crown* and revitalized the swashbuckling, often Orientalist in tone series. *Prince of Persia* (the 1992 Broderbund Software edition for old Macintosh computers, specifically the Mac SE/30 I believe for my family back then) was the game that first ignited my imagination. With its heavy references to *Arabian Nights* a-la Disney's *Aladdin* and its focus on using gymnastics and sword-fighting to beat the clock and save the princess, I was fixated. I can't say for certain that *Prince of Persia* was my actual first game, but it's a strong contender. I had observed and played co-op style with my parents with titles like *SimCity, SimAnt, Shufflepuck Cafe, Myst* and a few miscellaneous sidescroller or top-down fantasy tactics demos of which I have faint memories. I also learned by click-clacking my way through *Mario Teaches Typing* at my elementary school. But none of these titles resonated with me in the same way as *Prince of Persia* (1992) did.

What was the difference between *Prince of Persia* and those other titles that bob to the surface of my memory? I don't think it was simply the colorful graphics or the thin adventure plotline (though I did want to reunite the protagonist with his princess). I think it was more to do with the way time and physicality interacted with each other in the system. At the time, I was taking gymnastics practice after school some nights and the way you controlled the protagonist throughout the perils of Jafar's dungeons – jumping, flipping and vaulting off high surfaces – was something I could identify with. The groundbreaking use of Mechner's rotoscoping animation techniques made the protagonist's movements feel very convincing to me as a child and despite having a different gender (the one that was supposed to be waiting in agonizing stasis while an hourglass' sands decide her fate) and different circumstances, I could see myself in the "Prince". So much so that when a kid on my school's playground dared me to jump to fifth (or was it sixth?) monkey bar, I truly thought I could do so. I broke my left arm instead.

Prince of Persia was the first game, to my knowledge, that galvanized my imagination enough that I wanted to translate the actions I took on-screen into my everyday life off-screen and outside. Something about the mix of time-bound activity and the verisimilitude (scant and constrained by the limited frames of '90s graphics as it was) was just potent enough that it made me believe that I, a time-bound and perpet-

ually moving child, was capable of the same feats as the Prince.

Now obviously, this is probably not exactly what went through my head back then on the playground. But I do remember that when the dare was issued to me to make that ill-timed leap of faith to the far-off monkey bar, I wasn't just trying to impress my schoolmates (who had previously bullied me into playing a damsel-in-distress during recess). I was excited to take the dare head-on because I truly believed I could do it. Because of a computer game. Just to be clear, I see this as a formative experience, not a negative one. Yes, I broke my arm, but that's beside the point. I've never once regretted taking leaps of faith since (both figurative and literal). But that fall also tempered my expectations, teaching me to be more strategic and resourceful about how I conduct myself when taking risks. And to learn from each periodic fall I take as well.

Time has always been important to the *PoP* franchise, but the dynamics of how players experienced time shifted significantly with the *Sands of Time.* Up until that point of the series, time was a constraint, a way to push players to master the controls, so that they could succeed in spite of that constraint. *Sands of Time's* rewind mechanic imbued players with a different kind of agency, the ability to act

upon time instead of reacting to it. I don't have as much experience playing *Sands of Time,* or the cringe-inducing *Warrior Within* which continued to use the rewinding mechanic, but I have noticed that what the rewind mechanic has done for players is make them aware of just how much potential agency they have. I think this is why *Prince of Persia* (2008), which centered not just the Prince's agency but the Princess' as well, has a special place in my heart. Dastan and Elika also learn that agency is not something individual and isolated, but fluid and exponential when teamwork is embraced to overcome epic obstacles.

Speaking of teamwork, I think another reason I strongly believe *Prince of Persia* was the real start of my life as a player, is because of the thrill of excitement when, while watching my mom play the title one day, she asked if I'd like to try and learn the game. Despite how much both of us struggled to master the keystrokes and combos needed to advance in the game, I rarely felt frustrated. Learning to play this game also taught me about the joy of sharing a geeky media experience with someone.

Recently I asked my mom what her perspective of the game and sharing it with me was like. She told me she found it humorous to see her young daughter hit

obstacle after obstacle and at most react with a surprised yet pitiful exclamation of "Oh no, the little man is hurt" or something along those lines. I was a sweet summer child of 3 or 4 at the time and it was my first time confronting a representation of death and failure on-screen. One that softened the blow by reviving my avatar and teaching me how to continuously get up and try again. A lot of that early era of the series was about reacting to things. To the environment, to your sword dueling opponents and most importantly, to the time limit.

If games can make us aware of systems and our actions within those systems and how we could better translate thoughts into actions, why do we still insist that games are just escapist entertainment? Yes, I know that they are capitalistic objects in most instances, and therefore subject to the BS of "too big to fail". But at the level of consumers and players of this media, why are there still so many who refuse to see how games can influence you politically? Is it the seeming absurdity of realizing that games, as silly or irreverent as they can be in their representation, can be mirrors of how different cultures around the world perceive agency?

I love that *The Lost Crown* is bringing together all of the elements of past *Prince of Persia* titles that I have enjoyed and

learned from. I love that it's the first AAA game to be localized officially in Persian (Farsi). I love that it's the first Prince of Persia to feature Mentrix, an Iranian-born and Sufi-inspired woman composer, on its soundtrack (a far cry from the Godsmack era of *Warrior Within)*. Not to mention how gender-diverse Ubisoft Montpellier's creative team is, as well. The games industry is becoming more aware of the importance of including people from the cultures being represented in the process of development and localization, despite the controversies involved with doing so. 🔱
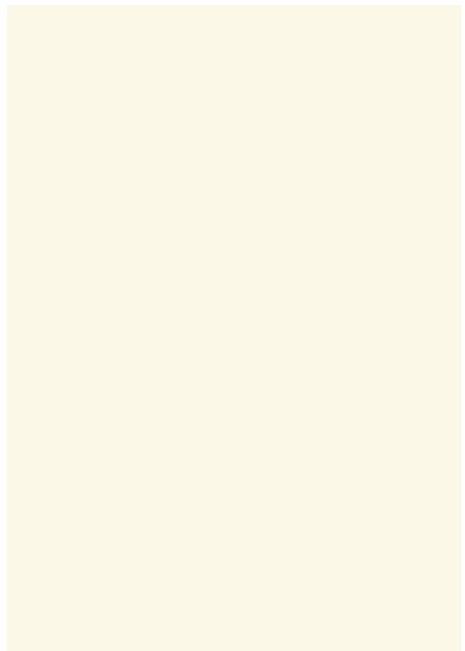
ATOMIC CITY:
U2 GO NUCLEAR AT THE SPHERE

I recently texted this to one of my oldest and dearest friends:

I will never forget that show. I'll be in assisted living with no idea who my children are, and I'll still be talking about U2 at the Sphere.

As I showed photos and videos of the concert at the gym a few days later, I went one step further on the assisted living analogy:

"If my grown-up kids walk in, I'll look at them, confused, and ask: 'Do I know you from the Sphere?'"

Yes, late last year, I flew to Las Vegas, won $176 on a Willy Wonka slot machine at the Venetian, and saw "U2:UV" at the Sphere, which was both a blast from the past and a rocket ride into the future. I've had *Achtung Baby* practically on repeat ever since, an album I only fully appreciate now, more than 30 years after I first heard it. I've also spent the winter traipsing around in a U2-at-the-

Sphere beanie hat I bought on Etsy. If I lived in Las Vegas, I wouldn't be writing this column at all, because I'd be at the show. Again. (And then again.)

In some ways, the Oompa-Loompas dancing and singing at me as bonus Wonka bars opened and my winnings spun ever upward on the souped-up slot-machine screen was the perfect opening act for U2 at the Sphere. Something old and nostalgic (classic Willy Wonka!), something new and thrilling (me actually winning at a casino!).

Something old and nostalgic: The Edge's ringing guitar as it opens "Where the Streets Have No Name" (albeit in the best quality sound I've ever heard at a live concert venue, especially of this size).

Something new and thrilling: The towering screen behind the band slowly lights up as a red sun rises in the East, illuminating a desert landscape and a flag made of billowing smoke. The 21st Century Spaceship: Earth

opens up to sand and brush stretching out to the distant hills and horizon. The word epic feels inadequate. In the brief video clip I took, I can be heard simply saying, "Shit."

If you don't like U2, you're not alone, of course. For me, they were always playing second fiddle to my beloved R.E.M., especially when I used to scrap with my girlfriend in high school over which world-conquering rock band was better.

All these years later, though, one thing is undeniable: U2 fans are insanely lucky. Decades after their prime, they're still rele-

vant. R.E.M. broke up 13 years ago, and U2 is, right now, in the midst of a residency opening a mind-blowing venue with a show so good I didn't give a second thought to flying across the country to see it.

In fact, it was the best decision I made last year. Maybe my best decision in several. At any rate, when I'm old and barely able to see through my own dim hazy past, I plan to remember this decision and smile.

Maybe, I'll remember my decision to have kids, too. 🎸
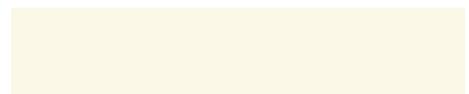
SEASONAL SPACE

One of the few TikTok accounts I miss, after successfully extricating the app from my day to day, is Frankie Simmons. I don't remember when I discovered her, but I do remember that it was before last winter. Several videos from that time stick in my brain: her talking about how she struggles with the season, but that she doesn't just want to figure out how to get through it but to also come to appreciate it for what it is.

I was trying to do the same. Both last winter and this winter have not only been cold and dreary but I've also been waiting for a big change coming in February: last year, moving to my own place in a new city; this year ending an editing contract and getting back to full time writing.

I'm not a patient person. I spend so much of winter – and the other seasons – thinking about the future, listing out everything I'll get to do when the time is right. But over a couple of years, I've been trying hard to stick with the present moment and find what's good about it.

I'm still very bad at it. Simmons' videos, and now that I'm not on TikTok but subscribed to her newsletter, her writing, are great at making me *want* to. In a recent email titled "A Scavenger Hunt for the Dead of Winter," she once again sets out the beauty of the season. I almost didn't read it – I know where the dead of winter is, it's *everywhere* and it's inside my chest. But, as Simmons writes, "there are things that exist today that won't on any other day of the year." Tree branches in the low sun, birds more grateful than ever for scattered food, soup and thick-sliced bread that just tastes better in the cold.

So, sure, I'm invested in the idea again, but putting it into practice is hard. I'll throw some extra sunflower seeds out of the door in the morning as I'm making my coffee, but it's too cold and I'm too tired to remember Simmons' words about considering how nice the branches on my neighbor's hazel tree look today.

Sick of it, I turned to a fictional tropical landscape. *Beasts of Maravilla Island* is a photography game in which a woman called

Marina heads off somewhere warm and lush, armed with her camera and her grandfather's notebook. Through these two objects, Marina explores the island's biodiversity, capturing images of the dozens of birds, plants, reptiles, insects and more.

In every area, a checklist tells you how many species to be on the lookout for. It trains you to constantly keep an eye open for newness. At first, each new level is a riot of undiscovered flora and fauna, but as you move through the level, there's less that you haven't seen before. You have to carefully track down the dead ends and cul-de-sacs which are the only spots to find something strange and beautiful, like a chorus of singing frogs or a crystalline ladybird.

Of course, this is easy in the game. Maravilla is a paradise bursting at the seams with color, movement, and energy. It's also short and split into 20-or-so minute sections, so you don't have to keep it up for long.

But still. I played one section of *Beasts of Maravilla Island* and then I got on a bus, and the naked tree branches seemed more interesting than ever. I played another section and hung a print in my workspace that's been lying, waiting, for weeks. I finished the game and went downstairs, out into the garden, broke the ice on the birdbath and scattered some seeds. Then I went back into the kitchen, laid out some vegetables for soup, and watched what turned up. Blackbird, wood pigeon, robin, great tit, magpie.

Maybe they'll show up again tomorrow. Maybe they won't. I'll keep a look out and let you know. 🎺

ROAD HOUSE RONIN

My wife has been asking friends and colleagues alike what their favorite 25 movies are. Not the greatest of all time, but movies they hold dear for whatever reason. Some folks struggle with the question, fearing judgment for tastes established long ago but have since gone bear and bull in their wider estimation. Or they just have a hard time blowing the dust off the shelves in their mind theaters to recall the major hits. This has also let to a few incredulous exclamations of "what do you mean you haven't seen [movie that bombed but then became a cult classic thanks to cable or whatever]?"

One such film was *Road House,* the 1989 punch-fest featuring Patrick Swayze smoking too much while squaring off with a series of small-town tough guys and then eventually a 60-year-old Korean War vet mobster. I'm pretty sure it's the kind of movie my dad might have left playing around the house, as it featured a lot of high-heat blues riffs and sweaty kicks and '80s toplessness, but I'd also rewatched it a few years ago and remembered it being more fun than serious without swerving too far into total silliness.

So, a few nights ago, we threw it on to see how it held up, in no way influenced by the upcoming "remake" under the same title which I only just learned about this morning and am already dismissing.

Swayze's the lead, a mysterious bouncer (or "cooler," which is the bouncer in charge) that everyone with a lick of sense is afraid of or attracted to, and everyone else thinks they can take down. But Dalton knows that no one can beat him, which renders fighting moot for the most part. His first potential brawl is really a ruse to walk a dipshit out the door, stumbling to his car with limbs intact and smugly believing Dalton is a coward. But a rich man feels otherwise and asks Dalton to come fix up his boxing bar, the Double Deuce. Dalton negotiates a killer rate and total control and skips town that night.

If you haven't seen *Road House,* you can probably predict the major beats, which are mostly that Dalton is a tough guy with a heart of gold, trying to act like he only cares about money, but can't help but fall in with the charming residents of the town and join

their battle against a cartoonish kingpin. But on this viewing, I realized there's a bit more going on with Dalton, which is that he is a ronin, and *Road House* is a samurai film.

I'm no stranger to Kurosawa's films, *The Tale of Genji,* and other major works of the samurai canon, but if I'm being honest, most of my knowledge of the most noble definition of what it means to be a samurai comes from *Usagi Yojimbo.* This comic is the lifelong work of writer and artist Stan Sakai, winner of multiple Eisner awards and, if you have any interest in comics, probably your favorite writer/author's favorite writer/author. Sakai started *Usagi Yojimbo* in 1984 and has been publishing his stories ever since, with appearances alongside the Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles in comic and cartoon form, videogames, even a Netflix reinterpretation. It's the story of Miyamoto Usagi, a samurai prodigy turned masterless ronin when his lord died on the Adachigahara plain. Since then, he has wandered and done good whenever he could, only drawing his sword as a last resort.

Usagi and Dalton's stories aren't totally parallel, but they rhyme in a lot of ways. Dalton roams from bar to bar, taking the worst dives and violent hellholes and transforming them into places that sell booze and good times. Usagi similarly refuses to settle, instead wandering Japan on the warrior's path in order to perfect his art. The legends of Dalton's martial prowess proceed him, and when Dalton is eventually forced to engage in combat at the Deuce he delivers three times as many licks as he takes. Both Dalton and Usagi are underestimated, and they use this to their advantage, almost always surprising their opponents with their ferocity.
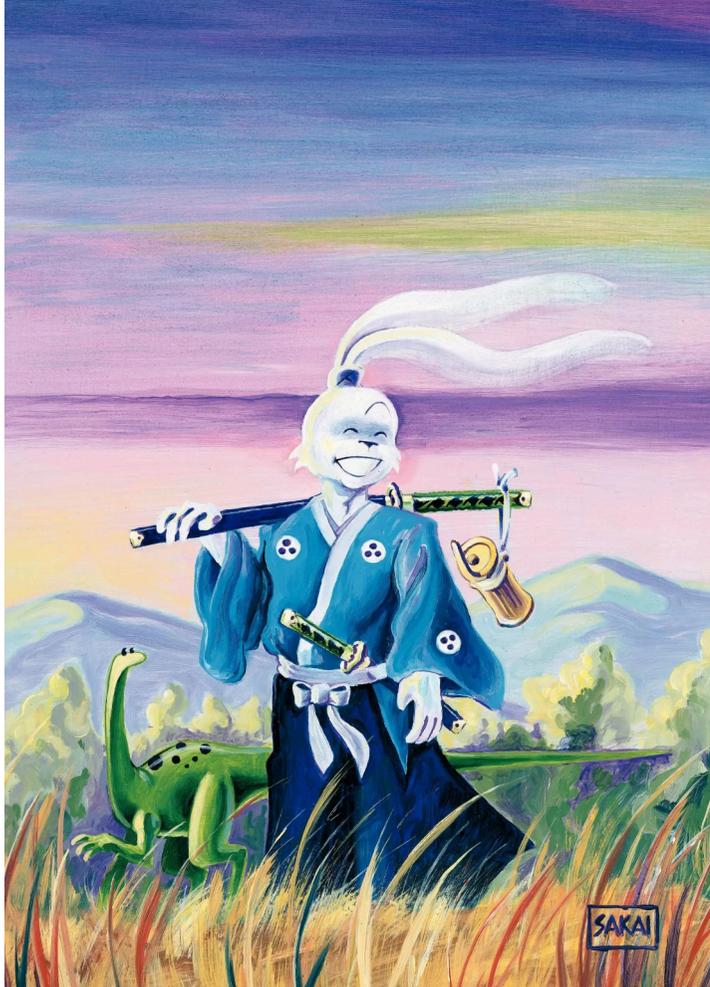
Usagi Yojimbo teaches us that a true samurai does more than just study killing – they must master various other arts, including philosophy. Dalton understands this directive, having been a philosophy student at NYU before he became a bouncer, and we see his elegant tai chi practice and affinity for reading. It also doesn't hurt that he's close friends with the Double Deuce's house bandleader and can appreciate some well-played blues. Dalton also has a grizzled teacher named Wade, played by baby silver fox Sam Elliott, who is the best in the bouncing business, pairing nicely with Usagi's Sensei Katsuichi, a seemingly invincible old lion hermit who lives in the mountains and takes Usagi on as a student only after Usagi proves his dedication. Katsuichi and Wade consider their students to be fools, though they deeply care for them as well.
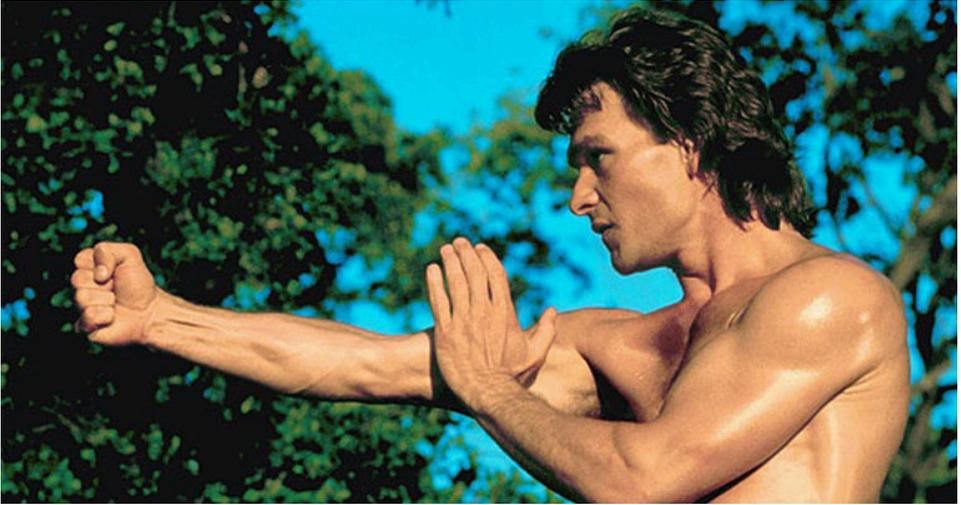
The best evidence of *Road House* as a samurai movie is when Dalton is training his new staff at the Deuce. He fires the hotheads and the drug dealers and tells the rest that fighting should be their last course of action – they should always "be nice" no matter what a rowdy patron says or threatens. Usagi was similarly trained that the sword is the soul of the samurai, and more so, the sharpest souls are kept inside their scabbards – a riddle that Usagi struggles with as a student but comes to understand more and more with each life he takes. A true warrior recognizes her abilities, but also that life is sacred, a lesson Dalton learned when he killed a man in self-defense over a misunderstanding with a lover, leading to Dalton ripping the attacker's throat out.

Here we see Dalton the samurai at his peak. Though he abhors violence, violence is his tool, his trade and his burden. He uses it only when pressed and aims to prevent death, laughing off the regular vandalism of his car at the hands of frustrated small-time bruisers. But mobster Brad Wesley delights in unrepentant destruction and cruelty, sending his bloodthirsty henchman Jimmy Reno out to kill Dalton's friends, which drives Dalton to the edge. In a bareknuckle beatdown on the riverbank, Dalton and Reno seem evenly matched, and slowly Dalton realizes that Reno will not stop attacking his friends and cannot be reasoned with as he

desires only brutal death. So, Dalton unleashes his throat-ripping technique while his doctor girlfriend watches aghast. The samurai strives for a world free of this kind of death, but will not abide unquenchable blood thirst, accepting that he damns himself by engaging in the fight.

Road House ends with a pretty killer final rout through Wesley's garish mansion, where one knife in particular racks up an impressive body count. In the end Dalton tries to walk away from a defeated Wesley, no longer willing to stoop to the criminal's level, leaving the various doughy businessmen of the town to do what they probably should have done all along with their many guns. Dalton then has a sexy(?) romp with his girlfriend in the river, a tidy and blissful ending. This is rarely the end for a samurai, and is certainly not where Usagi has been heading in Sakai's work, where a few alternate timelines have carried nothing but further tragedy for the samurai rabbit.

This discrepancy doesn't disqualify *Road House* from its samurai movie statues however. It gives me hope for Miyamoto Usagi, that his wandering may end with peace, the savage cycle broken, and an end to his foolishness. As Sensei Katsuichi said, Usagi should have gone home and lived happily as a simple farmer. Dalton did, so perhaps there is still a chance. 🐰

WATCHING KUBRICK ON MY PHONE

After what seemed like too many years of knowing about this podcast, having it sitting on my favorites list on my phone, and doing nothing, I finally started listening to *Blank Check with Griffin and David,* a movie podcast hosted by actor/film nerd Griffin Newman and film critic David Sims. The essential premise is that the two hosts (often alongside a guest) will watch a director's entire oeuvre and spend far too long dissecting the movies. They have done, among many others, Sam Raimi, Nora Ephron, Hayao Miyazaki . . . the list goes on.

I knew I wanted to tune into this podcast one day because I really liked Griffin Newman as Arthur on Amazon's version of *The Tick* and I thought it would be fun. My suspicions were confirmed as I quickly blasted my way through their seasons on Christopher Nolan and Sam Raimi. As I perused their list of directors, one name suddenly stuck out, as it often does in so many lists of directors: Mr. Stanley Kubrick. I thought, why not revisit some classics with the side commentary from my two parasocial buddies.

The one trick of the whole ordeal – I was going to watch them all on my phone.

Now, I also recognized when I started this endeavor, I was wading into a bit of a clusterfuck – Scorsese vs. Marvel and all that. In order to allay these fears, I'll assure you all that at the start of the pandemic, I watched all of Marvel through *Endgame* on my phone too. All is fair in love and infinity war.

But I won't get distracted by nonsense internet discourse. This is about Kubrick. To be fair, I have never seen a Kubrick movie in theaters, so this entire thing may be flawed from the get-go. But I do own the majority of his films on DVD and have seen a lot of them often, including *The Shining, A Clockwork Orange* and *Full Metal Jacket* more times than I can count. When I began my "research," I had seen nine out of thirteen of Kubrick's films. I was missing *Fear*

and Desire, Killer's Kiss, Lolita, and *Barry Lyndon,* the last of which I thoroughly regret having slept on until now (although I will cop to enjoying *Lolita).*

The Kubrick I had watched, however, has always been on a living room TV with a DVD, or on cable, or on a computer monitor of some sort, downloaded very "legally." In comparison with these methods, sitting in a dark room, with my familiar device in my hands (the one on which I am currently writing in fact), watching and rewatching Kubrick felt intimate. I was enveloped by 2001's psychedelic last act; the war room from *Strangelove* never felt bigger; I'm not sure the yawning emptiness of the Overlook Hotel ever felt so despairing.

While the cinematography certainly felt more stunning than watching Kubrick on TV, the audio was incomparable. Having a solid set of headphones on for these films offered a glimpse into Kubrick's sense of audio production I had never considered before. The clicking of Danny's tricycle down the hallway, as he shifts from carpet to hardwood to carpet to hardwood, became hypnotic. It changed the whole dynamic of these sequences, taking me more into the growing insanity built by the movie. Likewise, in *Eyes Wide Shut,* the creepy score over the iconic cult ritual scene never struck me much before, but this time dominated

my viewing, maybe because there's no dialogue or even facial expressions, but also because it is a vitally unsettling component for the scene. Not to say too much, but I think, as someone at least a quarter deaf in one ear, audio via headphones is better than audio in nearly every other capacity. I am focused, mesmerized and confounded by Kubrick's masterful work in the medium.

Now, I would be remiss to dismiss all of the criticism of watching a masterful auteur on my phone. Obviously, a true cinematic depiction of *Barry Lyndon* would have offered full-bodied cornucopia of luscious visuals. Who would I be to dispute that? I mean, the movie is a painting come to life. And aspects of plot can become dissembled when I get up for a bowl of ice cream at the drop of a hat, or the little man I live with decides to wake me up at a surprising hour, or, God forbid, I click over a screen and browse social stupid fucking media for half a second. That may sound flippant, but I caught myself doing just that so many times, it became an obvious distraction.

But of all the distractions I experienced watching Kubrick on my phone, none was worse than the ads. Fuckin capitalism, am I right? I mean, I didn't have ads on all the films, but they really destroyed the tension in *The Shining.* Clearly someone had chosen the potentially right place to insert a break,

but also, there is never a good place for a break in that film. It is crafted to build tension scene over scene and random ads for dating apps really killed that impending sense of dread.

And to that point, I do feel like I lost the plot thread fairly often because of these various distractions. This wasn't terrible in the movies I had seen often, but for some of the ones I had only seen once (or never) the distractions certainly made me lose various threads. I mean, even with an intermission, am I really not going to take another break during *Spartacus*'s 197-minute runtime? *Barry Lyndon* is surprisingly (or maybe unsurprisingly) watchable, but it straight up took me a week to get through it. What can I say, I'm in my late 30s and generally can't start a movie before 9pm. I get sleepy.

Finally, (I promise I will wrap soon) I also get distracted by taking notes. Now, it's possible I would take notes on a film in a theater, but if I were to, it wouldn't be on the same interface on which I am watching the movie. I won't go to the lengths of showing you my notes on Kubrick's oeuvre, but I won't deny having a lengthy Google Doc devoted to Kubrick. Having (or maybe getting) to pause the movie to take my notes was certainly valuable, as was being able to run the film back 10 minutes, if necessary, but it also was a clear distraction. I don't really need to

Google every side character actor that appears in *The Killing,* but I want to dammit. I swear I missed half of the details in *Killer's Kiss,* and I am still unclear about why Nicole Kidman doesn't give a shit at the end of *Eyes Wide Shut.* Whether that lack of clarity is due to me being distracted or a failure on Kubrick's part I am unsure. Maybe I'll have to try finding his filmography in the theaters to figure that one out.

I am truly jealous of Griffin and David who have the opportunity to watch these movies in theaters. NYC does seem like a cool place sometimes. Watching Kubrick on my phone couldn't top watching its original run in theaters, or even reruns. Nevertheless, I truly felt as enraptured by the warm phone glow 12 inches from my face, and the deep sound offered by my sweet, sweet Sennheisers as I do in a theater. I caught nuances in films I had never caught the dozens I've seen dozens of times before. And obviously, theaters offer something a phone cannot, but watching Kubrick on my phone beats watching him on my TV any day. 🎭
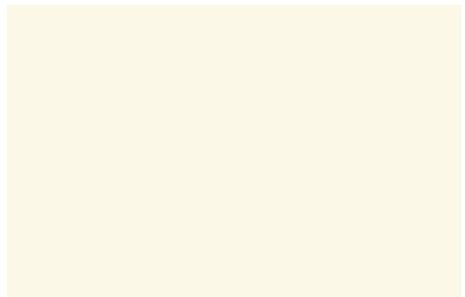
FORMS IN LIGHT | **JUSTIN REEVE**

WEAVING THE BOUNTIFUL THREADS OF BEING

Throughout the centuries, fundamental questions about the nature of life and human existence have confounded the curious, whether we call them scientists, philosophers, theologians or anything else. While navigating the open seas of self-discovery, one of the main movements to have emerged from our endless introspection has been materialism, a concept which asserts that all of reality can be reduced to mere matter, meaning of course that everything in the world including consciousness and thought can be considered if not explained through the lens of its physical properties. This idea turns up rather frequently in the field of new media, especially videogames, either directly or indirectly, primarily in the form of robots and cyborgs, ranging from *Portal* to *Cyberpunk 2077*. The problem posed is basically at what point a bucket of bolts either begins or ends being a person.

In terms of traditions, materialism as a philosophical perspective posits that all phenomena including human existence can be explained through the properties and interactions of matter. The roots of materialism can be traced at least back to ancient Greece, proponents along the lines of Democritus, Epicurus, Protagoras and Strato purporting that all things including the mind are composed of miniscule grains of matter, particles or molecules confusingly called atoms, a term later adopted by the founders of microscopy. Materialism on the other hand eventually moved beyond this rather limited meaning, encroaching on a variety of different scientific disciplines, mainly neurobiology and psychology, although the influence on history and political economy should never be understated. What emerged was a holistic perspective on human nature, emphasizing the interconnectedness of our biological, psychological, and social dimensions.

The central tenet of materialism challenges the traditional concept of the self, in other words a metaphysical entity distinct from the physical body, also known as the soul. Mate-

rialism considers the self or ego to be an emergent property of the brain itself, a product of mental activity and the interplay between millions or even billions of neurotransmitters. When looked at from this perspective, the reality of consciousness, typically seen as the essence of identity, is quite simply a manifestation of the machinery within a living body, most notably the brain. The fields of neuroscience and neuroimaging have made significant strides when it comes to unraveling the mysteries of consciousness, mapping neural pathways correlating to various mental states. Advanced imaging technology such as functional magnetic resonance and electroencephalography offer a glimpse into the silent symphony of our thoughts, emotions and perceptions. This provides a very different picture of the soul from what theologians have postulated in the past. The notion of a permanent, undying soul has become increasingly untenable as materialism gained ground over the years, consciousness now being seen as an evolving construct formed through biological processes, personal experiences and a range of external influences. This of course represents a paradigm shift in popular culture, calling into question what it means to even be human, let alone a person.

Emotions are often described as the essence of human experience. Instead of spiritual compulsions, these are now con-sidered to be the result of biochemical reactions occurring within the physical confines of a brain. This perspective carries implications for human evolution, emotions being understood by materialism to be mechanisms of survival and perhaps even reproductive success. The feelings we all know as love, happiness, anger and fear can be deconstructed into their biological components, revealing the material underpinnings of our emotional repertoire. Theologians would of course argue that reducing emotion to a mere chemical reaction diminishes their significance with respect to interpersonal relations, but materialism contends that understanding their biological basis actually enriches our appreciation of the human experience, inviting a deeper exploration of our subjectivity.

Materialism extends well beyond the individual into the complicated realm of culture, social structures being seen as emergent properties of human interactions and the material conditions that shape them. Politics and economics converge to provide a materialist lens through which we can examine these dynamics, an often-ignored field known as political economy. The most pervasive aspect of human society, inequality, can be scrutinized through the materialist perspective, something known as historical materialism. Instead of attributing social disparities to metaphysics, materialism directs

our attention to the distribution of resources including access to education, along with various other opportunities. The material conditions of society play a pivotal role in shaping the social fabric, determining the possibilities available to people within a given society. Materialism sees human endeavors including religious practice and artistic expression as products of the historical context from which they emerge, pulling at the seams of cultural exceptionalism. This posits that even the loftiest expressions of human creativity and spirituality are in fact rooted within the material reality of the societies which produce them.

Taken as a worldview, materialism stands in stark contrast to metaphysical explanations that invoke supernatural entities or transcendental planes of existence, carrying profound implications for morality, ethics and even the meaning of life. Seen from this perspective, ethical frameworks are grounded in human wellbeing and the tangible consequences of our actions rather than supernatural pronouncements or divine commandments. They result from the interplay between social norms, empathy and especially reason. This pragmatic approach calls for us to reevaluate our ethical principles in light of their impact on the real world, a controversial understanding of morality, even today. The notion of cosmic purpose and teleological explanations of human exis-

tence are called into question. Within such a world, the search for meaning is redirected toward our collective responsibility for shaping the future we hope to experience. The emphasis shifts from seeking a predetermined personal purpose to actively contributing our efforts to the wellbeing of countless generations to come.

This much maligned understanding of the world, materialism, offers a guiding light which illuminates the interconnected network of our biological, psychological and social selves. The materialist perspective challenges many of our most profoundly ingrained beliefs, encouraging us to view ourselves not as divorced or set apart from the physical world but as active participants in a fundamentally physical existence, hopefully developing a deeper understanding of our nature and a renewed sense of purpose, a conception of self-grounded in tangible reality as opposed to ethereal order. This of course complicates the perhaps forever unresolved questions posed by videogames like *Portal* and *Cyberpunk 2077,* turning the attention away from the divine gift of a soul towards the physical processes found within the world around us. 🜍
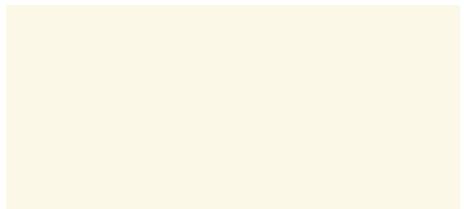
I MIGHT BE DONE WITH DREAMS

Disney's *Tangled* is a great movie in its own right, but it also has a pretty lovely message about chasing your dreams even if you think they're impossible. It's a worthwhile goal in life; pursuing a dream. Here's the thing, though: Lately I've come to realize that, if I'm being honest with myself, I don't really have a dream anymore.

This isn't meant to be a depressing story, I promise, but it's something that I've been grappling with for quite a while. In fact, it wasn't until very recently that I was able to start figuring out why that is, and more importantly accept the idea that it's okay.

A big part of it is that I did have a dream for a good chunk of my life. Growing up (and throughout my college years, even) I desperately wanted to make a living writing about videogames. Writing had been a passion of mine for a very long time, along with games, and the thought of being able to do both - to live off of doing both – was my "I wanna be an astronaut." And I got to do it, too! I did it for quite a while, and still do in some capacity I suppose, but the problem is it all went

sour after a while. Like most of the jobs I've had over the years. I'm pretty sure this whole ordeal of living my dream and then finding out I kind of hate it has made it way more difficult for me to find a new one.

But no matter how hard I try to think about what I wish I could do with my life if I didn't have to worry about paying rent, buying food or affording basic healthcare (woo-hoo, America, yeah…), I keep drawing a blank. I'm actually (money worries aside) kind of happy with my life at the moment?

Sure, it's nothing glamorous but I get to work from home, I get to write about literally anything I want for Unwinnable here and, while my primary writing gig may be a little assembly line-y, I do sometimes get to cover genuinely interesting stuff like hydrogen on the moon and diesel submarines. I have the time and mental bandwidth to help my wife Diana with her very well established and currently still growing dream job; to pay attention to our cats; to work on my silly little YouTube channel about transforming robot

toys; to do fuck-all and sit around watching other peoples' YouTube videos.

I guess, in a way, I haven't been able to figure out what my dream is because I'm kind of already living it. I've been happily married to my best friend for close to 20 years (and it keeps getting better) and I basically get to dictate my own workday however I want (within reason because I *do* still need to make money). But I still don't have anything particularly grandiose or even mildly ambitious on my mind.

I'd like to be able to support my toy hobby with my Patreon, but I don't have the desire to put in the absurd amount of work it would take to gain The Algorithm's favor. I'd like to make more money with my writing, so I could afford to write fewer (but more refined) things, but "lol" at the idea of making a proper salary writing about anything that isn't complaining about women in *Star Wars* and other such bullshit these days. And besides, I'm already making toy videos and writing so if nothing else I'm in a better position to push forward if society ever decides to give us all a fucking break.

And really, there's no rule that says everyone has to have a big dream all the time. Maybe one will come to me later. Maybe something I'm already doing will present me with a window of opportunity. Or

maybe I'll never have another big dream again, and honestly, that's fine too. Because the whole point (to me, at least) of dreams like this are to do what makes you happy. And if I'm already happy where I am (minus the ever-present Financial Sword of Damocles), then maybe that means I'm already kind of living it. 🏵
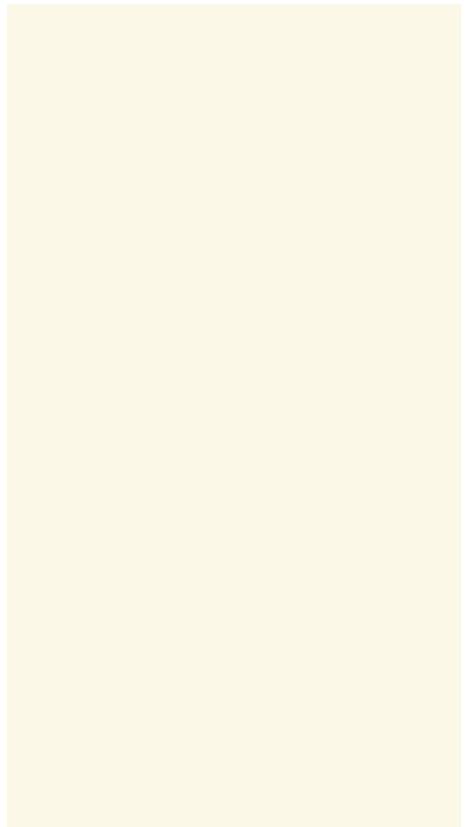
EMBARKING ON A DUCKQUEST

FEATURING DARCY PERRY

by Alyssa Wejebe

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.

Looking at the cover of *DuckQuest* inspires thoughts of *Darkwing Duck* and *DuckTales,* as well as a smile. In a wild coincidence, the name of its creator, Darcy Perry, also conjures up visions of *Perry the Platypus,* a duck-billed secret agent from *Phineas and Ferb.* But Perry the creator says *DuckQuest* and its world of AquaLoonia all started with Jennell Jaquays, the iconic game designer who unfortunately passed away in January. Perry and Jaquays had worked together to make *Quack Keep,* a game also filled with duck characters and what Perry called Jaquays's "glorious adventure design."

"Jennell had a way of seeing your potential and bringing the best out of you. She inspired me to draw and write for *Quack Keep,*" Perry shares. "We had wonderful conversations and built a friendship during that time. I was also the apprentice, and I soaked in everything. *Quack Keep* gave me the courage to try something by myself."

The result was *DuckQuest.* Perry had originally conceived it as a board game modeled after *HeroQuest.* Perry had even started sculpting miniatures with that in mind. But then he pivoted to developing a roleplaying game.

"I had one main idea. What if ducks weren't the comical sidekick? What if ducks were the heroes of the adventure? Of course, any world inhabited by ducks is going to be quackers," Perry explains (while often playing with puns). *"DuckQuest* has been favorably compared to the adventures of Usagi Yojimbo and Terry Pratchett's *Discworld.* From a game design perspective, I was riffing on the light-hearted, rules-light style of *Toon, T.W.E.R.P.S., Paranoia* and *Ghostbusters.*"

Fortunately, the miniatures remained. They're included in a section from the *Quack Starter Edition* of the game, and Perry has sculpted a wide array of them for his online shop at Star Hat Miniatures. An instant favorite of mine from his catalog was Darktail, who embodies an even deeper homage to the caped crusader Darkwing Duck.

"I sculpted Darktail for a Kickstarter backer who had an obvious love for Darkwing Duck. I used a lot of old Zorro film shots as a reference for that miniature," Perry shares, noting the influences among various masked adventurers. "If I am sculpting a miniature for someone, then I work with their vision for the character."

He has a different approach for miniatures that are forged from his imagination.

"For my own designs, I often let the putty decide as I work. The key thing is to start, and keep experimenting," Perry explains. "My preferred method is still a paperclip, bent and twisted into a frame, followed by small additions of Green Stuff putty, which is prodded into shape with a sharp metal point. A dentist tool, or a needle point does the trick. And patience. Lots of patience. I also use a magnifying glass."

When the sculpting is done, he sends the "green" to a caster. They make a mold from the original sculpt and cast metal or resin replicas. Then Perry can send those to players around the world.

"Recently I asked the legendary Jason Wiebe to sculpt a miniature. Pugerus, a three-headed pug-Cerberus, was sculpted with ZBrush and is a featured monster in *The Village of Omelette.*"

Perry says that developing the latest entry in the *DuckQuest* universe, *The Village of Omelette,* started as a humble tribute to *T1: The Village of Hommlet* by Gary Gygax. "That module, for Advanced Dungeons and Dragons, came from Gary's original home campaign, which his children played characters in," Perry says. "Hommlet is the classic village with a nearby dungeon that launched a million adventures and dungeon crawls."

He thought *The Village of Omelette* would be simpler to develop than *The Banshee of Billfort,* a previous *DuckQuest* module.

"Banshee was a hard slog, but surely renovating Gary Gygax's Hommlet would be easier? In a word. No. Because Advanced Dungeons and Dragons is a different beast. At least, in the '70s it was," Perry shares. "I couldn't just rename NPCs and locations, and list how much gold was hidden behind the fireplace."

To craft this module, he had to dive deeper into his creation.

"The Village of Omelette made me examine what makes DuckQuest tick. You have to plant your tongue firmly in your beak," Perry explains. "When you have a Morris Dancing Owlberserker in a random encounter table, you're headed in the right direction. Or, the Hammer of the Dogs, formerly belonging to Paw, the God of Chunder. Or, a pack of Schurks, brutal adversaries and calculating card players."

The book for *The Village of Omelette* is densely packed with all sorts of information like that – lore about the world and the characters that populate it.

"Although I borrowed several NPCs from *Hommlet,* most are new characters, with their own agendas," Perry shares. "[But] Morduckainen, the most powerful Arch-mage in all of AquaLoonia, is an obvious duck clone of Gary Gygax's Mordenkainen."

Among a whole host of other NPCs, Falco Peregrine and his dynamic with Sir Cay are rather attention-grabbing.

"Falco Peregrine is a Merlin-type character. If Merlin was also a miserly and eccentric shopkeeper, taking every opportunity to make a quick buck," Perry says. "Omelette, now more of a town than a village, is Falco's long-term investment. Sir Cay is your standard bolshy knight, an Egguana that travelled far to win the title of champion at the annual Quackalot Tourney. Falco has taken Sir Cay under their wing. An odd couple, bound to cross the path of adventurers new to town."

This depth and playfulness with characters extends to Perry's take on classes in *DuckQuest,* which includes tongue-in-beak options like the Karateka Kid – and in a twist, it's illustrated with an anthropomorphic turtle instead of a duck in the *Quack Starter Edition.*

"When I was a kid, I played computer games and did martial arts," Perry shares. *"Karateka* comes from the videogame for the Apple II by Jordan Mechner. 'Kid' comes from *The Karate Kid,* which came back with a vengeance recently on Netflix as *Cobra Kai."* Perry added that Chet Minton, the main character artist for *DuckQuest,* shares his love for *Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles,* which resulted in the Karateka Kid being illustrated as a young turtle with nunchucks.

"Each class was designed to be a mash-up of iconic characters and adventurer tropes," Perry says. "My aim wasn't to define exactly what adventurers are available to players. I wanted to show that *DuckQuest* allows you to play anything you can imagine."

This sense of fun and freedom of expression is found throughout his duck-filled setting. "The game world, AquaLoonia, is a collection of surprises waiting to happen," Perry says. "A wondrous, quasi-mythical, post-apocalyptic, retro-futuristic world. Which is to say, if you have an idea that delights your gaming group, it is welcome here." 🦆

* * *

Buy DuckQuest on Exalted Funeral now!

MADE WITH LOVE: ANIME MASHUPS AND THEIR CREATORS

by JUSTIN KIM

What the hell is an anime mashup?

Anime mashups are a peculiar niche in the online music sphere. Their sources are similar yet distinct enough to be combined into a new and harmonious song. At least one of their primary sources comes from an anime production or a videogame. Throw some high-pitched vocals into the mix and a cultural phenomenon unique to the interconnectivity of the internet arises

These traits are present in a lot of mashups produced by the scene. secefece's "Give It All Your Sailor Fuku (Lil Jon vs Lucky Star)" sets the vocals of Lil Jon's 125 BPM club banger "Give It All U Got" to the hyperactive 150 BPM beat of the iconic anime opening "Take It! Sailor Uniform." Zach CG's "Wishing For a Hunie [Remastered]," fuses Skee-Lo's pining for a beautiful lover in "I Wish" with the main theme of erotic dating sim HuniePop, where you romance a whole hive of gorgeous "hunnies." Anime mashups can only exist in a world where technology helps us find and forge creative links between songs without direct connections.

It's not just shitposts!

I can't fault those who don't look past this niche-within-a-niche genre's quirks when chances are their only exposure to mashups may be DaymanOurSavior's "Snow halation but shawty's like a melody in my head" (if you're reading this Dayman, I mean no offense; it's a fire mashup). It's easy to dismiss the anime mashup scene as novelty joke songs without much substance. But to assume this subscene of music lacks artistic merit is to ignore the love and dedication that go into an under-appreciated craft.

The scene's filled with talented and passionate artists but allow me to highlight three anime mashup artists in the English-speaking world who've been leading the charge in keeping the community alive and thriving. My goal's to shed more light on the part of this scene that tends to go unnoticed: The people and passion behind the mashups.

HandBraJeans:
An unsung community hero

HandBraJeans (HBJ) and I first started corresponding during the pandemic. When we caught up again for this article, I was shocked by him recalling a YouTube playlist I made years ago as a send-off for his retirement (don't worry, he came back). This shock led to understanding when he explained his philosophy of making time for those who make time for him. We see this approach on videos such as "Safe From Rain | Girls' Last Tour × Capital Cities

Mashup" where he took the time to respond to as many comments as possible.

Yet for someone who's active in speaking with fans as well as advising and mentoring other mashup artists, he's not too public about it all. "There's a lot more people who are far more popular than me but I like being this person behind the scenes," he chuckles when discussing how he interacts with the community. A comparison between his own uploads (numbering in the upper 80s) and a playlist for mashups he helped with (numbering at more than 200) shows a strong dedication to helping others and keeping the anime mashup spirit alive. He says that "One of the whole reasons why I think feedback should exist in the mashup world is so that people end up liking their own mashups even more. I firmly believe that if you like what you're doing and make a continual effort to improve, the longer you'll participate in this artform and grow as a person respectively."

A key part of HBJ's mashup style is his effort to maintain balance. In "Color Washed | Mitsuboshi Colors × Knox Hamilton × Xan Griffin Mashup," he recreated the "Colors Power ni Omakasero!" melody in FL Studio to make it better fit the "Washed Up Together" instrumental, a practice where he respects a source's original vision while balancing his own intent as a mashup artist.

In songs like the synthwave mashup "My Dearest Zero | Guilty Crown × The Weeknd Mashup" where the sources include both Western and Eastern music, HBJ tries to balance each respective culture's production values, noting that "Where I balance my mashups, I also balance the Western and Eastern philosophies of: How loud do you mix a vocal? How wide do you make the vocal sound? And which instrument do you give time to shine?" For this track he made sure to appreciate his sources by incorporating both of their melodies. "Those synthesizers that you hear in the chorus are all me . . . I layered like five synthesizers on top of each other. And the melody in the first chorus is different from the last one. The first one follows the melody of the original Weeknd song but the last synthesizer follows the counter melody in the background of the supercell song. The whole reason why I did that synthesizer work was to give a nod to the original source material while adding my own little details in there."

To him, balance in mashups is a sign of appreciation for each source that made a contribution to the overall product, an attitude that also comes from his background in architecture. When describing his style of balance, he says, "In architecture, context is important. If you're designing a building, how do we establish a built form to be

respectful to the street life and to be aesthetically compatible with its surroundings? There's a response to context. And similarly, this is why I balance the musical vision of others with my own."

HBJ's a unique creator who cares a lot about the people he encounters. Whether it's giving another artist a helping hand or respecting an artist's original vision when mashing up their song, he demonstrates a love for connection and community wherever he goes.

### Triple-Q: Meme and mashup veteran

Make no mistake; Triple-Q may appear to be just a certified shitposter but they also have 11 years under their belt as a dedicated anime mashup artist. They're also one of the most prolific and well-known creators in the scene. Out of all their videos, memes and mashups both, at least twenty-four have reached at one million or more views. It also helps that they're a professional illustrator and graphic designer who likes to draw the cover art for their works.

Many of Triple-Q's mashups follow the standard anime mashup formula of having two songs riff off each other with perhaps a third source to accent the pairing, such as "As the Flower Was - Lycoris Recoil vs.

Harry Styles," but having less sources doesn't diminish the quality of the final product. They also re-use sources across multiple projects such as with the "Ocean halation - Love Live! vs. Yellowcard" mashup being one of many "Snow halation" mashups in their repertoire. Another frequent technique Triple-Q uses across their discography is sampling dialogue in pieces such as "I Really Want to See the Fireworks at Your House - Cyberpunk: Edgerunners vs. Katy Perry." In this case, they had voice actors perform a speculative exchange between the lead *Edgerunners* characters as part of the mashup's theme.

The patterns in Triple-Q's style may be standard for an artist of their caliber but these patterns' expected presence's exactly why one of their less popular mashups makes for an interesting case study.

"Sonic the Mighty!: Act 3" is fascinating because it's unconventional both as a Triple-Q mashup and as an anime mashup. It breaks the standard formula of limited sources by using five of them yet three are similar enough to form a representative group since they share the same musical motifs as music for the Planet Wisp level in the Sonic franchise. The Planet Wisp songs also appear in other Triple-Q mashups such as "Heaven's Symphony" but as far as I'm aware "Sonic
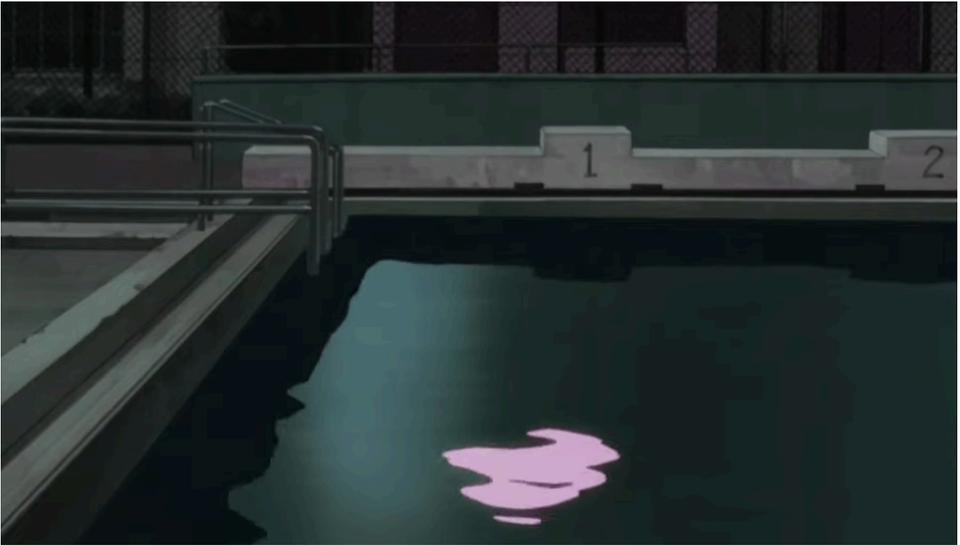
the Mighty!: Act 3" is the only one that uses three different takes on the motifs.

And finally, Triple-Q's mashups almost always use a musical vocal source yet the closest to that we have here are two dialogue samples from the Sonic games that follow their usual practice. Most of the song's an orchestral instrumental mashup, something rare both as a Triple-Q production and as an anime mashup in general. The entire work's an experimental piece from a long-time creator with a particular style who cares enough to find new avenues of self-expression.

Triple-Q's love for making mashups is evident in their craft. The sheer volume of works they've released over a period of 11 years reaches well into the hundreds, something no one would achieve if they were only doing it as a passing interest. Through it all they still find the time to evolve the way they make their art.

nakinyko: An enigmatic godfather

nakinyko (pronounced knack-ee-nigh-ko) is one of the forbearers of the subgenre as we know it today and I don't say this to embellish him. He started to make anime mashups in the late 2000's after being inspired by artists such as Girl Talk and The Hood Internet, noting that "Their mixes had this feeling

of breaking musical boundaries while also being silly or goofy, and I think I just wanted to make stuff with the same concept, but incorporating anime and video game music, which I didn't really hear much of at the time." With a long career in the anime mashup world, it's no surprise that other artists such as Triple-Q name him as one of the reasons they began making their own mashups. Yet for someone who's been around for so long, he keeps a minimalist presence in the space as well.

This enigmatic godfather is known for his eclectic range of sources, consistent quality of releases, and ability to weave multiple sources together as if they were one song. His current style of mashups is inspired by the indie rock band The Go! Team and the plunderphonics group The Avalanches, who try, as he puts it, " . . . to create a new song using smaller bits of forgotten records." We see this in songs of his such as "OK," where ten different songs blend together as if they were made to be with each other. As a comparison, the title track of one of nakinyko's favorite Avalanches albums, "Since I Left You," samples seventeen songs. It's no coincidence that "OK" and "Since I Left You" share a mosaic style of production where each source's used with intention in service of the overall song's broader vision. To him, " . . . part of the fun of making mashups is

nakinyko's Mashups
(2018-2020)

trying to sample smaller bits and pieces of songs, like drum sounds or riffs, and using them in creative ways."

Despite working in a complex style that calls for a demanding level of attention to the finest details, nakinyko's process is as simple as you can get. He explains that, as someone without a formal musical education, " . . . I'm really just trying to figure things out by ear when making mashups." When I asked about his style he mentioned noting down songs he liked and wanted to hear mixed together as well as humming melodies to compare them and see how well their sources would mesh. But underneath his casual approach is a mind honed over a decade to detect the subtleties in mashing up music. On combining separate songs, he says, "I do think that most people can tell whenever someone sings out of key, for example, so I'm just using that same sense when mixing melodies against chord progressions."

A closer look at how nakinyko uses his sources reveals the intricate level of detail and care one needs to put in to make mashups like his. "Pink Moon on the Water | BECK × Nick Drake" brings together eight songs across time and disparate genres and transforms them into a beautiful collage about the moon and love.

Throughout the song you'll hear the guitar and piano of folk song "Pink Moon" and the vocal duet act of the dramatic rock ballad "MOON ON THE WATER" act as the calm foundation of the track. They're accented by instrumental contributions from rock legend Led Zeppelin's "Whole Lotta Love," the upbeat pop-rock song "Everlasting Love" from the beloved *Katamari* games, an ambient track called "The C R T Woods" from famed Chiptunes band Ana-managuchi, the euphoric "Skyline" by baroque pop group Broken Social Scene, and "Let's Dance" by punk pioneers The Ramones. At times these sources turn the song's foundation into a loud exclamation of love. To top it all off "Amore che nasce" by Piero Piccioni from the film *More Than a Miracle* brings the song to a swelling finale right as it ends on a joke from the anime "MOON ON THE WATER" appears in, *Beck: Mongolian Chop Squad.* I'd go into more detail, but this song analysis alone could take up an entire article itself.

A whole lot of time and effort is required to pull off feats like "OK" and "Pink Moon on the Water." If you look at the release dates of his videos, they differ from anywhere between a few months to one to two years, which is unsurprising given the complexities and nuances of each mashup. nakinyko may only drop in once in a blue moon with new

tracks but to keep doing so for 15 years and counting shows how much he loves making them. When asked about his mindset towards his craft, he explains in a manner befitting his straightforward approach, "To me, it's just about having fun, being creative, and enjoying music."

Final thoughts

All the songs and their respective artistic choices are just the tip of the anime mashup iceberg. The music theory aspects of the craft are their own rabbit hole, as well as community mashup events and the perpetual fight against copyright strikes.

The anime mashup scene is a vibrant community full of talented and passionate individuals. They, like every other artist in the world, are practitioners of a rare and difficult skill set that calls for not only excellent music production capabilities but also competence in cross-cultural knowledge, visual presentation, copyright laws, and so much more.

I wrote this piece because I'll be damned if I let some of the most amazing artists in the world be forgotten. In a world where it's becoming weird to not watch anime, anime mashups are the perfect soundtrack to a growing global subculture that also used to be a social pariah. The most intriguing part of all this is that none of the artists I've mentioned are even from Japan; HandBraJeans is from Canada, Triple-Q from Australia, and nakinyko from the Philippines. Thanks to advancements in communications and digital audio editing technology as well as social media platforms, these creators separated by entire oceans can share aural love letters to their favorite shows and videogames. These media artifacts aren't just shitposts nor regular old mashups. They're evidence of a profound yet unrecognized aspect of cultural globalization at play.

If all of this *still* isn't enough proof, then watch this recording of a group of cosplayers dancing to Emdyion's "When the Rune Sparkles in September" at Anime Expo's Maid Cafe in 2017. Observe one of the most bizarre, unexpected and coolest achievements in anime mashup history. Let the sound of Japanese pop singers harmonizing to Earth, Wind & Fire's legendary hit wash over you as visions of synchronized dancing and clapping in an American convention center permeate into your memories, Accept it. Embrace it. This is the future, and it's only getting better. All I, and the anime mashup community, ask is that you listen. 🌊
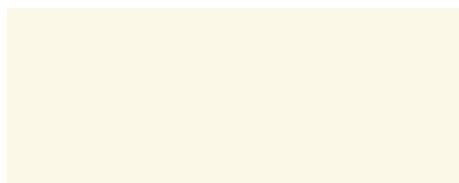
FORTNITE, EMINEM AND KIDPROOFING MEDIA IN THE AGE OF CONTENT

by HOLLY BOSON

The FTC won't let them be. The biggest *Fortnite* event this February has nothing to do with the Battle Royale – it's the deadline for claiming part of Epic's settlement following the Federal Trade Commission's 2022 ruling that the game's confusing interface, use of loot box mechanics and hostility to refunds were designed to trick players into making purchases that they did not want. The settlement took particular interest in the way the *Fortnite* interface automatically saved payment info, meaning any child able to pester their adult to purchase the smallest quantity of V-Bucks could easily buy as many new skins and emotes on their parent's card as they dared to risk.

The FTC's description of the purchases as "unwanted" falsely implies that most of these purchases were an accident. Children don't usually earn their own money until at least their teens, so they have questionable judgement about whether it's worth blowing hours of someone else's pay on a virtual costume of a dancing banana. In *Fortnite,* a player without a paid skin has an avatar which changes every round between several characters of various genders and races, so players must open their wallets for the privilege of an avatar that communicates their personality or looks like them – a must on a platform used by kids to socialize.

More damning about Epic's attitude towards children was the FTC's second ruling, which fined Epic for knowingly violating COPPA, a rule that protects under-13s from data harvesting and social abuse. The $275 million they were fined is nothing compared to the estimated $30 billion in revenue Epic made since *Fortnite* launched as a modest zombie survival game in 2017.

The reason that *Fortnite,* upon adding its Battle Royale mode, outcompeted its inspirations is partly due to its platform agnosticism and use of cross play, letting players on consoles, PC and phones hang out in the virtual space together. At a time when mobile gaming was just beginning to accommodate console-style experiences, *Fortnite* was a thrilling technological development in an uncrowded market, but also got around the way young people's freedoms are restricted. Your parents could stop you playing with your console if they wanted to use the TV, but they couldn't stop you playing *Fortnite,* because you have that on your phone, which your parents make sure you have with you at all times in case you get in trouble. You could play with internet friends under the covers on a school night, or even play in class (Common Sense Media found in 2018 that 27% of 13-18 year olds admitted to doing this).

Epic capitalized on this by building the game into a playground of youth culture, filling it with barred-out melodic rap of the type parents don't think is real music, dances from video sharing platforms that parents don't know how to use and cross-promo with any media property trying to create or affirm relevance. Even *Fortnite*'s free-to-play pricing structure meant children could download the game themselves, without having to negotiate with an adult for access to a debit card. The result is that, as the FTC found in 2019, 53% of American tweens aged 10-12 played the game weekly, in contrast to 33% of American teens, and only 19% of young adult Americans aged 18-24.

Fortnite was designed from the ground up to appeal to 8-14 year olds, with the building gameplay intended to evoke the common childhood experience of building forts and playing with puzzle toys, but using the 12+ age rating to make it feel genuine to its intended player base. Epic's stated strategy was to be "living room safe, but barely," a game that your parents disapprove of, but accept as less dangerous than more overtly militaristic games like *PlayerUnknown's BattleGrounds* or the *Call of Duty* franchise (Epic recently blocked the British Army from using *Fortnite* to recruit). Keeping the balance right would let a child feel grown-up to have *Fortnite* NERF guns and lunchboxes but allow parents to tolerate buying them.

Kids have less status in society than adults. We justify this with their vulnerability, but in practice, being a child is an experience of institutionalization, control and social degradation. Children are fed art that represents the sanitized world adults would like to pass on to them, but this itself is a mode of control, for a class of people who exist in the same world of pain, unhappiness and blood as the rest of us. You likely remember how much darker and more violent the pretend games you played in the playground were, compared to the cartoons you got the characters from. I bet the art you cherished the most at that age wasn't anything that felt cozy to you, or anything so beyond you that it was boring or gave you nightmares – but the stories that made you aware for the first time of what a big, intense world out there it would be when you finally get old enough to explore it. Since the 1950s, the medium of children's commercial art which served as the socially acceptable place for kids to engage with taboos has been pop music. Marshmello's cartoon head, Travis Scott's action figure imagery and Ariana Grande's dainty princessiness all appeal to children despite their music containing themes of drugs, violence and sexuality that would be unthinkable
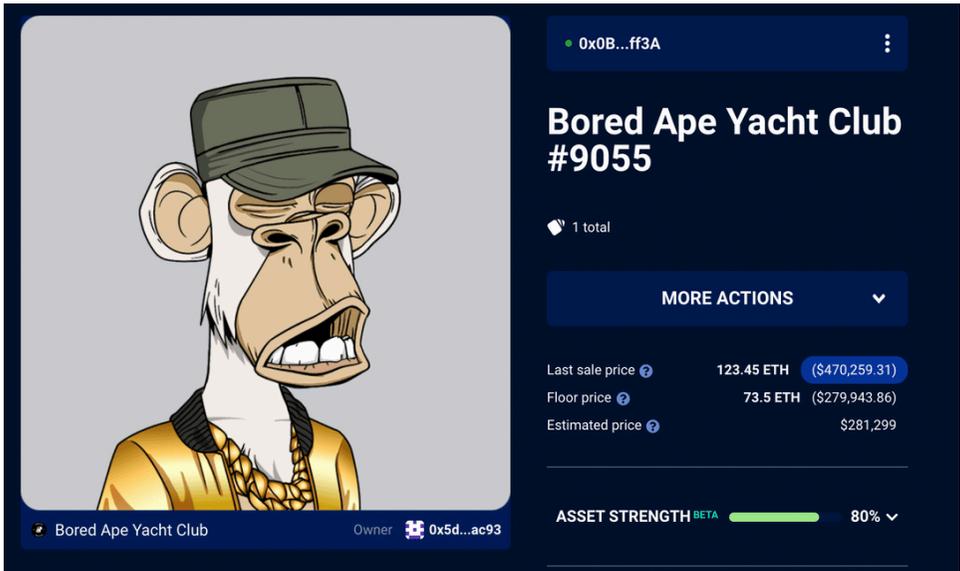
in a children's movie. Naturally, all of these artists had virtual concerts in *Fortnite.*

On December 2nd, *Fortnite*'s Big Bang event finished with a cameo from Eminem, the pop star who embodies the tension of child-inappropriate children's art better than any other. His 2000 album *The Marshall Mathers LP* is a work about the contrast between the sanitized environment we desire for kids and our horrid actual treatment of children, blaming negligent parents, sensationalist celebrity culture, pearl-clutching commentators and himself as a young father of the next generation of screwups. Its puke-and-brimstone approach begins with chainsaw-'em-up lyrics about raping his mother and ends with an intricate list of homophobic slurs; yet Viacom allowed Eminem a takeover event of MTV's after-school appointment show *Total Request Live,* dissing teen pop for the amusement of his squealing preteen girl audience in the same month as guest appearances from parent-approved teen idols like Howie from the Backstreet Boys and Hanson. He may not have used any foul language, but the message was clear – his dangerousness was the *reason* he spoke to kids.

There's something anachronistic about seeing the personification of the Y2K culture war rendered in *Fortnite*'s raytraced silicone rather than the origami style of *Quake III Arena* – you may be forgiven for assuming that Epic's response to the FTC ruling was to pivot away from real children in favor of Millennials, who have similarly childish tastes and also live with their parents. But, like Robert Christgau predicted, Eminem's kid appeal has outlived the shelf life of his celebrity references. His 2004 parent-child love song "Mockingbird" was a 2023 TikTok hit, and one of his *Fortnite* skins is of his noir image from *Music to be Murdered By,* a Platinum-selling 2020 album in which Eminem's middle-aged fretting about his fading star doesn't keep him from rapping about bullies stealing his tricycle or a child's plot to murder his abusive stepfather. Even outside of his puerile subject matter, Eminem's candy-coated Rube Goldberg prosody is fascinating to kids, a demographic more interested in concepts of 'biggest' and 'strongest' and 'fastest' than in effortlessness. Epic Games claimed Eminem was the *Fortnite* playerbase's most requested musician.

With this context, Eminem's presence in The Big Bang can be interpreted as an apology to the players following their disastrous attempts at childproofing. With the FTC's eyes on them, Epic found themselves forced

to obey both COPPA and the standards of censorship bodies. In November, Epic's strategy was to age-rate individual skins that had elements of fear or violence, then restrict them from being used in game modes rated for under 12s – mostly community content made in Creative mode. The resulting restrictions ended up on characters who had holstered guns as part of their character models, as well as on mildly scary visuals like the Marvel supervillain Venom. Outcry led Epic to announce a new strategy where skins would have multiple censorship levels and adjust between them on the fly, but the basic underlying logic remains ridiculous. In the runup to the Big Bang, a selection of hit Eminem singles (from his comparatively tamer post-sobriety material) were broadcast over the in-game radio in enervating Clean edits.

In "Godzilla", the lyric "you've just pulled a pistol on a guy with a missile launcher" loses the word "pistol," despite playing in a game where players can find both pistols and missile launchers and pull them on each other. When he raps about giving critics "the motherfuckin' finger – prostate exam," the expected swear is cut, but also prostate, a sex-swapped version of how the only version of "The Real Slim Shady" I knew as a kid cuts the word clitoris. But Eminem's sick jokes and disgusting imagery are kept, so long as he doesn't say any bad words. Removing holstered guns from characters in a game about shooting one another with guns is the same absurd double-standard that allows Eminem to perform passages of lexical keepy-uppy comparing his rhymes to the Vegas shooter's bump stock firearms but won't allow him to say "prostate." It's tempting to dismiss it as the actions of a censorship board that has no idea what it's doing, but it's more revealing to decide it is the reflection of an objective political truth. The average American six-year-old isn't allowed to know about the prostate because for a long time, powerful, stupid men from that country have believed that letting children know about their prostates will get them groomed and turn them gay. The average American six-year-old can be expected to know about bump stocks, because they do active shooter drills in school.

A real tragedy is how underused Eminem was by the Big Bang event – his aesthetic is a perfect fit for *Fortnite,* a bratty, kinetic silliness with novelty elements that sits comfortably next to the braggadocious hip-hop songs Fortnite uses to characterize its original skins. (The climax of "Survival," *"I must be allergic to success, because every time I get close to it, I just go at you, than*

achieve," is a painful Dad joke in the song's original *Call of Duty: Ghosts* sync placement, but if you bump it on Icon Radio in a golf cart while running down a guy with a taco for a head, no song lyric will ever make more sense to you in your life.) Instead, this peerless emcee is deployed as the ultimate master of ceremonies for Epic's shareholder reassurance, taking his place after trailers for the new *LEGO* and *Rocket Racing* modes to promote *Fortnite Festival,* made possible by Epic's acquisition of Harmonix. It's another frustrating brand collaboration for an artist who has stubbornly resisted the prestige route in favor of remaining a mainstream pop star, resulting in enduring relevance but also excruciating acts of selling out like the Bored Ape Yacht Club advertisement he focused on for most of 2022. The power of the eternal "Lose Yourself" isn't buoyed up by the oversimplified *Guitar Hero*-like gameplay of *Festival,* the beginner-level difficulty of the step chart has no connection to the dactylic beauty of that flow, and the song itself is too dour and earnest for cartoon fishmen to rock out to. The giddiness of Eminem's best work is represented by his often-maligned middle-aged self, who upstages the blond brat with his 2020 hit "Godzilla," appearing as a giant that jump-cuts around a burning city in time with the song's slapstick blast-beat flow.

Keeping his monstrous, bearded head close to the camera is a thoughtful staging of the tongue-twisting trick syllables that serve as the climax of the piece, but Unreal Engine's lip-sync distorts Eminem's otherwise flattering likeness into the visual language of *Skibidi Toilet* and the outrageous lyrical censorship that turns his best punchlines into an instrumental reminds us why it is that an Eminem show in a kid's game couldn't fill up the 7-minute set that Ari got.

Despite the majority of cultural commentary on the subject, the geeky crossover-happy trash of today's media wouldn't have been out of place to a teenager in the Shadymania era. Sam Raimi's *Spider-Man* would pave the way for the dominance of superhero cinematic universes the same year that Eminem was gallivanting around on MTV in his Rap Boy spandex, and any kid tired of watching it could have powered on their console to play *Super Smash Bros. Melee* or *Kingdom Hearts.* Moral panics emerge in times when children's relationship with the world is mediated by new technology – Elvis's swinging hips on television in the '50s, "Purple Rain" in children's CD players in the '80s. Perhaps the controversy that surrounded Eminem was a displaced fear of the age of brands, a rapidly expanding and shameless culture willing to sell anything to

your kids they could put an MTV-friendly face on, even if it reflected their worst impulses of misogyny or homophobia. There's nothing so inappropriate as that in *Fortnite,* but it's run by a corporation demonstrated by law to be negligent of its responsibilities to keep kids away from hearing their "friends" kill themselves on voice chat or wasting their parent's money on digital collectibles. It's the opposite form of subversion – instead of showing kids the ugly side of the world in a safe way, *Fortnite* puts a barely safe face on exploitation in an attempt to sneak it inside the home.

But there's a feeling of desperation about the strategy – the new modes are half-baked. *Rocket Racing* is pretty good, but not better than *Rocket League.* Festival is a worse version of a game you got tired of over a decade ago and *LEGO Fortnite* is an adequate *Minecraft*-type game with some charm but clunky building controls. The *Festival Jam Stage* is diabolical, an appropriation of Harmonix's flawed but delectably inventive mashup game *FUSER* that Epic killed off for an empty hangout space that offers no creative or performance possibilities. Everything feels unfinished, a minimum viable product that Epic appears to have rushed out to juice the player count to look good for the shareholders; a number of the staff that

worked on the Big Bang event were laid off when Epic cut its workforce by 16% a couple of months before the event went live.

It's not clear how *Fortnite'*s tidier playground is going to fare – it's dependent on players staying invested until the new modes can become viable. The FTC-enforced content sanitation could give *Fortnite* an edge with parents – if your brats are on *Fortnite,* at least that's some time that they aren't pureeing their attention spans with TikTok sludge videos – but in an age where children are growing up online, barely-living-room-safe only lasts until the kids discover the uncut stuff.

After the Big Bang event, *Fortnite'*s next celebrity guest was The Weeknd, following after his appearance in his despised erotic thriller series *The Idol.* His music is no cleaner than Eminem's, but it's concerned with more adult topics and reference points, signaling *Festival* as a designated adult area in contrast to the *LEGO* toybox on the other channel. The censorship of his music is less egregious, but references to "God," like the reference to "Jesus" in Beyoncé's hook on Eminem's "Walk On Water," are still cut. I want to say that *Fortnite'*s boosting of the album is part of why the soundtrack to *The Idol* is getting another lease of life on

the charts after the bombing series got cancelled after one season – clearly, kids are hearing how the song is supposed to sound on the real internet, *Fortnite*'s main competition if Epic is serious about turning the game into a Metaverse.

Is it even possible to keep children ignorant of cussing any more, when we're all exposed to the torrent of information coming from everything around us? If we continue to outsource the task of keeping our kids safe to media conglomerates, we are handing too much power to forces that only care about making money – companies like Epic which signal their harmlessness by suppressing content, when the dangers to children were always material. Children are too lucrative an untapped labor force for companies not to exploit their passion and curiosity to create meaning for their product and value for their shareholders. But it's also not possible to trust the FTC – it took them years to act, and even with the refunds, we can never reverse what happened to the kids who were traumatized by *Fortnite*'s irresponsible moderation.

I think we need to rethink what childhood innocence actually means – not a state of being prevented from seeing the world's darkness, but a state of being given the tools to protect themselves from it. Unfortunately, this requires some difficult conversations, and for authority figures to acknowledge that children are complete people who can never be fully controlled. For them to be normal during the day, we have to accept that at night they turn into monsters. 🦑

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Illustrations

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