UNWINNABLE

ISSUE

173

LILO & STITCH AND MENTAL HEALTH

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

UNWINNABLE

magazine

DAVID SHIMOMURA EMILY PRICE MADDI CHILTON PHOENIX SIMMS MATT MARRONE JAY CASTELLO LEVI RUBECK NOAH SPRINGER JUSTIN REEVE ROB RICH

This Machine Kills Fascists

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Longform

Contributors

Dear Reader,

It's around this time of year that I remember daylight savings exists for so many of us. Truly a nightmare. For people like me who enjoy a dark-looking game or movie it really messes up one's ability to find the time.

Anyway, while that is all miserable, I am happy to announce our next theme issue will be this June, Kawaiiju! A celebration of the huge, the cute and the monstrous.

For features, this month we have Orrin Grey on our favorite found family, *Lilo and Stitch*. Backing this up is Perry Gottschalk one *The Last Guardian*.

For this month's Funeral Rites, brought to you by our friends at Exalted Funeral, Justin Reeve talks with with Huffa Frobes-Cross about *Between the Skies,* a system neutral game about exploring endless strange worlds.

As for our regular rogues . . . Jay Castello spills tea and paint. Maddi Chilton ruins my news feed with epochs and Russian lit. Matt Marrone went on vacation but gave us a beer report on his way back. Noah Springer plays with a Cucurbitaceae herding dog! Justin Reeve goes to the city of lights. Rob Rich watches other people watching other things. Sadly, not on Gogglebox. Levi Rubeck flexes his MFA on all of us. Phoenix Simms also fathoms the depths of lit crit!

Never let the powerful sleep well at night. Vote in your local elections. Hand out cash to people that need it.

See you all in the next Exploits!

David Shimomura
Chicago, Illinois
March 6, 2024

PAST PRESENCE | **EMILY PRICE**

OCTOPIA IS A SWEET FARMING SIM THAT REWRITES EASTWARD'S HISTORY

My favorite growable vegetable in *Octopia* is sweet potato. It can make *imoyokan,* a sweet paste shaped into cubes. You can grind it into vermicelli noodles, though I don't know if you can make *japchae,* which is my favorite thing with sweet potato noodles in it in real life. The first thing you make with it, though, is simply grilled sweet potato. You give it to a former real estate agent whose career was just crushed by the company that sent him out to see you. "Stick a fork in me," he cries, "I'm done" – then you hand him a jacket sweet potato, and everything is good again.

Simple stories don't have to overcomplicate themselves to be good. Like the humble sweet potato I grill in my oven when it gets cold outside, *Octopia* remains sweet and delicious the whole way through, and the whole experience lasts a lot longer than I expected it to. *Octopia* is a DLC released for a three-year-old game, an RPG called *Eastward* which followed a man and the mysterious girl he took care of as they attempted to stop the end of the world. Pre-release, this game had more hype than most mid-range retro inspired RPGs, which three years on is now a field that feels semi-exhausted. When it was released, all that buzz muted into a contradictory whimper. It got plenty of reviews – even NPR reviewed it – but most of them concluded that it was merely OK.

For people who really enjoyed the game like me, the announcement that a DLC would be coming more than two and a half years after the original release was a huge surprise. The better surprise was that it was a fully playable farming game, something that is not present in the original at all. In *Octopia,* you live in an alternate world where the two main characters from the original game have bought, and now need to fix, a broken-down vacation town with an attached farm. It's an

excuse to put two RPG characters into a farming sim, and in doing so to make the full package of *Eastward* a combo that sounds like an SEO headline's greatest dream: throwback pixel RPG, plus lighthearted found family farming sim.

This sounds like a cash grab from my description, so I first need to make the important point that this DLC sells for $6. I'll be real, *Octopia* is less a DLC and more a tie-in game to *Eastward* that sells for the price of a nice latte. I say this because of the amount of content – I'm not at the end yet, and I've played for 15 hours – but also the lengths Pixpil has gone to in order to improve the experience of the game.

The best example of how *Octopia* has changed and adapted its source material is with cooking. In the original *Eastward,* cooking was robust enough. You need a piece of food from one of the major categories – meat, fish, dairy or vegetable – to make dumplings or sushi. *Octopia* has radically expanded this system, to the point where there's over 150 recipes. It also made the cooking system match the farm sim it's now in. Each recipe calls for specific ingredients, and you need all of them to make the dish. Whereas in a game like *Stardew Valley,* even modded to add more recipes, I find myself making dishes based on what I already have, in *Octopia* it's the other way around – I only grew my crops to sustain my cooking.

The DLC gets rid of the most-complained about aspect of *Eastward,* which is its combat. This is more tied into cooking than you'd think – John, the first main character, is a good chef and fights with his frying pan. Combat relies heavily on placement, and you have to turn in the right direction in order to make an impact. Defensive playing is rewarded, since damage resources are semi-scarce, but there aren't many options to defend beyond not getting hit. Even as an *Eastward* enjoyer, I admit it's frustrating. I got stuck in a sewer sequence and put the game down for six months before I finished it.

However, I'm someone who values the aesthetic experience of a game more than its gameplay. The moment-to-moment experience of fighting can be kinda bad, if the world is interesting. *Eastward*'s story, while unintelligible at the end, plays with themes of found family and survival against apocalyptic disaster that I found moving. The main characters are fleeing a huge cloud called the Miasma on an overground train for most of the game, watching each community they become a part of get swallowed by the darkness. It's a sad story that hits some of the same touchstones as *Spirited Away,* a movie I was

frightened of as a kid because of how bluntly it treats loss.

Again, these themes are more important to me than the fact that the story doesn't make a whole lot of sense. And *Octopia* has smartly done the perfect thing in this situation: make a follow up that focuses only on tone. The DLC obliterates most of the story of the first game, making you start fresh. It also centers minigames that made the original special, putting them center stage in the DLC. There's fishing and building in addition to cooking, and side quests where you make recipes for people to get them to move in. You can have all your friends over for dinner. Certain milestones aren't explained, but the mystery reminded me of playing *Harvest Moon* on my DS as a kid – walking around without a clue let me accomplish a lot more in the process of figuring it out.

I think *Eastward* deserved better than the lukewarm reception it got, and I'm sad to see that its DLC seems to have received more of the same. There are almost no reviews of it, though its Steam rating is positive. *Octopia* represents a studio multitasking: releasing an upgrade in a super-popular genre that's bound to bring in new players and giving old players something else to do. *Eastward* was itself a reinterpretation of retro RPGs, and leaned heavy on aesthetics, but never without substance. In its own genre that's guilty of style over content, *Octopia* really stands out. Put together the games form a pair of style and substance, if you're willing to push through some difficult controls and mystifying story in the original. But if you just want to make some radish soup with your neighbors, *Octopia* is there for you.

MIND PALACES | **MADDI CHILTON**

LOST IN TRANSLATION

I'm considering whether I should switch which translation of *War and Peace* I'm reading. I've had to say that sentence out loud with a straight face while working through this dilemma, which has been appropriately humbling. It's just not a problem most people have any particular stake in; the fact that I'm even taking time out of my packed schedule of Anthropocene anxiety to worry in this particular direction means my life has taken a turn somewhere. But it does feel like a genuine dilemma! I'm reading one of the great works of world literature for the first time, and probably the only time, and I'd like to do it right.

Here's the context. A friend and I have both taken on the project of reading *War and Peace* over the course of 2024. At 361 chapters, that's roughly a chapter a day. The chapters, I have been assured by highly-vetted internet sources, are an average of four pages. So far, my experience supports that; I've found myself wincing when I have to flip pages twice, which makes me sound a bit more precious than I feel I've actually been about this whole thing. I'm quite enjoying the experience! It's less daunting when you have such a small portion of it set in front of you every day, and the fact that we're reading it together means that every day we essentially get to have a gossip session about our best friend: depressed homosexual Andrey Bolkonsky.

The fuss made about the novel's laundry list of characters has been exaggerated so far. There are about as many as you'd expect for the word count, and a fair amount of side characters are introduced and then fade into the background without a hysterical amount of fanfare. The main characters stand out, are given plenty of time, and the relationships you're supposed to follow and understand aren't yet too complicated.

But what does frustrate me, and what has prompted my investigation into other translations, is my own sobering lack of context. The picture Tolstoy paints of aristocratic Russian society and Napoleonic warfare is so impressively, perfectly specific that I feel both totally immersed in the story he is telling and entirely incapable of understand-

ing the fundamental things happening within it. I will sit in awe at the perfect description of the set of Andrey's eyes as he listens to the droning of a general whose job he thinks he could do better; I'll wince in sympathy as Marya finds herself smitten with a man whose mere presence terrifies her, preening even as he politely acknowledges her and turns back to her prettier friend. Then, two chapters later, I will spend six paragraphs in desperate confusion trying to understand the punchline to a joke. Sometimes the book refers to four different characters as "the princess" on the same page. There is a *lot* of talk about political diplomacy.

It sounds like I'm bitching at Tolstoy for his lack of clarity. Leo, it's not you, it's me. A book like this is a big deal, okay, and if I read it, I'd like to feel like I've *read* it, to feel like I understood the nuances I needed to and followed even the particulars of one or another battle and came out of it a more educated, erudite person. I don't want to miss anything! In the midst of all the eternal yawing about whether you should make teenagers read classic literature in school or if adults who primarily read young adult fiction are a disgrace to their species we've skipped over the fact that some of us didn't pay attention in English class and therefore feel a little like a circus bear riding a bicycle even when doing something that is ostensibly their primary hobby. I would like to not be an idiot about this, ideally.

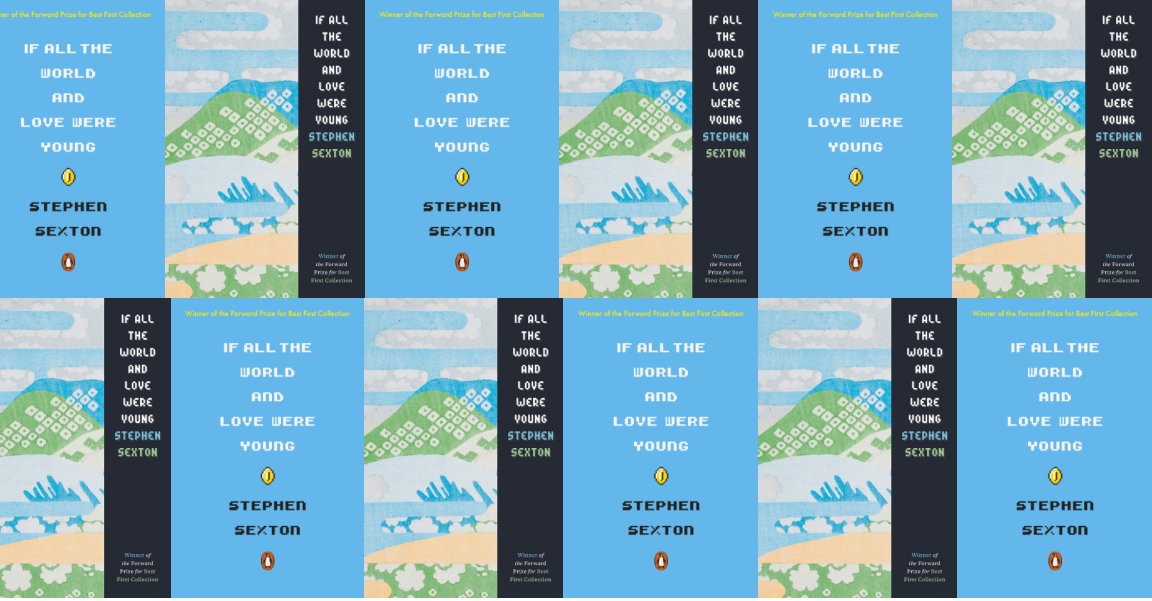
So here I am, overanalyzing translations. Constance Garnett is taking the brunt of the heat here, although in all honesty I really don't think she's been all that bad. I'm just evaluating my options. Despite the fact that you can't min-max life, I still want to ensure I'm in the best place I can possibly be, inventory and equipment-wise, for the boss fight of world literature. So here are my choices now:

» Modern Library Classics, paperback, what I'm currently reading. Garnett translation, which I'm finding readable on a sentence level but contextually confusing. My copy got trashed in the mail, so I've got incentive to let it go.
» Modern Library Classics, hardback. Second verse, same as the first. It would look nicer, and the spine wouldn't come pre-split!
» Norton Critical Edition. Absolutely not. The meager essay offering isn't worth Maude's Anglicized names. Who the fuck is Andrew?
» Penguin Classics. Pretty paperback, nice and chunky. Got a good HANDFEEL. I'd be worried about the dark spine showing cracks prominently. Briggs translation, which is supposed to be easy to read but unforgivably British.

» Barnes and Noble paperback edition. Talks about a character's death scene on the back splash so I refuse to read it on principle.
» Oxford World Classics. A pretty copy, but I know from experience the spines of that series are so tight it's impossible to read them without visibly fucking them to hell and back.
» Vintage Classics. Beautiful, big-ass teal hardback. Would make me feel like I'm Doing Something… but it's the Pevear and Volokhonsky translation and I'm scared of their literalisms.

Anyway, these are the things I think about all day. This is your brain on books.

What everything comes back to, here, is why I'm reading *War and Peace* in the first place. It's mostly because – and I am personally extremely susceptible to this, for some fluke of personality that can probably be attributed to my star sign or my love language or the tarot reading my friend did at New Years – because I want to say that I have. I do things to prove I can. I am constantly making a point no one asked me to. Why would I read *War and Peace?* Why wouldn't I? And I am. Take that.



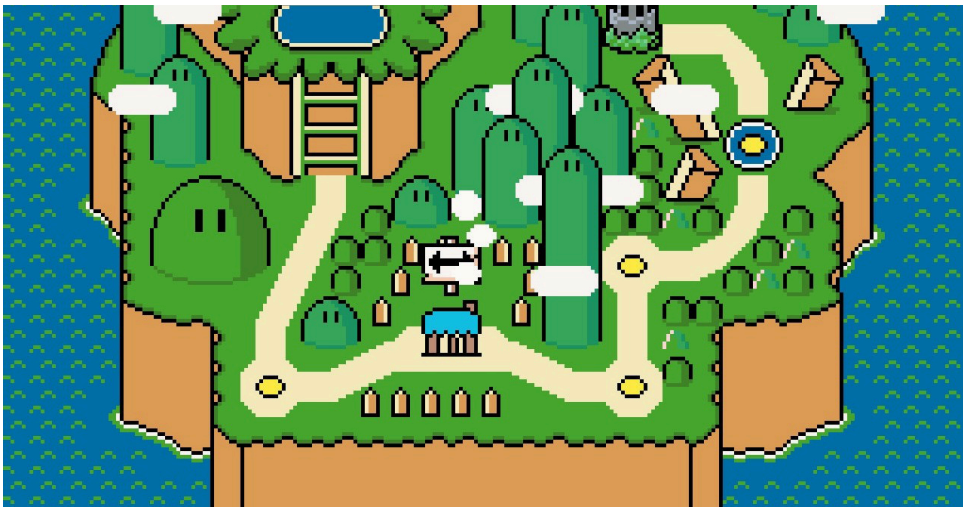
INTERLINKED | **PHOENIX SIMMS**

A 16-BIT MEMORIAL GARDEN

Last month I had the wonderful opportunity to review Wake Forest University Press' reissue of *If All the World and Love were Young*. Penned by award-winning Belfast poet Stephen Sexton in 2019, the title references a line from Sir Walter Raleigh's "The Nymph's Reply to the Shepherd" and is a parodic response to Christopher Marlowe's pastoral poem "The Passionate Shepherd to His Love." Despite the classical nature of this reference, the wistful yet disenchanted tone of Raleigh's poem reveals the postmodern attitude that Sexton writes in. Not to mention the self-referential and eclectic subject matter of his extended poem.

The piece gained renown for being a literary memorial for his mother, mapped onto the abstract pop-culture geography of *Super Mario World* (1990). Finally getting the chance to read this work, I can confirm that the framing of this poetry book is not at all a gimmick – it's a sincere and perceptive choice. One could even call this framing transgressive in that it effortlessly blends high and low culture (as much as I loathe those terms). For Sexton, death and *Super Mario World* have always been connected and he gets at this connection via tracing the long chain of signifiers he's experienced since childhood.

To be clear, Stephen Sexton is not the first to write videogame-related poetry. People have been writing poetry related to their gaming experiences on the internet for decades. In recent years, poets like Rachel Atchley and Latonya Pennington regularly contribute poignant work to *Videodame* and *Into the Spine,* respectively (as I'm sure they do elsewhere). Various game designers have also developed games that directly reference poetry, like Dejobaan Games' *Elegy for a Dead World* which is a dedication to the British Romantic tradition. There are also games that are visual poems, like Jordan Magnuson's *Walk or Die* which shares a similar surreal tone to Molleindustria's *Every Day the Same Dream*. The latter being a title published all the way back in 2009, I should add.



Magnuson, as of last year, has even released an entire book on *Game Poetics,* which he has made open access.

Only recently have there been more attempts at developing a poetics that is both unique to games and places games within the ongoing literary history of poetics. This is what Sexton has accomplished with *If All the World and Love were Young.* This extended poem is not only a stunning elegy for his mother, but an ekphrastic piece about the nature of play and memory. One that establishes a poetics not just of gaming experiences, but one that recognizes the physical media of games as poetic objects in and of themselves.

For instance, early in Part One of the extended poem, Sexton devotes the opening lines in "Yoshi's Island 2" towards the aesthetics of both the what he saw as a player on his television and the physicality of a world on-screen:

"Pixels and bits pixels and bits their perpendicularity:
One of the worlds I live in is as shallow as a pane of glass."

Notable as well in these lines is how he positions himself as both the viewer and the player character of Mario, a dual mindset we are often subject to when engrossed in a game world.

What Sexton has done with *If All the World and Love is Young* is demonstrate how games are both physical technology that enable a postmodern experience of witnessing and making meaning. The representational media nested within that technology engages players with ever-evolving audiovisual signifiers and makes them actively part of that process of making meaning as well. And as long as you have a working outlet and a compatible television, us players can find and make meaning in a variety of different settings. Sexton's prefatory note to his extended poem is a perfect example of this, where he describes playing *Super Mario World* in his late 1990s home (emphasis mine):

"My back is to the camera. The television was positioned so it faced out from the corner of the room where the wall met the patio door. To my left, I could see the garden, along which a little river ran and, over the fields, a dense forest. To my right, there was the huge block of the television, which was already fifteen or sixteen years old. **My eyes drifted between these two positions.** Because of the flash of the camera and the glare of the television

screen, it's impossible to tell which of the following levels I'm playing."

Games blur the boundaries between personal and shared histories, individual and collective states of consciousness as well as private and public spaces. It's no wonder then that one of Sexton's epigraphs is one of Susan Sontag's influential thoughts on photography and the overlap of self and the construction of a perceived self. Sontag's *On Photography* famously explored how photographs were also, like games, both objects and complex containers of cultural signification. She also, like Sexton, realized how the act of photography was also an organizing principle of human thought. Both photography and games have proliferated to the point of influencing our everyday routines and perception of communication.

What Sexton has demonstrated deftly with *If All the World and Love were Young,* is that our game experiences and memories are viscerally entangled with mundane locations. Each and every one of us players likely have specific individual anchoring memories connected to a specific title or perhaps a play date with one of our friends. Often these moments are fragmentary and not specific to what's on-screen, as game critics and theorists have noted. Despite how absorbing playing games can be we are paradoxically more aware of where we played or who we were playing with.

In his essay "No Traces" for *Critical Hits: Writers Playing Video Games,* Sexton recounts some of his most intimate game memories and the key players and events involved in those memories. The first memory and the one tied closest to his poetry collection is of him playing *Super Mario World* in the summer of 1998 at his County Down home. The same summer that the Real IRA planted the Omagh bomb in protest of The Good Friday peace agreement that was to end the conflict known as the Troubles, which claimed 3,500 lives since the late 1960s. Sexton remembers hearing of the Omagh bombing on the radio and later learned of further details of the disaster from TV news.

He goes on to explain how a childhood friend of his played *Metal Gear Solid* with him and that in the act of playing and witnessing a game together, he would often forget who held the controller. Later in his life he read literature about games as visual culture objects and stumbled across a term used by scholar Peter Buse, the "circuit of specularity," which eloquently described the vicariousness of playing games. Gaming, whether alone or with an audience, makes the player aware of *seeing themself* seeing

themself. You transcend and I would add, in some instances, extend your perception of your identity and body as you imaginatively inhabit game worlds.

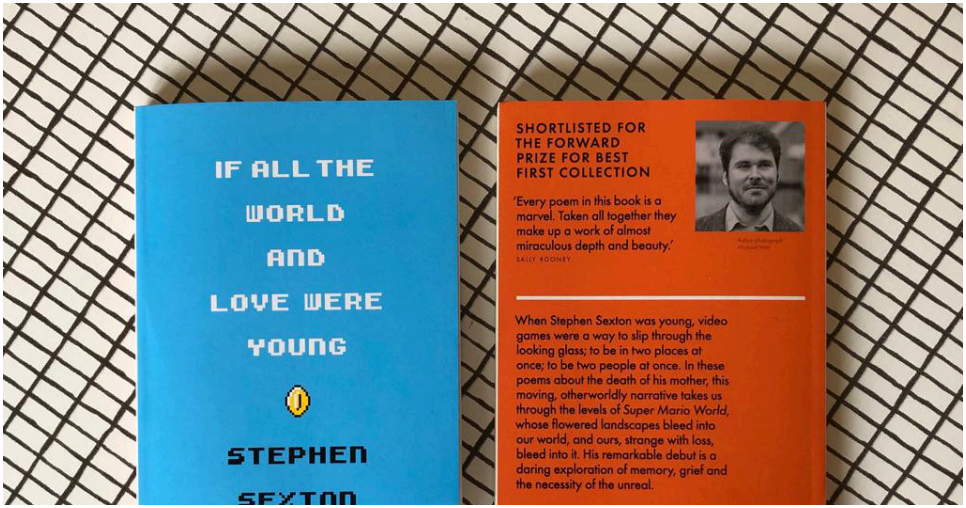
Sexton is keenly aware of how technology has constantly been mediating his everyday life since early on. His locus of game memory is fixated on both his old childhood home in County Down and the photographic representation of him playing *Super Mario World* in that home. The photograph, taken by his mother in that same timeframe mentioned in "No Traces," serves for him as an edifying tool for making sense of his mother's passing. At first, he struggles against the photo's memento mori quality, focusing instead on the nostalgic turn towards the past and a home and a self that no longer exists exactly as it was captured.

Sexton draws a parallel between this realization and his observation in "No Traces" about games operating in a similar manner to photography. Specifically, games as they are experienced on consoles, which themselves are quite possibly becoming obsolete. Contrasting "the vast, coin-hungry machines of the arcade," very much a public space for gaming, consoles "put the experience of gaming into domestic spaces." This led to games becoming signifiers of "home, and the moments of childhood one rapidly outgrows" similar to how processors develop rapidly. As such, although games are not necessarily stationary visual cultural objects like photographs are, they are "fixed in technological time as well as personal history." Sexton ascribes an almost supernatural quality to this feature of photography and games.

With regards to that last note, think of the doubling of the self mentioned in "Yoshi's Island 2," bringing to mind perhaps *Poltergeist*-like imagery of an entity pressing against the confines of the world that "is as shallow as a pane of glass" or some sort of doppelgänger. In the sequence or "level" that precedes it, "Yoshi's Island 1," Sexton describes his mother taking the photograph in an equally ethereal way:

"My mother winds her camera the room is spelled with sudden light:
A rush of photons at my back a fair wind from the spectral world."

That memory was not just where Sexton became aware of the circuit of specularity (although at that point he had yet to learn of it). He describes it as "moments of watershed" that he will return to again and again, taking "the Orpheus route from one world up into another" as he characterizes his grief in one of the later levels "Vanilla Secret 1."



Throughout the collection Sexton showcases a fearlessness of juxtaposing eclectic subjects. Irish pastoral landscapes, the beauty of broken-down old televisions, the way the names of the Koopa Kids remind him of singers like Wendy O. Williams, and how even '90s slang in its archaicness is bittersweet. There's a credits section that lists all of Sexton's influences, emphasizing the eclecticism as well.

If All the World and Love were Young reminds us that games are worthy of literary analysis and that it's not preposterous to perceive them as significant objects of our visual culture. Sexton recently wrote for the Irish Times about his follow up collection *Cheryl's Destinies* (also reissued by Wake Forest University press), a collection that deals with how poetry and time have been transformed by the ongoing pandemic. He mentions that the isolation and loss of intimacy we experienced for a prolonged period during lockdown led him to consider new ways of joining disparate, perhaps even "silly" parties together to create new intimacies. Clearly the philosophies Sexton's learned from his first poetic work have influenced him deeply and allowed him to express and process both personal and global grief.

Reading this collection was both cathartic and vindicating and I hope more players and poetry readers seek out its revelations.

ROOKIE OF THE YEAR | **MATT MARRONE**

BEERS OF THE OSA PENINSULA

I returned late Sunday from a truly wonderful vacation to rural Costa Rica. We stayed in a bamboo house in the middle of the jungle, swam in waterfalls and spied scarlet macaws, sloths and howler monkeys.

There is, at the heart of it all, a touching family story I could conjure up for this column. As that seems like a lot of work on a tight deadline, I am going to, in the spirit of the Rookie of the Year's never-ending mission of service, tell you about the gallons upon gallons of lukewarm to ice cold local beer I drank.

Here are the names of the beers I had, in no particular order: Imperial Classic, Imperial Silver, Imperial Ultra, Pilsen, Bavaria Masters, Dirigo Fermentory Faro and Dirigo Fermentory Lover.

Here's that same list, this time ranked by quality: 1. (tied) Imperial Classic, Imperial Silver, Imperial Ultra, Pilsen, Bavaria Masters, Dirigo Fermentory Faro and Dirigo Fermentory Lover.

The reason they're all tied is because other than the Dirigos, which are from a craft brewery we visited, most of them are essentially the Coors Light of their country. Consumed at any temperature lower than brain-freeze cold, they are uninspiring at best. When found frigid on a deliriously humid day in the rain forest, however, they are a revelation.

In case you ever find yourself in Costa Rica, here is your complete guide.

Imperial Classic: According to our good friends at Wikipedia, Imperial was first brewed in 1924 by Carl Walter Steinvorth, the first orthodontist in Central America. It is a light, refreshing beer, perfect for sitting on the porch of your bamboo treehouse after a nice hike and about sixteen showers.

Imperial Silver: After the trucker hat with the Imperial Eagle logo on sale at the airport I wanted was for some reason manufactured too small for an adult head, I decided not to do any more research into the Imperial line of beers. But here is how I imagine it: Some-

where along the way, a member of the Steinvorth family, if not Carl Walter himself, decided their brew needed a fancier offering for their more well-heeled clientele, likely either the Costa Rican one-percenters or tourists or both. They achieved this by adding the "classic" name to the original Imperial label, then creating new cans and bottles that are virtually the same except for the Silver name and color swath, and then pouring regular old Imperial beer into them. If you are able to tell the difference between Classic and Silver in a blind taste test, my only question for you is why are you taking a blind taste test when your only goal should be to drink as many as possible until you are so drunk you can't remember a thing about your stupid real life back home anymore?

Imperial Ultra: When Silver is no longer fancy enough, or, more likely, when you bought eight-packs of all three Imperial flavors at the supermarket because you thought they were different, and you've run out of the other two, Ultra is the perfect choice. Crisp, light, refreshing, and TOTALLY UNLIKE both Classic and Silver, ahem, it'll have you deep in discussion with the giant iguana asleep on the palm tree over the parking lot after only 10 or 15 cans.

Pilsen: Is this yet another new bottle design with classic Imperial dumped into it? It wouldn't surprise me. But, no, Pilsen has apparently been around longer, since the 19th Century, so likely it's more the other way around. At any rate, I had a lot of Pilsen during my trip, but I'll never forget one particular bottle served to me at Martina's, the local ex-pat-owned watering hole, which was so beautifully cold I could have wept. I was also told by a bartender somewhere else that it was his favorite Costa Rican beer they had on offer, so score another one for Pilsen over Imperial. It's also ideal for drinking while floating in a pool at a resort that isn't your own.

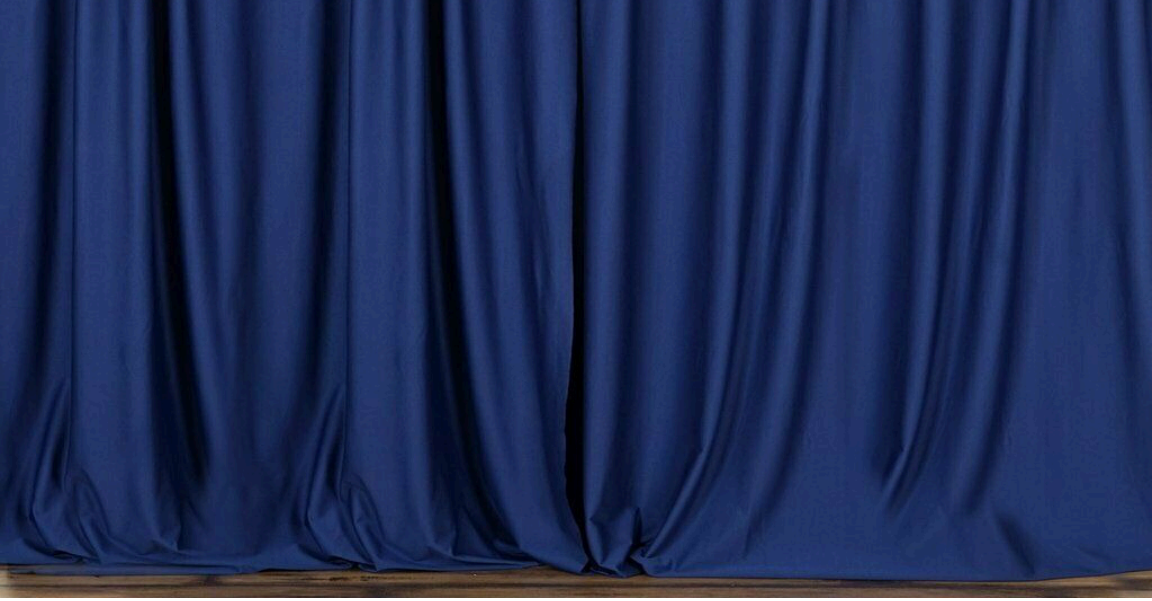
Bavaria Masters: When we ate lunch at a place called Delfines, Imperial and Pilsen were listed on the beer menu as "Domestic" beers. Bavaria, however, was under the header "Domestic Premium." There are several types of Bavaria, which I'm sure are all quite different, but I headed straight for the Masters edition, as I didn't want to mess around after our walk to the Porto Jimenez restaurant under a punishing, cloudless sky. "What's the temperature?" my sister-in-law had asked along the way. "Whatever temperature it is in Hell," was my response.

Dirigo Fermentory Faro: On our only night in the capital of San Jose, which was also our last night in the country, we stayed at an airport near the hotel – Hotel Aeropuerto, naturally – which the Wife of the Year

selected partly for its location but also because it has an on-site microbrewery. My first order was Faro, a German-style brew that came in handy when they forgot to put in my dinner order and I had to eat table tortilla chips while watching everyone else eat.

Dirigo Fermentory Lover: This is the microbrewery's "West Coast IPA" which I was told is their pride and joy and tastes like any basic IPA you've ever had. It was the last beer I drank in Costa Rica. The weather in San Jose that night was gorgeous – cool, breezy, not at all humid – and an IPA was perfectly fine for the occasion. That being said, I would have been just as happy, if not happier, if one of Carl Walter Steinvorth's heirs had surreptitiously replaced the contents of the bottle with any of the Imperials, or, by extension, an original Pilsen.

So, there you have it. You are now, pretty much, an expert on Costa Rican beers. I bet you didn't have that on your bingo card for today, did you? Now, go ahead and Google the sound howler monkeys make and play it loudly while you're trying to fall asleep tonight – and you'll practically be Costa Rican yourself.



AREA OF EFFECT | **JAY CASTELLO**

SOME QUESTIONS I PERSONALLY FIND INTERESTING ABOUT PAINT

Is Cloud Strife guided by the hand of God?

I'm playing a game of *Dungeon World* right now as a cleric, and clerics get two guidance spells right off the bat, with the opportunity to acquire more as they level up. My cleric is also (perhaps unsurprisingly) a very devout person, so I cast these spells a lot. And when I'm not playing, I think, constantly, about what it would be like to be able to ask God exactly what it is they want you to be doing at any given moment.

Cloud Strife might be a cleric.

Yes, sorry, I'm talking about the yellow paint. But I'm going to do my best not to be drawn into the discourse here. (Okay, quickly, my take: Twitter is a dying platform subsisting, vampire-like, on baiting people into having conversations no one enjoys or finds any value in.) What I want is to take the yellow paint seriously; approach it critically.

As critics, we broadly ignore these oddities of game design, bracketing them out away from our curiosity about the rest of the game. They've been weaponized by a certain contingent of gamers who like to talk about "lazy" developers, and in our defense of them as a tool we leave no room to acknowledge them as a part of the game itself. At most, we might talk about why they're necessary as games strive for hyperrealism that makes their worlds less readable for actually playing in – but here I am approaching the discourse again.

The point is, is Cloud Strife guided by the hand of his creator to know which walls are climbable? I haven't played *FF7 Rebirth,* so I have to work in the pre-critique here, asking questions I would like somebody else to answer. But *Final Fantasy 7* is a game where verticality is a major expression of theme. The original had an extremely famous staircase climbing sequence showcasing

the vast space between Midgar's upper and lower classes. It means something that Cloud can climb some vertical surfaces easily in the new version.

Perhaps everyone can see this paint? Presumably Cloud's party members can also climb this wall. Do other people do the same when Cloud isn't around? Is it a major throughway? I think that Rebirth begins in a post-Midgar section of the game – could this be a symbol that outside of the deliberate oppression that defines the city, mobility – literally physical and metaphorically social – is easier?

Perhaps not. Not all artifacts of artistic creation are diegetic. We might instead choose to treat the yellow paint the way we treat a shaky cam or water on the camera. The film director uses these not because they are within the story but because they are a connection between the story and the viewer. They tell us something about the medium itself, not the narrative within it. Lens flare, for example, became a symbol for authenticity in film in the 1960s, selling the idea that the camera was capturing something real. In the world of CG, it stuck as a method of persuading audiences that what they were seeing was really filmed rather than created afterwards.

If yellow paint is one of videogames' equivalent tools, what is it saying? Is it highlighting *Final Fantasy 7*'s arrival as a 2024 AAA video game, where the yellow paint is essentially a genre convention? The remake is a deliberate answer to the 1997 release, and showcasing the essentially different medium it finds itself in is a worthy part of expressing that. How would this tie into whatever *Rebirth* does as metacommentary on *FF7*'s original narrative?

Or maybe the existence of the yellow paint actually undermines *FF7*'s take on verticality as class commentary. How do we square that with its value as an accessibility tool? (Going a bit beyond pure criticism, do we think there was a more elegant solution that could address both concerns? What factors in AAA development might have prevented this from happening?) Perhaps it would have been a more coherent game if Cloud and party couldn't get off the ground – or perhaps that would have undermined some of the hope.

As I said, I don't have answers to any of these questions, because I haven't played *Final Fantasy 7, Final Fantasy 7 Remake,* or *Final Fantasy 7 Rebirth.* But I am a critic, and more importantly, I enjoy criticism. *Final Fantasy 7* is one

of our most discussed games for a good reason, and the remakes are clearly doing something fascinating with that legacy. I want to hear other people dig into what that is, even if I don't want to play any of these games myself. And while no critical evaluation of a piece of art will be able to touch on every single part of a game, immediately excising something just because it's a quirk of game design makes our potential criticism less rich.

After writing most of this piece in the pre-review period, I now know that *FF7 Rebirth* is generally considered to be very good, but that some critics found it a victim of open world bloat. But when we talk about that bloat, which occurs in so many modern AAA games, we usually talk about its effect on pacing, and on how it gets in the way of what we actually want to do. That's not a criticism of any of these reviews, which talk lucidly and valuably about the experience of playing. (And, given the 250+ comments on that Polygon review I linked earlier, bravely.)

But I'm increasingly feeling like I could spend years exploring what that bloat does thematically. New questions stand out to me now that I've read reviews. In a game stuffed full of minigames, why not make climbing one of them? This reroutes me back to asking what it means that climbing, in a world structured on vertical hierarchy, is so easy for Cloud.

People have been talking about that famous Tumblr post again recently: the curtains were fucking blue. Of course, the curtains aren't just blue. We push against this instinctively, knowing the value of symbolism. We use it in our arguments for media literacy and against AI generation. If a bait tweet posted a screenshot of a film and said that the blue curtains were overdone and distracting, we would respond en masse with interpretations of their meaning, not explanations for their creation.

Well, are the climbable points just fucking yellow?

CASTING DEEP METEO | **LEVI RUBECK**

MEGA MAN X DOESN'T BEGIN UNTIL DR. LIGHT SINGS "MY BLUE SUIT"

Is there any term as
disgusting as "flow state" and the
weight, the gall, the bile

it carries for low wattage
imaginations
I tilt my head back and
where skull meets spine a crack

like knuckles or soccer knees
It's been like this for a year or so,
tilting my head fully to the stars

This time I jolt, and I
see myself flash with the
price of invulnerability,
flow interrupted

Gamers have some idea of
flow state but we do not de-
base ourselves with general
gamerisms here. It's not

instinct unbridled like silver
fox Goku, an unearned lean
into cellular primacy, as if every

    body carried a godliness instead
of potential for cancer
    or community

Closer to playing music or dancing,
    sports if I ever drilled,
washing cars if karate is to be
    believed, muscle in concert

with mind, *Whiplash* without
the white men spoiling
    jazz, power decoupled from
the threat of decisions. *Mega*

Man X was my first stage
for conducting instinct,
a game so completely
    played through the SNES

controller almost a relic'd Les Paul
or a Rock Band SG dumped
at Goodwill, but with more
    respect (where did my
SNES end up one wonders)

Mega Man 2 came after *3* only
    because that's how libraries
and lending and a nascent global
    supply chain still wired with
warehouses operated and

these were fine games
    carried on the shoulders of
the new wave of British heavy metal
(man) and figuring out
    the twist from

left to right in thumbs of three
on the pellet button while
    developing a sense of momentum
that spurns physics but pleases
the balletic

Here we're learning tempo
(that *Whiplash* again), each level
    a swamp of midi and slow down
and CRT lines blooming with
dust in the corners

step forward jump run charge
(later) slide (later) A Bflat C /
I V vi IV / tap tap tap taptaptap
et cet era

But too thick for flow, more of
a polo state, a gravity chamber
waltz (not blue yet), speed
yet undiscovered, not my tempo

Mega Man X, a non-sequel, not
the tenth Mega Man game (see *X-Men*
and *House of X*[avier]
and *Powers of X*[10])

a future vision of the future where
the war rages and you, X (not Mega [Rock]
Man but not-not) are ill prepared
though still four buttons stronger from
the other games we
are not following exactly

The key changes: charging
a shot and jumping
off walls, taught from stage zero
(which ends with Zero)
(and violet Boba Fett)

which doesn't smack of much
but it's one of two steps that
set a new range of flow and
without the walls it's the old
pre-20XX Mega Man

These walls are friction, resistance,
slow down, reflective, the Y
axis, an exponentially tall
second dimension to what
was possible before and if

you aren't dancing up and over
the penguin or the kuwanger
there's no music in you or
it's a stringless ukulele for some
thumbs but what pissed away
potential

Walls are the surface, but the
    dash is the beat
    Mega Man X doesn't begin
until the ghost of Dr. Light sings
"My Blue Suit" to X and
    teaches you to flow

but before that how
much time have
you spent fighting Vile

When you play now
(we still play now right)
    does X interrupt Vile's
flow state as he dashes in his
tugboat Gundam

We push that rock up the
infinite mountain and we
    must endure we must match
    tempo and dodge shot and
blank out this immortal
subordinate

Surviving against Vile
is a paradiddle, the circle of fifths,
    a fundamental, a piece of performance
I'm sure speedrunners have hacked
to hell and back but
    I refuse to look, I think only

of the flash and
the jump and one of
    three scenes with Zero
which serves to proof a legend
and from there we
    are finally warmed

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

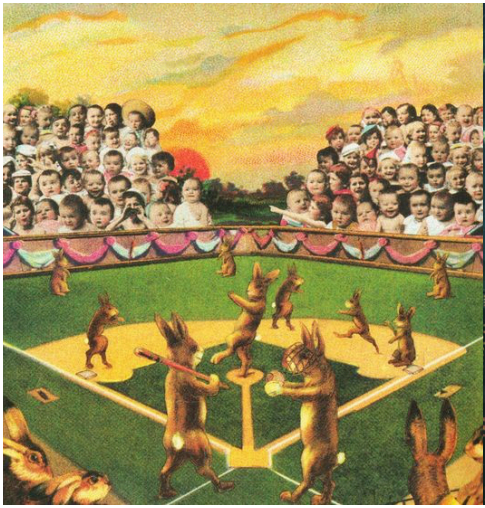
SMASHING PUMPKINS – MELLON COLLIE AND THE INFINITE SADNESS VINYL 4LP BOXSET

I know I've spent a lot of time in the past five years covering hip hop, but I do enjoy other musical styles on occasion. I was raised listening to classical music with my dad, and my mom got me into some of the classics from the '60s when I was young – I still have a soft spot for The Beatles and Bob Dylan. When I left for college, I quickly discovered more classic artists that still get spins, like The Velvet Underground and Iggy Pop. And of course, I started to dive into the soul and funk scenes as I began sourcing out samples

from my favorite hip hop tracks. But as a kid who entered their teenage years in the '90s, I can't deny that the era of "alternative rock" resonates strongly with me. If a band was getting airtime on 105.7 The Point here in STL in 1998, I was probably getting into it. Some of them (Beck, Alice in Chains, Rob Zombie) are still in rotation today.

But of all the '90s era bands, few spoke to me like The Smashing Pumpkins (editor's note: Pumpkins originalists (such as myself) will be keen to note that on several albums they credit themselves as *The* Smashing Pumpkins, notably here, on *Adore* and since 2012). What can I say – Billy Corgan's nasal croon spoke to a very specific form of angst that ran through Gen X and dribbled down to little old pre-teen me. So, when I learned that there was a deluxe vinyl edition of *Mellon Collie and the Infinite Sadness,* I knew I had to get my hands on a copy. However, it was normally retailing between $80-$100, and that just seems out of my price range. I do have a two-year-old and work at a non-profit, and that just seemed a bit unnecessary. Fortunately, my sister took the hint when I posted it to my siblings group chat and got it for me for Christmas, and oh boy, it is a delight.

When *Mellon Collie* released initially, it was already a double disc CD. In the age where even relatively short albums get split into two records, it only makes sense that *Mellon Collie* is split into four. Each record comes with a unique sleeve that has the classic decoupage imagery from John Craig: rodents smoking hookah in an opium den; an airplane flown by birds with dapper monocles; rabbits playing a game of cricket; two girls wandering through a field of yellow flowers with a lamb. It feels like a mixture of something by the Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood mixed with the science fiction of *A Trip to the Moon* – an art nouveau take on steampunk. Given that each record is double sleeved (the inside sleeve just has a nice swirling design), there is a clear invitation to frame them as a quadriptych on a wall. I will say that I've been tempted, but I can't get myself to take down my current selection of *Liquid Swords, Donuts, Clouds,* and *MM.. Food.*



When all of these custom sleeves are combined in an elegant box, the price almost starts to feel worth it. But then, the box also includes a lovely insert with full lyrics, and a slim book of interviews with Corgan about each song on the album. Flipping through these pages you'll learn Corgan's ambition to make his version of Pink Floyd's *The Wall,* his summation of the smash hit "Bullet with Butterfly Wings" as a "withering attack on the lameness of fame," and how his heart was broken at 16. I could go farther into the music itself too, but that seems like, in the nearly 30 years of existence, not much more needs to be written on that front.

Instead, I'll simply say that of all the albums from the '90s alternative rock scene, *Mellon Collie and the Infinite Sadness* is one of the most deserving for a deluxe treatment like this. With all of the extra visual production around the album, this deluxe edition truly offers something that can't be replaced by streaming. It's a remnant of a past that focused on material music products, and a reminder that they still hold value today. If you've got the spare scratch lying around and have a fondness for vinyl and/or The Smashing Pumpkins, I couldn't recommend it more.

FORMS IN LIGHT | **JUSTIN REEVE**

DISDAIN AND DEVOTION

When it comes to videogames, levels can sometimes be a little bit like diamonds in the rough, criticized at first for their lackluster layouts or broken bottlenecks, only to be broadly recognized later on as minor masterpieces. In particular, maps from older videogames along the lines of *Doom* and *Quake,* once dismissed for their poor design or perceived difficulty, have come to be revered for their interesting ideas and creative solutions, despite their sometimes-frustrating limitations. This process of reinterpretation and reevaluation mirrors the journey of many architectural icons, once thoroughly panned but eventually rising to prominence. Paris for example offers several compelling case studies including the Eiffel Tower, Louvre Pyramid and Centre Pompidou that were at first controversial but are now celebrated as marvels of architecture.

Gustave Eiffel presented the public with a tower made of iron latticework as the centerpiece for the Exposition Universelle of 1889. The building faced a barrage of criticism from the architectural community, detractors disparaging its industrial appearance, comparing the structure to the ornate buildings which had defined the local streetscape for decades. In spite of this initial backlash, the Eiffel Tower soon captured the imagination of the public, becoming a symbol of technological achievement and the wonders of modernity. The imposing size facilitated by the use of iron lattice came to symbolize the spirit of progress and innovation that would become so pervasive towards the end of the nineteenth century. As people grew accustomed to seeing its presence, the Eiffel Tower went from being a contentious addition to an integral part of the skyline. The structure stands today as an emblem, once controversial but now beloved.

The glass pyramid welcoming visitors to the Louvre was unveiled by Ieoh Ming Pei back in 1989. This brand-new addition to the building, part of a sweeping renovation, was met with widespread controversy, critics arguing that its modernist aesthetics could only ever clash with the architectural style of the Louvre, a product of the Renaissance. In spite of this backlash, the Louvre Pyramid

has undergone a remarkable transformation in terms of its public perception. The design allows natural light to filter into an underground lobby, creating a striking but still inviting space. The main point of entry in the past was a relatively inconspicuous door, something which resulted in long lines and plenty of congested passageways. The overall design of the Louvre Pyramid provides not only a grand entrance but also facilitates the flow of visitors into the museum. The creation has recently come to be seen as a successful marriage of ancient and modern aesthetics, blending seamlessly into the background of the surrounding structure.

When the building was unveiled by Renzo Piano in 1977, Parisians were shocked by the radical design of the Centre Pompidou. The innovative inside-out architecture featuring exposed structural and mechanical systems flew in the face of contemporary conventions, being widely described as an eyesore. But this was only the beginning of the story, as the Centre Pompidou has since emerged as one of the most visited cultural attractions in all of Paris. This boldly designed building is now celebrated as a symbol of modern architecture, having played an important role in revitalizing the surrounding district, once a neglected and relatively rundown part of Paris. Le Marais has undergone something of a cultural renaissance in recent years, owing at least in part to the nearby presence of the Centre Pompidou. The structure provides a reminder that art and architecture can challenge our perceptions and push the boundaries of what many consider possible, enriching our cultural understanding in the process.

The journey of these architectural icons from initial disdain to eventual devotion brings into focus the somewhat unpredictable nature of design. Similar to how some videogame levels have been criticized but later hailed as masterpieces, many buildings have transcended their initial criticism to become beloved landmarks, at least for later generations. This underscores the importance of remaining open minded about embracing potential, broadening our appreciation of artwork in all of its various forms. As people continue to push the boundaries of design, structures like the Eiffel Tower, Louvre Pyramid and Centre Pompidou serve as a testament to the unstoppable power of progress. We need to remember that beauty often lies in the eye of the beholder and that perceptions can change over time, whether in the virtual space of a videogame level or the tangible world of architecture.

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

WHY I WATCH YOUTUBE REACTIONS

I've written at length on all sorts of movies and shows that I have an immense fondness for. From *FLCL* to *Futurama;* 2014's *Godzilla* to 2015's *The Muppets;* Netflix's *She-Ra* and Apple's *Ted Lasso.* But here's the thing: Without fail, there's always one universal constant for me among every single one of these pieces of media – no matter what they're about, how high they rank on my personal favorites list, or whether or not a portion of the people involved turned out to be complete pieces of shit.

What's this have to do with watching any of the locust plague's worth of react channels on YouTube? Stick with me. These channels are seemingly more prolific than anime music videos, cute animal bloopers or hour-long diatribes about the evils of wokeness (I'm making it a point here to note that was rolling my eyes while typing that last part).

Admittedly this could be The Algorithm tailoring itself to my interests – while regularly trying to sneak in some bullshit anti-feminist or transphobic garbage, because YouTube – but my point is there are a *lot* of these types of channels, and they almost always do numbers. If not in subscriber counts (though a lot of the ones I've seen or subscribed to tend to balloon astronomically all the time), then individual video views. People love this shit. **I** love this shit.

But why, though? Why is watching someone else watching something I've usually already seen (often multiple times) so alluring? Why do any of us care? I think the reason ties back into what I was saying about my favorite films and shows.

That one thing I mentioned that all of that stuff has in common? I wish I could experience them for the first time all over again.

Of course, time and the human condition doesn't typically work that way, so I can never go back and watch the series finale of *Avatar* with fresh eyes. I can't be left

shocked and dumbstruck at the end of the second season of *The Owl House*. There's no more mystery over what happens to Adora and Catra in *She-Ra*'s final episodes.

I'm out of first times for all of them, but not everyone else is.

React videos, as eye-rolling as the concept can be (and is, if I'm being honest), are a way for me to relive these moments for the first time by proxy. It's not exactly the same, sure, but seeing someone else burst into tears during that one part (if you've seen it, you definitely know what I'm talking about) of "The Tales of Ba Sing Se" hits almost as hard as when it originally blindsided me. Watching a YouTuber scream in excitement when "Now eat this, sucka!" (again, if you know, you know) makes a comeback in *The Owl House* is just about as thrilling as it was on that first watch. It's basically akin to the joy of sharing something you love with a friend or family member, but now it's a stranger on the internet sitting in front of a camera.

Chances are I'll never lose my distaste for how often a lot of other worthwhile work falls through the cracks while reactions always seem to have The Algorithm's proverbial ear, even though I watch a whole lot of them myself quite regularly. But I do feel like I understand their consistent popularity. It's one of the few ways we can really revisit those special "it's only new once" moments, and since there are so damn many of these channels, we can usually vicariously watch something for the first time over and over again. It's annoying, but it's also kind of magical.

BETWEEN THE SKIES AND BEYOND THE HORIZON

FEATURING HUFFA FROBES-CROSS

by Justin Reeve

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

In the realm of tabletop roleplaying games where the world is limited only by the imagination of the players, *Between the Skies* represents a beacon of boundless creativity and narrative freedom. Developed by designer Huffa Frobes-Cross, who aims to unlock the untapped potential of collaboration, the game takes players on a journey through strange and wondrous domains where the only borders are built through their own creativity.

Between the Skies begins with a clear description of its twofold goals: “a cosmic fantasy game of travel and exploration across endless worlds,” but also “a set of modular procedures, tables, and methods that can help spark your, imagination and bind together your chosen fragments from the ever-expanding cosmos of rpg creation.” This mission statement outlines Frobes-Cross’ unique approach to game design, rooted in a deep appreciation for the unexpected and the unexplored. Her philosophy centers around the idea of roleplaying as a "flow of shared imagination" where rules and systems serve to facilitate play rather than dictate the player experience. As the designer explains, "rules and procedures are there when the group finds them fun or helpful, but they’re not required for play."

Frobes-Cross adds that “I write games to encourage this flow and channel it in weird and compelling directions. The rules, procedures and systems in my games facilitate play, but the conversation is most important.” She goes on to say that, “I want to give as much help and inspiration as possible to the roleplaying conversation,

while not presenting a system that must be followed." She refers to *Between the Skies* as "rules minimalist, fiction maximalist." Frobes-Cross explains that "nearly every procedure or rule in *Between the Skies* is independent of every other procedure or rule."

This philosophy is reflected in the mechanics which are intentionally open-ended and flexible. Character generation produces a textual description which is system agnostic, allowing players to interpret and expand upon their characters in unique, interesting and unexpected ways. The game also offers multiple approaches to resolution mechanics, travel, inventory management and spellcasting, encouraging players to find the methods which best resonate with them. "In all these ways, I'm giving the reader tools and toys to use and guidance on how to use them, rather than a unified system to follow," Frobes-Cross notes.

The journey of *Between the Skies* from concept to publication is a testament to the power of community and collaboration in the world of independent design. The game quickly grew into an over 200-page project, but was initially published for free on the popular platform itch.io, before being picked up by Exalted Funeral. There now is a collected, revised and expanded hardcover copy in the works, promising even more tools and resources than ever before for players to explore and enjoy.

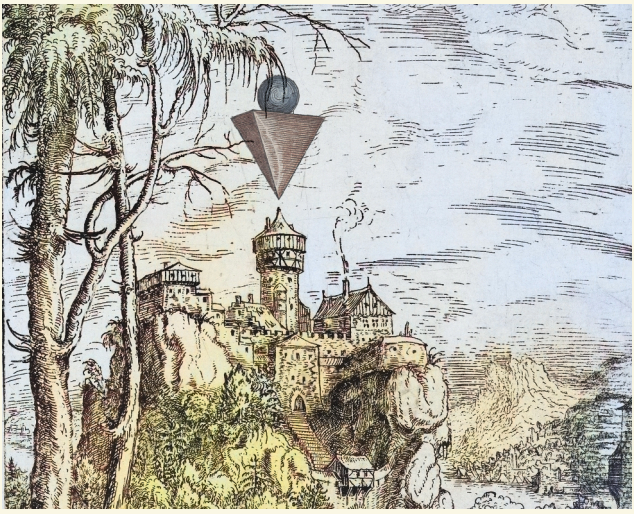
The development of the game was a personal journey for the designer. "My history writing games is also intertwined with my personal history as a queer woman," she explains. "I came out and started to transition at almost exactly the same time that I finished *Between the Skies*. The cover, with its blooming in-betweenness, evokes the weird, fantas-

tical fertility of the game, but I also made it as a private symbol for my newly emergent self."

"I found my first sense of queer, trans community through roleplaying games and am now a part of a small community of trans creators whose work inspired so much of my subsequent work on *Between the Skies* and my other in-progress projects. *Between the Skies* isn't explicitly a game about queerness or transness, but it comes out of those experiences." Frobes-Cross knows the value of found family, and credits the creative support group Trans Monster Insurrection as a solid foundation for building this and other work.

At the heart of *Between the Skies* is a desire to inspire players to embrace the limitless possibilities of their own imagination. The game's themes of wonder and exploration are designed to spark creativity and encourage players to think beyond the confines of traditional narrative structures. As the designer explains, "I hope that players will collectively spin their imaginations off into places they can't predict, and I can't predict."

One of the most striking aspects of *Between the Skies* is the approach to worldbuilding. Instead of presenting players with a fully fleshed out world, the game provides them with fragments of language and procedures to create their own. This approach allows each individual game to be a unique and evolving experience, shaped by the collective imagination of those involved. "Worlds emerge in play," Frobes-Cross explains. "I hope to inspire and open paths to imagining other selves and other worlds that players might not otherwise think about. Imagining other bodies and subjectivities in roleplaying games was a way of discovering my own desire for transition, and I know that's true for many other trans people. Maybe thinking about



being a rodent swarm or a sentient ooze will help people envision other ways to be?

“I may be partially joking, but I do hope that the way the game pushes you towards thinking the strange opens the way a little to consider new possibilities in other parts of your life,” the designer explains.

The artwork in *Between the Skies* is as evocative and imaginative as the game itself. The designer initially created collages using public domain art, inserting their own strange and fantastical elements to spark the imagination of players. There have been several talented artists who have since been commissioned for the upcoming hardcover edition, each bringing their own unique vision to the world of *Between the Skies,* including notable contributions from Roque Romero and Amanda Lee Franck. “In both my own work and the work that I've commissioned, I wanted to have images that worked a bit like the tables, sparking interpretations and imaginative flights, rather than illustrating an unambiguous fictional event,” the designer notes. Interestingly enough, much of this commissioned work was “created from results the artists rolled on *Between the Skies* tables.”

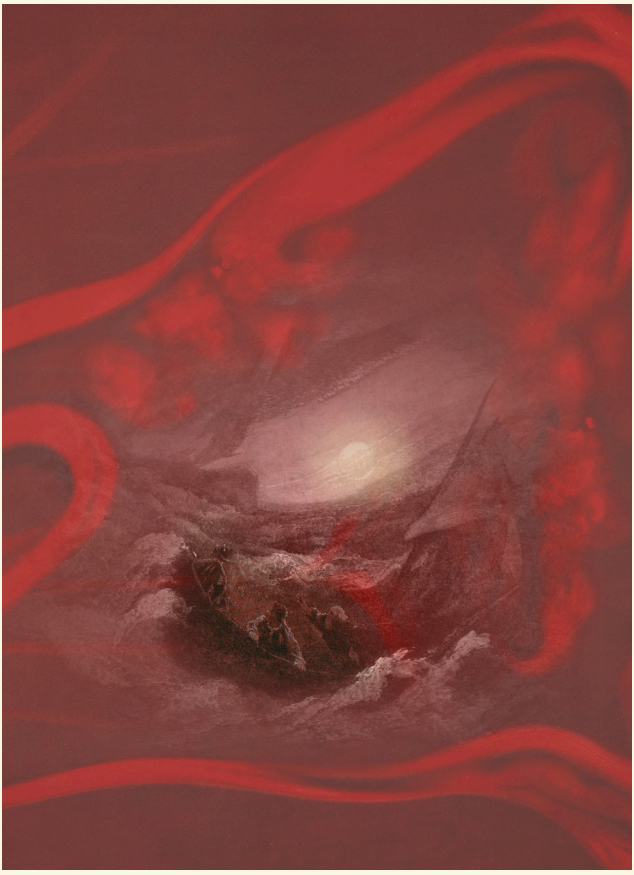
What sets *Between the Skies* apart from other tabletop roleplaying games would have to be its unique blend of simplicity and incredible depth. With minimal rules to learn and a plethora of resources to help players along the way, the game offers a truly customizable and open-ended experience. As the designer puts it, "I wanted players to have plenty of resources, inspiration and guidance, while having little to no required rules to learn. I wanted them to have the ability to run their games flexibly using the rules and procedures that work for them, while not feeling adrift

in a game that gave them no direction. That combination of very simple rules and procedures, no set unified rules system and in-depth guidance, and a plethora of resources, seems pretty unique to me."

For those who have experienced *Between the Skies,* the response has been overwhelmingly positive. Players have expressed joy and surprise at the strange and unexpected creations that emerge from their sessions, a testament to the game's ability to unleash the imagination. Whether played alone or in a group setting, *Between the Skies* offers a truly deep and immersive experience which invites you to explore fascinating possibilities and imagine worlds beyond your wildest dreams.

Despite the ongoing success, *Between the Skies* has not been without its challenges. Some players have found the game's emphasis on subverting typical RPG tropes and standard to be overwhelming, prompting the designer to include a section in the hardcover edition on how to approach and limit this perceived weirdness in the game. Such a commitment to player feedback is a testament to the designer's dedication to creating a game which is both inclusive and accessible. As the project continues to grow and evolve, the future looks bright for this innovative tabletop roleplaying game. With the hardcover edition on the horizon and a dedicated community of players and creators behind it, *Between the Skies* is poised to continue inspiring players to explore new worlds and possibilities.

Between the Skies represents how tabletop RPGs are growing beyond traditional confines. The project is a journey into the unknown, a voyage of collective imagination where the only limit is the bounds of your group's wildest ideas. The



success of the game is also a testament to the growing popularity of independent design where creators are constantly pushing the boundaries of possibility in tabletop gaming. *Between the Skies* stands as an example of what can be achieved when designers craft fresh approaches to game design. Whether you're a seasoned roleplayer or a neophyte to the world of tabletop gaming, *Between the Skies* offers a unique and unforgettable experience which is sure to captivate and inspire. So, gather your friends, grab your dice and prepare to embark upon this adventure like no other, exploring the limitless stars and boundless possibilities.

* * *

Between the Skies *is available now at* *Exalted Funeral*

UEDA, BUDDHA & ME

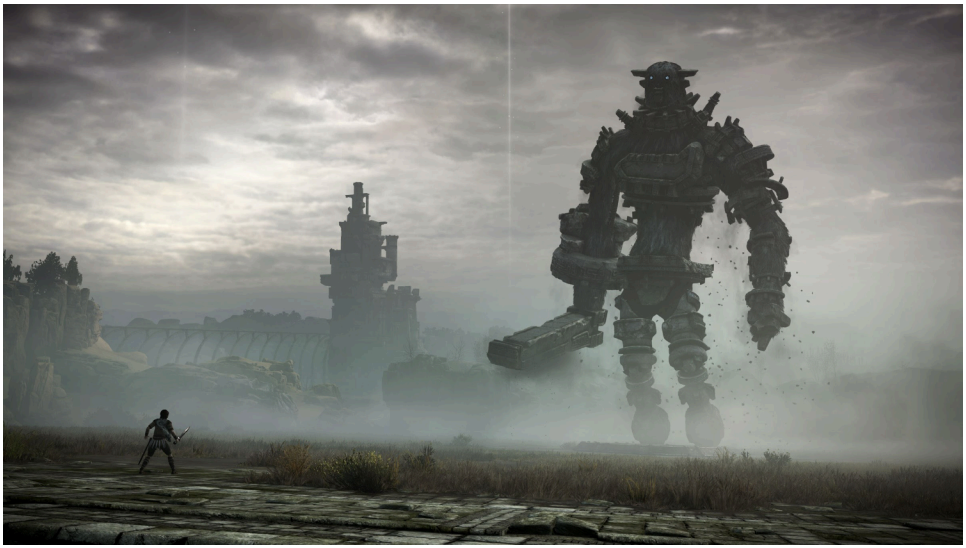
by **PERRY GOTTSCHALK**

The whole of human history stands to tell us one thing: we suck at letting things go. Though extremely reductive, it isn't a stretch to say that at the heart of everything ranging from war to art, there is someone who could not bear to let go of something. Perhaps attachment, the antithesis of letting go, is a universal truth of humanity that we cannot separate ourselves from.

I've always had a complicated relationship with 2016's *The Last Guardian* – and in this way I too find myself attached. I championed Fumito Ueda's games as the most essential entries to the videogame canon. "These are works of art!" I would cry. "It's one of the most incredible experiences you can have," My tone shifts: "It's also one of the most frustrating games you will ever play." Truthfully, many shouldn't play this game. You spend a dozen hours issuing commands to a giant bird-dog-cat thing who won't listen to you. Even if it's the point of the game to be frustrating, it's still just plain frustrating.

You can see the conflict I feel. It's akin to telling someone "This TV show is absolutely amazing. Once you get to the third season." That's a huge time investment for someone to make for anything. My friend swears that *Dota 2* is incredible once you really understand the game – once you've got anywhere from 100 to 500 hours under your belt. Time is a precious commodity that most don't want to spend unengaged or frustrated. No matter how high quality *The Last Guardian* is, any recommendation I make to another person will always have this underlying recognition that it may not be worth the initial investment to them.

Ueda's prior title, *Shadow of the Colossus,* requires no such conflict in recommending. It's what initially informed me that videogames could be something more than entertainment; they could speak to the soul and offer insight into the human condition as works of art. Ueda's approach to game design, what he calls "design by subtraction," reveals the beauty of his games. Ueda carefully reviews each detail of the game – mechanics, narrative, assets, everything – and pares them down until only the base essence of those details remains. Does the player having access to an item inventory improve their experience? If not, do away with it. Damien Mecheri, in *The Works of Fumito Ueda: A Different Perspective on Video Games,* notes: "Ueda soon realized that to create the best experience possible, he had to be sure not to make it more complex, but actually to simplify it, and make it as short and dense as possible." Ueda has likened this process to sculpting from a block



of marble: through the act of removal, of letting go, you uncover the work within.

This process differs from a more traditional design approach, where mechanics are added and iterated upon to flesh out a game. Ueda has always strived to make games that stand out from the other popular games, but his subtractive approach in an additive world doesn't point towards rebellious impulse for the sake of agitating the player. Ueda simply asks that the player allow themselves to be humbled. Forget what you know about other games. Let go of that knowledge. There are no character stat screens or inventories here. Don't come to these games as experts of others, come to these games as someone who has never played one.

Unsurprisingly, this humbling of the player opens them up to sincere emotional beats. The defining moment of *The Last Guardian* comes near the end of the game. You, an unnamed boy, and your companion Trico, the giant bird-dog-cat thing, have returned to your home village. By now, the game has revealed that Trico tore you from this community in order to feed you to an unknown para-cosmic entity, though through the events of the game, the two of you have formed a bond that overrides Trico's instinctual programming. You and Trico would go to the ends of the earth for one another, despite the rocky beginning you had.

The villagers don't understand this. They see a monster that threatens their families. They gather with pitchforks and torches to drive Trico away. Your family carries you to safety, away from Trico. Never mind that Trico has been your sole protector throughout the game: he is a beast. The people lunge at Trico, stabbing him with spears and burning him. You, carried over the shoulder of a villager, see him cry as he is harmed. He can fly away at any time – he does not have to subject himself to this physical pain. You realize he is actively choosing not to leave. He will not forsake you, his partner. All you can do now is command Trico to save himself, to flee to safety. He does not listen. The bond the two of you have formed prevents him from doing so.

I witnessed this scene unfold through water logged eyes, mashing buttons on my controller between sobs to urge him to preserve his own well-being. The big, dumb animal I'd grown to love would not – Trico keeps looking for any way he can reach me, to remain together. It isn't until he is one more pitchfork away from

death that he leaves, his sense of self-preservation finally outweighing his heart's desire. He lets go.

Trico is gone now. I need to pause the game and collect myself.

The game doesn't pause. No buttons respond. My controller died.

I missed that notification somewhere along the way, gripped by the emotional climax. Maybe the battery ran out while urging Trico to flee, or maybe before the scene prior, there's no way of knowing. I realized I didn't want to know. Witnessing this creature who loved me enough to put himself in harm's way, near death, to avoid being separated was volumes more powerful than whatever player input I could have had in that moment. If my controller had been responsive, would Trico have listened to me and flown away earlier? Who knows. I didn't wish to find out. I was okay with letting go of this "what if?" in favor of the experience I had. This is the space that Fumito Ueda puts us in through design by subtraction. To let go and experience.

Perhaps then, my conflict in recommending this game partially comes from knowing that this moment is unreplicable. The odds of someone's controller dying at that exact moment is unlikely – they will never be able to feel the same thing I felt while playing. Hell, I can never play this game again myself. I would shatter this precious moment by knowing how this sequence could actually play out.

Design by subtraction isn't an idea original to Fumito Ueda. As mentioned, it's reminiscent of marble sculpting; one strips away all unnecessary elements until the work underneath is excavated. However, this process has little to do with the act of emotionally letting go. Ueda's works bear more in common with the concept of *Shoshin,* found in Zen Buddhism. Dōgen Zenji introduced the concept in the thirteenth century, teaching that one should approach even familiar experiences with a sense of curiosity. When one holds expectations of a specific circumstance, they can often fall victim to those expectations and alter their experience. Instead of this, one should utilize *Shoshin,* or directly translated, the Beginner's Mind, to open themselves up to a truer interpretation of the world.

A counselor once described it to me by describing a trip to the grocery store. It's my least favorite activity: I can only handle navigating a labyrinth of spatially unaware shoppers putting their carts in

the middle of the aisle for so long. "If you go into the store expecting to be enraged at others – guess what?" she says. "You'll be enraged." I consider the obvious truth of her statement before she continues, "If you go into the store only curious about what will happen, sure! You still might walk away mad. But maybe something else could happen that has you leaving the store feeling something else."

To be more at peace, one needs to let go. Shunryu Suzuki writes on *Shoshin* in his book, *Zen Mind, Beginner's Mind,* telling the reader: "In the Beginner's Mind, there are many possibilities. In the expert's mind, there are few," encouraging one to pare down their expectations. "If you limit your activity to just what you can do in this moment, you can fully express your true nature."

Consider Ueda's first game, *Ico,* and how it stands out from its contemporaries. Mecheri notes: "Going against all standards of the time, Ueda removed all visual elements that could remind the player that it was a videogame, including the health bar, which had existed in earlier versions of *Ico.*" In removing these gamey elements, Ueda too removes the player's expectations for their experience. If one sees a health bar, one can assume to receive damage from enemies – what can they assume to expect from enemies when they have no expectation of what can happen? The player cannot assume, only exhibit curiosity. Through design by subtraction, Ueda puts the player into the Beginner's Mind. It isn't just a philosophy for game design, it's a philosophy pointing towards a more spiritual experience. When a player is unable to page through inventory menus or map screens, they can only do what they can in that moment.

Shoshin asks one to treat things with openness regardless of our past, to keep the curious mind. We can see this easily in the level design of *The Last Guardian.* Gameplay phases are often uniquely sequenced: there is no run-climb-shoot-scavenge loop that one might experience from a game like *Uncharted.* Phases are often abruptly stopped by something else – in one encounter with the game's sentinel enemies, Trico will walk to the player in a hypnotic daze before swallowing them up. Mecheri again writes, "Some elements are only seen once, like the passage where Trico's horns light up to brighten the total darkness. This mechanic could have become regular in any other game, but its one-time use here makes the adventure credible." We are unable to predict what can happen next, so we must remain curious.

There is no question that Ueda's design by subtraction is meant to pull the player into *Shoshin.* The player is asked to let go of what they know about games, so that they can experience a fresh perspective. We players are asked to humble ourselves so that we can experience powerful emotion through moments like Trico's departure. We are asked to let go.

I used to believe that this memory I hold onto of an unknown moment is stronger than knowing the true outcome. Through *Shoshin,* the very concept at the core of Ueda's works, I realize this is a fruitless endeavor. The true outcome is nothing other than the true outcome. Whatever I'm guided towards will be the experience I have, for better or worse. Throughout *Zen Mind, Beginner's Mind,* Suzuki asks his students, "Do you understand?" with regards to the concepts he's speaking on. He asks not in a belittling fashion, but to suggest that understanding is not key to appreciation. In fact, understanding takes us away from the Beginner's Mind, from *Shoshin.* It isn't hard to imagine Fumito Ueda asking the player the same question.

With this in mind: Someday, I will replay *The Last Guardian.* I will experience that pivotal moment in the story again. My controller won't die this time. It may not be the same. I am at peace with this. I am okay with letting go. It is okay to let go.

Do you understand?

This is Your Badness Level: Lilo & Stitch and Mental Health

by ORRIN GREY

For those who don't use Letterboxd, on your profile page on the movie-focused social media site, you have a space to put your "top four" favorite movies. As is the case for most people, my top four is not exactly static, but there are two movies that pretty much always have a place there: *House on Haunted Hill* (1959) and *Lilo & Stitch* (2002).

The latter is often surprising for people who know me primarily as a horror writer and the "monster guy." I once had someone ask me if its presence on my top four was because I was a "big Elvis fan." I told him, honestly, that it was because I'm a big *Lilo & Stitch* fan.

And I'm obviously not alone. While *Lilo & Stitch* did well for itself in theaters – it was a Disney animated feature, after all – it has found its real footing in merchandizing, and you can get Stitch's (undeniably adorable) face plastered all over pretty much anything these days.

In proper Disney fashion, the movie also gave rise to a variety of spin-offs and sequels, including a Saturday morning cartoon-style animated series which ran from 2003 through 2006 on ABC and the Disney Channel. Familiarity with these is mostly not necessary for us today, but the 2005 direct-to-video sequel *Stitch Has a Glitch* is going to be vital to the topic we're here to discuss.

There are a lot of reasons why I like *Lilo & Stitch* so much. I like the writing and artwork of creator Chris Sanders. I like the painted backdrops and Hawaiian locale. And, of course, Stitch *is* a monster, and I *am* the monster guy, after all. The movies pay homage to the big bug flicks of the '50s, to alien invasion pictures and so on. But it also goes deeper than that. As a weird kid myself, who grew up into a weird adult, it's easy to see aspects of myself in both Lilo *and* Stitch – and I'm not alone.

Plenty of people identify heavily with one or both characters, and one doesn't have to look far to see *Lilo & Stitch* held up as an example of autism representation, for instance. And it is representation, albeit of a slightly different kind, that I'm here to discuss.

There are obvious mental health parallels at work in *Lilo & Stitch*. Lilo is attempting to process the grief of her deceased parents. She grapples with anger management and, according to at least some armchair clinicians out there, PTSD. She struggles to express herself in a way that connects with

other people, and she becomes frustrated when she can't.

Lilo & Stitch also showcases how such mental health struggles can be exacerbated by external conditions. Certainly, Lilo's life is made harder by the absence of her parents, but it goes beyond grief. The financial situation in which she and her older sister Nani find themselves also makes everything harder – and further isolates Lilo from her peers.

For me, one of the most heartbreaking scenes in cinema is the moment when Lilo tries to play with the other kids by showing them her doll, Scrump, which she made herself. The other kids reject the doll and, with it, Lilo as well. Frustrated, Lilo throws Scrump to the ground and storms away, only to come running back, scoop up the doll, and hug it tightly – a moment that I can feel down to my marrow.

As I said, I can certainly see aspects of myself in Lilo, but the real glimmers of recognition, where mental health is concerned, come from Stitch. There's no need to get into specific diagnoses but, like a lot of people, I experience a particular cocktail of anxieties, quirks, trauma responses and other things that fall under the broad umbrella of "mental health." And like anyone, my specific combination of these things is unique to me. No two people are alike, even (maybe especially) in their struggles, which is sometimes easy to forget in this age when all experiences are seemingly boiled down to TikTok trends and internet memes.

I have rarely seen my own particular mental health journey echoed onscreen in a way that resonated quite like the one Stitch experiences in *Stitch Has a Glitch*. In the first movie, Stitch comes to Earth without a purpose, and finds one in Lilo's family. Initially, like Lilo, he struggles to interact with his surroundings in healthy ways. In his case, this is because of his "destructive programming" from his creator, Jumba Jookiba. But it is also because he has nothing else. Because he is lost and alone.

This same "destructive programming" can be seen as a metaphor for mental illness. What is mental illness, after all, but a kind of harmful programming in our own brains. Many of us struggle with "negative self-talk;" inner voices that diminish or harm us, driving us, in turn, to often harm those around us, though not on purpose. In *Lilo & Stitch,* Lilo represents this via a childish simplification – Stitch's "badness level," which, as she points out, is "unusually high, for someone your size."

By the end of *Lilo & Stitch,* however, Stitch has largely overcome his programming and found his place as part of Lilo's family. In fact, the ending montage shows Stitch as more than merely a part of the group. It shows him specifically as a homemaker, packing lunches, baking cakes, doing laundry, and so on.

For most of a decade, I've been working full-time as a freelance writer, meaning that I work from home and have an extremely flexible schedule, while my spouse holds down a more "normal" 9-to-5 type job. Partly because I am home more, I have become more of a homemaker myself in these last few years, and I've found that I enjoy it. To put it in the rather cliched terminology of "love languages," one of the ways that I show my love is definitely through "acts of service."

Part of this can also be traced back to my own background, specific traumas and particular anxieties. I struggle to feel like I am of value to the people around me – but I also take genuine pleasure from making myself useful and making others happy, something I didn't fully understand when I first saw *Lilo & Stitch* many years ago, but which has provided a sense of homecoming upon repeated re-watches.

Though the ending of *Lilo & Stitch* paints a rosy picture, however, the journey toward mental health is not one that occurs without setbacks, and that's where *Stitch Has a Glitch* comes in. The premise of the sequel is that Stitch's creation was interrupted and, as a result, he has a "glitch" that causes him to act out despite his best intentions.

Even before this glitch becomes apparent, however Stitch is haunted by his own "destructive programming," just as many of us are haunted by that "negative self-talk" which tells us that we will never be good enough, that we will always hurt those we love simply by existing. In his nightmares, Stitch wreaks havoc on the island, which prompts Lilo to put him through a childish version of "talk therapy" before determining that his goodness level is higher than ever.

Shortly thereafter, however, Stitch begins to "glitch." When he glitches, he does exactly what he fears that he will do – damaging and destroying the things around him but, much worse, damaging the trust and hurting the feelings of those he loves. And when he "glitches," his family are understandably frustrated.

"He ruined everything," Lilo says, after one of his episodes.

"It's not my fault," Stitch replies.

"Then whose fault is it?" she demands.

It's a conversation that many of us have had, if only with ourselves. We're afraid that our flaws and our struggles make us unlovable and, worse, unworthy of love. That we will hurt those who make the mistake of loving us because we can't be anything other than the way we are.

"I know what's wrong with you," a wounded and betrayed Lilo lashes out, when Stitch tries to explain that something isn't right. "You're bad. And you'll always be bad."

Ultimately, that's what *I* fear. It's what my negative self-talk whispers in my ear in the dark watches of the night. I'm afraid that I'm *not* actually mentally ill; that I'm *not* a victim of trauma and some faulty wiring, doing the best I can with the tools I have; that I'm *not* just a basically ordinary person with a not-particularly-noteworthy collection of quirks and flaws. That I am, instead, simply and irrefutably *bad,* and that no matter what I do, how hard I try, or how much I *want* to be good, I will *always* be bad.

By the end of the film's brief 68-minute running time, Stitch's "glitch" is treated via a widget whipped up by Jumba, and the power of love and friendship and all that jazz. And many of us find ways to treat our own glitches via talk therapy, medication and coping strategies that help us to care for ourselves and those around us. It's never a perfect or an easy fix – nothing in real life ever is – but sometimes watching a cute little blue alien struggle with the same things we struggle with can make it a little easier, at least for a while.

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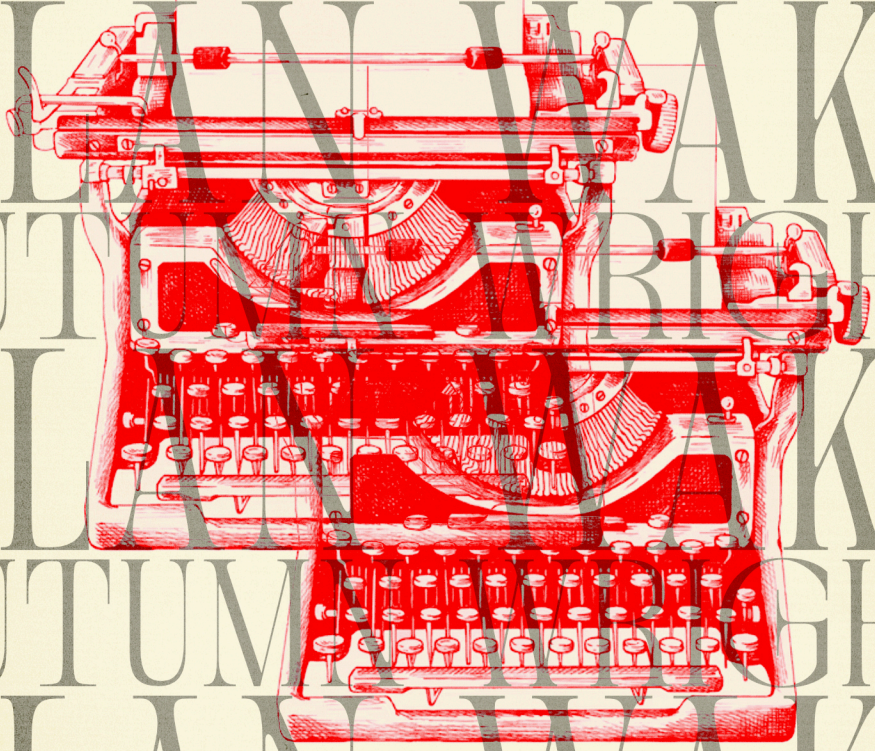

Stu Horvath explores how the hobby of roleplaying games, commonly known as RPGs, blossomed out of an unlikely pop culture phenomenon and became a dominant gaming form by the 2010s.

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