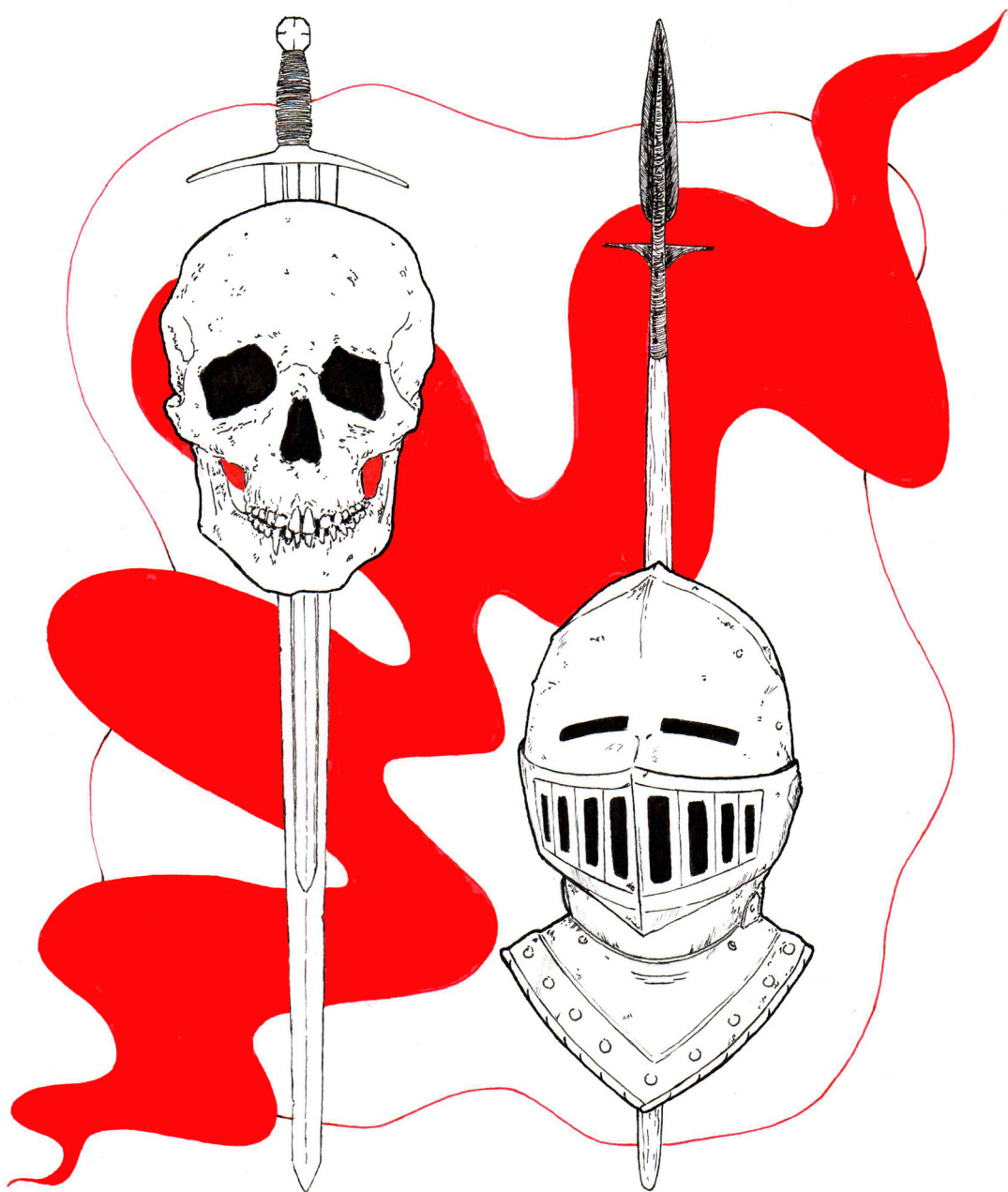


# UNWINNABLE MONTHLY

*Volume 4, Issue 12 - December 2017*



**CRUSADER KINGS II • EARTHBOUND • LASAGNA CAT**

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*Monthly*



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This machine kills fascists.



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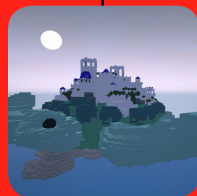
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## CONTRIBUTORS





Welcome to our final issue of the 2017. We had a great time putting together this issue, and all the other issues this year. We hope you've enjoyed reading them as much as we have writing, editing and designing them. Only two more until #100!

This month's cover story, by Maxwell Neely-Cohen, takes on *Crusader Kings II*, a game I've been addicted to for years and has consistently defied my attempts to explain why. Max does a great job of, if not solving the riddles of *CKII* entirely, collecting them in a way that they suddenly make a different kind of sense. Hank Drago is the artist behind the cover, which does a great job of capturing the feel of *CKII*'s obsession with death and lineage, while also being strangely holiday appropriate. Quite the accomplishment, I think? More on Hank in the Artist Spotlight.

We have two more features for you. Jun Wilkinson discusses how localization shaped the classic SuperNintendo RPG *Earthbound* and ruminates on how localization should be approached in the modern era of videogames. The other marks the return of our friend David Wolinsky, who chats with Fatal Frame, the creators of the Lasagna Cat YouTube series about comedy, stupidity and the internet that was. Finally, our sponsored Q&A is with Nathan Rowe, the man behind the VR app *SculptrVR* that allows you to both create and destroy worlds.

The columns are as eclectic as ever. Yussef Cole's debut column is particularly noteworthy, as it looks at Jack King-Spooner's game *Dujanah* and the balancing act between postmodernist recontextualization and cultural appropriation. Gavin Craig delivers a list of his hopes for 2018. Meg Condis checks out the documentary *Living Dolls* and digs into why we think dolls are creepy. Casey Lynch rounds up the best metal albums of the year (I think you'll be surprised by his top honoree). Meanwhile, Matt Marrone picks his own album of the year and is similarly surprised.

Brock Wilbur replays *Stubbs the Zombie* and regrets almost every minute of it. Deirdre Coyle hangs out with *Fortnite*'s Phase Scout Jess and talks about anarchy. Corey Milne wonders about *Neir: Automata*'s approach to saved games says about the game's message. I discuss how *Assassin's Creed Origins* changed my perception of ancient Egypt (and maybe my perception of perception). Sara Clemens runs like the wind, Rob Rich mourns through videogame Let's Plays and, finally, Jason McMaster makes us jealous that he has *Gloomhaven* and we don't.

If you haven't visited [Unwinnable.com](http://Unwinnable.com) recently, I encourage you to do so. Brian Taylor and I spent the last few months redesigning it to make it a bit friendlier and have the focus fall more squarely on our regular contributors. Of particular note is the new [Best of Unwinnable](#) section, curated by Sara Clemens, that will focus on surfacing great writing from our seven-and-a-half-going-on-eight year history. We also have a [newsletter sign-up](#) so you can get the best current Unwinnable stories directly in your inbox. Best of all, the new design also incorporates much more paisley than it did previously.

Hopefully you also noticed in the email that delivered this issue to you that we've started a subscriber-only Slack. The many members of Team Unwinnable have a lot of fun in our editorial chat, discussing all manner of cultural hot topics. We are hoping to create a private community to share that daily experience with you, one that captures our zest for thoughtfulness and potty humor.

Before I let you get to the rest of the issue, a serious note. I sincerely hope this letter from the editor finds you well. 2017 was a challenging and exhausting year and 2018 promises more of the same. I, and the rest of the team, particularly managing editor Amanda Hudgins and social editor Melissa King, have strived to make Unwinnable a welcoming place for writers of all backgrounds, where we can discuss the things that matter most to us without constraint, be they silly or serious. We could not have done this without you, our subscribers, and we can not adequately express our appreciation for your support. Whatever holidays you celebrate this December, I hope they bring you joy; whatever comes with the new year, I hope you find all the happiness and resolve and peace that you need.

Stu Horvath  
Kearny, New Jersey  
December 15, 2017



## To Hell With 2017, Bring on 2018

As 2017 turns to 2018, I have a brief wish list for the year ahead. In 2018, it would be fantastic if:

- ♦ I had time to play *Nier: Automata*.
- ♦ We excised the word “prequel” from our vocabulary, or, even better, if it became absolutely unnecessary.
- ♦ More of my friends were financially and professionally secure
- ♦ Complete strangers, too, while I’m at it. Dignified work and wages for everyone. Everyone.
- ♦ I’m going to get off the economic kick, I promise, but health care is a big part of financial and professional security.
- ♦ And going back to the word “dignity,” working to make sure that people’s basic needs are met isn’t just a good idea because it means that they’re more likely to be able to be productive contributors to the economy, it’s something that we should do because they are human and, hopefully, so are we.
- ♦ Less nonconsensual groping, and just none of that Louis CK/Charlie Rose shit. Zero.
- ♦ The NES Classic and SNES Classic consoles were more broadly available.
- ♦ Quietude, within and without.

- ♦ *Tangiers* finally comes out, and it's even half as interesting as I've hoped.
- ♦ I write a couple of the longer pieces that have been brewing in my head.
- ♦ I get paid a reasonable rate for said pieces.
- ♦ Season 2 of *Westworld* doesn't suck.
- ♦ I had a way to watch Season 2 of *Westworld*.
- ♦ I saw more old friends and colleagues in person more often.
- ♦ It made any kind of sense to play *Dragon Age: Inquisition* again to pay close attention to the portrayal and function of religious expression (and ambivalence in both that expression and its reception).
- ♦ (That's a soft pitch. Feel free to make an offer.)
- ♦ I figured out how to record a podcast and got my hands on a decent microphone.
- ♦ I got to have some really good conversations with people about books.
- ♦ (That's also a soft pitch, but it's already taken. Unless you have a better offer.)
- ♦ (Just kidding, Stu. Mostly.)
- ♦ I found a really comfortable pair of brown semi-formal shoes to replace the old pair I've just about killed.
- ♦ While I'm at it, hell, a dog. I'd love a dog. Don't tell my wife
- ♦ The HBO *Watchmen* adaptation collapsed and we got a really great *Fantastic Four* comic instead.
- ♦ More people seemed to realize that Star Wars has at least as long and proud a tradition of being really bad as it does of being really good. Or even pretty good.
- ♦ It's okay. Not everything we love has to be great.
- ♦ But it's also okay for other people to not love all the things we love.
- ♦ I read more works in translation.
- ♦ My friends and family end the year happy and healthy.
- ♦ And you as well, dear reader. 🍷



## Living Dolls

Human beings [have always been fascinated by dolls](#). Archeologists count dolls among some of the oldest known artifacts and they were integral parts of the ancient Egyptian, Greek and Roman societies. Many cultures assumed that these miniature doppelgangers were infused with magical properties or used during religious rituals. Others utilized them as training tools to teach children about their future roles in the adult world. Still others created intricate replicas of important cultural or political figures that served as collectors' items.

Today we have integrated dolls and other human simulacra like robots and virtual avatars into nearly every aspect of our lives. Yet, there is still something irresistibly eerie about an old-fashioned toy doll. They populate our [popular horror movie franchises](#) and regularly appear in our [haunted houses](#). Why do dolls creep us out so much? [Francis T. McAndrew of Knox College](#) writes that, when we feel the hairs on the back of our neck rising up, it is because we are experiencing

anxiety aroused by the ambiguity of whether there is something to fear or not and/or by the ambiguity of the precise nature of the threat (e.g., sexual, physical violence, contamination, etc.) that might be present. Such uncertainty results in a paralysis as to how one should respond.... It maybe that it is only when we are confronted with uncertainty about

threat that we get “creeped out,” which could be adaptive if it facilitates our ability to maintain vigilance during periods of uncertainty.

...

If you are walking down a dark city street and hear the sound of something moving in the dark alley to your right, you will respond with a heightened level of arousal and sharply focused attention and behave as if there is a willful “agent” present who is about to do you harm. If it turns out that it is just the wind or a stray cat, you have lost little by over-reacting, but if you fail to activate the alarm response when there is in fact a threat present, the cost of your miscalculation may be quite high. Thus, humans have evolved to err on the side of detecting threats in such ambiguous situations.

In other words, we find dolls creepy because they trick our primitive brain into questioning whether or not they actually have agency. We know that they are inanimate, but they imitate living beings closely enough that we can't quite shake the idea that they might one day decide to get up and go about errands of their own.

In robotics, this feeling is described as the “[uncanny valley effect](#),” which describes the way that the empathy that human beings feel towards humanoid robots craters just as they reach the threshold of realism. This is why we find ourselves reacting positively to robots like WALL-E or the Iron Giant and negatively to the pseudo-humans in movies like [The Polar Express](#) and [Final Fantasy: The Spirits Within](#) or to this interactive creepygirl (click at your own risk).

[Living Dolls: The Subculture of Doll Collecting](#) (Judge, 2013), [examines the lives of several collectors](#) who have set up shop down in the uncanny valley and are now living there amongst their playthings. Take Debbie, who responded to her own husband's obsession with videogame avatars (another doll-like object that we use to fulfill our own fantasies and to experiment with different aspects of our personalities) by creating her own family of expensive Ellowynne dolls to keep her company. Or Mike, a gay man who became obsessed with Barbies as a way to explore his sexuality before he felt ready to come out to his family and friends. These folks do not so much “play dress up” with their dolls as use them to try on different roles for themselves. They live through their dolls in addition to living alongside them, imbuing them with the agency that they feel unable to claim for themselves.



Real Doll aficionado David, on the other hand, uses dolls to fulfill a different kind of fantasy: one in which he can become a more idealized, more masculine version of himself using his dolls as props. Fucking his dolls, he tells the camera, makes him feel young. One gets the sense that this feeling of virility comes from the artificial sense of power that one can derive by dominating an object that looks like it might have a will of its own, even if it actually doesn't. In order to become a "real man," he subjugates an unreal woman. As a friend told me while we watched him romancing his possessions, "In this post-Weinstein era, I guess that it could be much worse." RoboMike, on the other hand, plays God by granting his dolls some autonomy of their own. A former visual effects artist, Mike creates short films using stop-motion animation to explore what it might mean for a robot or a doll to have a sexual fantasy of its own (as opposed to the ones that we manufacture for them for our own ends). Although his films are pornographic, they do not come across as particularly titillating. They are more like a Natural Geographic film exploring the mating and procreating habits of a fantastical new species, one that cares little for what gratification we might wish to extract from them.

The human beings in *Living Dolls* are each a bit uncanny themselves, in their own way. But they invite us to think about how we interact with our own totems, whatever they may be, and to re-think the way that we define agency in ourselves and in other beings. 🍷





Battle Jacket - \ˈba-təl \ˈja-kət\

*noun*

1. A denim or leather jacket or vest, usually covered with sewn patches embroidered with the names/logos of killer metal bands.
2. Unwinnable Monthly's metal column, your best source for what's new, undiscovered and unholy in metal.

Tis the season for new records, seeing that The Faceless just debuted *In Becoming a Ghost*, their first new album since 2012's *Autotheism*. HOT TAKE: it's pretty good and it has a flute solo! It's also the season to talk about the very best metal albums of the year, so here's our picks, along with a bunch of other great bands and songs to check out in [this month's playlist](#). As always, tell me what you think on Twitter, I'm [@Lynchtacular](#).

[LISTEN NOW TO THE UNWINNABLE BEST METAL OF 2017 PLAYLIST](#)

## UNWINNABLE METAL ALBUM OF THE YEAR 2017

**Zeal & Ardor – *Devil is Fine***

SPIRITUAL BLACK METAL BLUES

What started as a racist dare on 4Chan evolved into one of the most refreshingly unexpected metal records in years. Led by avant-garde musician and artist Manuel Gagneux, the band combines black spirituals from the era of American slavery with black metal conventions, throwing keyboards and electronics



into the thoughtful arrangements as well. The result is a full-throated expression of metal that works so well, it's surprising no one tried it sooner.

WATCH: "[DEVIL IS FINE](#)"; LISTEN: "[BLOOD IN THE RIVER](#)" (LIVE, STARTS AT 1:35); LISTEN: [FULL ALBUM](#)

## BEST METAL OF 2017

### Converge – *The Dusk in Us*

CROSSOVER HARDCORE DOOM GOTH MATH

The new Converge record has it all: crushing math, creeping goth, hardcore, thrash metal - in the first half of the album. I can't think of another band's ninth studio LP recorded 27 years after they formed that kills so hard.

WATCH: "[A SINGLE TEAR](#)"; LISTEN: "[THE DUSK IN US](#)"; LISTEN: "[EYE OF THE QUARREL](#)"; LISTEN: [FULL ALBUM](#)

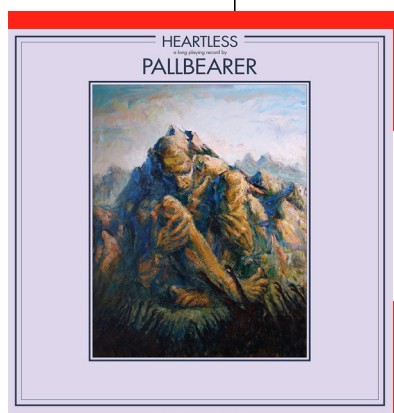


### Pallbearer – *Heartless*

MELODIC NEO SLUDGEDOM

*Heartless* showcases classic metal/rock arrangements that drive this jammy record, from the hooky opener "[I Saw the End](#)" to the heaving 12-minute-plus closer, "[A Plea for Understanding](#)."

WATCH: "[I SAW THE END](#)"; LISTEN: "[THORNS](#)"



### Dead Cross – *Dead Cross*

HARDCORE AVANTE AGGRO

Part hardcore, part thrash and all weird, this unlikely supergroup of Retox/The Locust bassist Michael Crain and Retox guitarist Justin Pearson, ex-Slayer drummer Dave Lombardo and Faith No More/Fantomas singer Mike Patton unleash the kind of music our parents called dangerous.

WATCH: "[SEIZURE AND DESIST](#)"; WATCH: "[OBEDIENCE SCHOOL](#)"

### Black Anvil – *As Was*

NEW WAVE BLACK

Torchbearers of the New York Black Metal scene, Black Anvil rearticulate the extremities of long-established black traditions with well-tempered songwriting, experimentations with clean vocals and elements of hard rock and classic metal.

LISTEN: "[AS WAS](#)"; LISTEN: "[ULTRA](#)"; LISTEN: "[MAY HER WRATH BE JUST](#)"; LISTEN: [FULL ALBUM](#)



## Mastodon – *Emperor of Sand*

PROG SLUDGE ROCK

Atlanta, Georgia's finest return to their concept record roots with *Emperor of Sand*, combining the brawn of *Leviathan* with the prog of *Crack the Skye*, while still trying to perfect the three-minute metal song.

LISTEN: “[STEAMBREATHER](#)”; WATCH: “[SHOW YOURSELF](#)”; LISTEN: [FULL ALBUM](#)



## Cormorant – *Diaspora*

BLACKENED HEAVY PROG

*Diaspora* finds the Bay Area quartet charting dense but catchy territory, mixing hissing snarls and howls with clean vocal harmonies and riffs aplenty across four songs that clock in over a whopping 60 minutes of awesome.

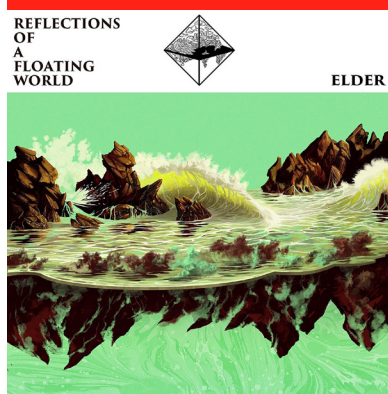
LISTEN: “[THE DEVOURER](#)”; LISTEN: [FULL ALBUM](#)

## Elder – *Reflections of a Floating World*

HEAVY PSYCHEDELIC JAM

Each of the six tracks on Elder's *Reflections of a Floating World* features surprising depth and complexity. This is definitely not just another doom or jam band.

LISTEN: “[BLIND](#)”; LISTEN: [FULL ALBUM](#)



## Decapitated – *Anticult*

TECHNICAL DEATH

The crushing precision and drive on *Anticult* shows why Decapitated are still one of the world's elite death metal bands almost 30 years on. Their sound is just as technical and relentless as ever and even grafts strains of melody into the mix.

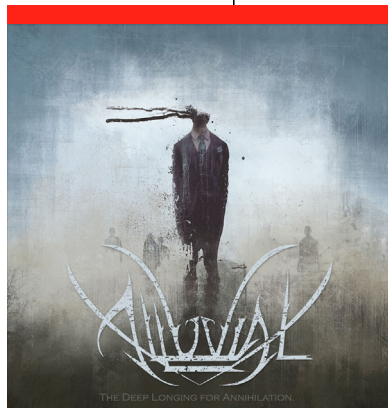
LISTEN: “[IMPULSE](#)”; WATCH: “[NEVER](#)”

## Alluvial – *The Deep Longing for Annihilation*

INSTRUMENTAL PROGRESSIVE DEATH

We end this year's Best of Metal list with one of 2017's first releases, an absolutely shredding instrumental collaboration between much loved guitarists Keith Marrow and Wes Hauch (The Faceless, Conquering Dystopia, Black Crown Initiate). State of the art production meets state of the art guitar acrobatics, setting the bar sky high for whatever 2018 will bring us. Happy New Year, and see you on the other side, brother!

LISTEN: “[COLONY](#)”; LISTEN: [FULL ALBUM](#) 





Here comes the most 2005 thing that ever happened: *Stubbs the Zombie: in Rebel Without a Pulse*. Yes, that's a real title for a real triple-A game. This is where I shine. This is what I was built for in this series.

In 1959 (yes, the same year *Bioshock* is set, so a great year of fear-based entertainment), Punchbowl, Pennsylvania, is hopping. Sock-hopping but also hopping technologically and in other valuable categories. A billionaire industrialist playboy named Andrew (my god *Bioshock*, how much did you steal) runs this utopian paradise that mixes *Jetson's* futurism with *Jetson's* naiveté. It's the kind of place where pneumatic tubes shove the populace to-and-fro but they're always accompanied by jetpack aided barbershop quartets or jetpack aided robot helpers. It's a city designed to help everyone and no one ever consider that this assistance should have limits.

Enter Edward "Stubbs" Stubblefield. Or, I suppose, exit Edward "Stubbs" Stubblefield. Stubbs was a traveling salesman back in the '30s who started dating Andrew's mom (Maggie Monday) but then her dad straight-up shotgun murdered him and buried him in the woods. Now our fedora-sporting protagonist has risen from the grave and this city of the future is more than happy to help him find his way back to his one true love.

Unfortunately, Stubbs is now a flesh-hungry, bloodthirsty, bone-craven undead monster. As a zombie, Stubbs has a lot of newfound powers. He can devour the living and turn them into zombie subordinates that he can use to mob enemies. He also has organs he can tear from his body cavity and launch at foes like a grenade. He can tear arms off living humans and beat them to death with them. This last one is entirely unnecessary, but, boy, do I love doing it.

To recap: You're a zombie in love with a woman you lost twenty year previous, whose son built a city of futurism that he cannot control and you've got to kill everyone to find love again. Look, I think this is a tale as old as time and/or a song as old as rhyme.

In one of the strangest turns in the history of gaming, this title was built using the engine from *Halo*, right after we got *Halo*. When I say built in the *Halo* engine, I mean it plays identically, despite being Not That Game in any way. If you choose to enter the campaign in co-op mode, you'll find yourself shouting "Why am I playing *Halo*?" Entire levels seem to have been lifted with no consideration for the fact they do not belong in this *Jetsons Nightmare*. This barely touches on the fact that this is absolutely not the way *Stubbs* should play, but this is the way *Stubbs* was delivered to us, so you find a way to say: "Sure. Fine."

Even the most invested fans won't clamor to demand an HD remake of this. Revisiting it is a shocking disappointment. These are gigantic levels that are poorly designed in such a way that I remember losing an entire hour trying to solve checkpoint issues in level three and, a decade later, I'm doing the same thing. Just like the first *Halo*, this game is insanely easy with a friend by your side, but oh wow was it not built to support that with any sort of balance and levels can become unmanageable quickly. A different kind of difficulty.

You can throw parts of your body that explode and you can throw parts of your body that crawl on the ground to hunt foes

through other rooms and you can just be yourself, but that is terribly boring in a world that starts with a stylized bang and almost immediately becomes level after level of the abandoned Missouri mall from *Gone Girl*.

God, this is a crap revisit. I wish I wasn't writing this. Stu, I am actively mad at what I've given you. Cancel this column.

When the game starts, it seems like you're about to see the scale and excitement of what videogames can do, in a time when videogames needed this kind of push. This is exactly the title that, if fully realized, would be what





we make hardcover art books for now. If *Alice: Madness Returns* can have it, so can *Stubbs*.

The game slips from this stylized city into warehouses and industrial rooms and abandoned streets. The civilians you turned into monster allies soon becomes endless waves of soldiers and scientists using *Mars Attacks!* ray guns and jetpacks. Then it's back to weird missions based around eating certain brains, or breaking some kind of machine or series of machines. It's all so badly put together. Even within the time period. *Psychonauts* did a better *Patton* tribute. I'm a little lost as to have my memory shifted on this. I love this game, but this is a slog and simultaneously two short by half.

Between sections where your body parts go on their own separate journeys, dating the mother of the antagonist and throwing organ-based fart grenades – these are all elements that set *Stubbs* apart from nearly every other videogame in existence. That is the enduring legacy here: a title so outside the box that perhaps there never was a box. That doesn't necessarily create a good, or even interesting, gameplay experience. As far as survival or horror, it doesn't do anything interesting despite being plenty gory.

As you may not play the game now, may I suggest that you do find the soundtrack CD (available for like \$3 used) and make it your new favorite album. It's a bunch of fantastic indie bands doing alt-universe versions of bopping 50s pop tracks. Death Cab does a flawless "Earth Angel," Cake's "Strangers in the Night" is unreasonably excellent and The Flaming Lips do one of their all-career oddest arrangements of "If I Only had a Brain" from *Wizard of Oz*. You get it? This is a game about zombies. Zombies eat brains. We're all having fun.

There's tongue-in-cheek, and this game is drenched in it, but it could have been tongue-outside-of-cheek or even tongue-through-cheek and the real shame is that no one gave this team a chance to do anything this original again. It still feels both punk and exciting to see the biggest videogame engine of the time taken over by horror anarchists who wanted to fill you with joy by mobbing unsuspecting men and women with your army of zombie children.

Sorry *Stubbs*. I'll miss what we had. 🍷





Lately I've been living in *Fortnite*'s post-apocalyptic sandbox survival mode. In this world – still a few notches removed from our apocalyptic political climate – 98% of the world's population has disappeared and mysterious Storms show up to throw zombie-like Husks at you, the commander of humanity's remnants. The hero classes include a host of goths: [Marine Corpse Ramirez](#), [Trailblaster Buzz](#), [Energy Thief Mari](#), but my best friend is Phase Scout Jess, a Mohawked woman with a leopard-print fur collar, plaid pants and a studded belt hanging diagonally across her hips (that's not holding *anything* up).

The characters in *Fortnite* don't have personality traits beyond their outfits and abilities. That leaves a lot of room for outfit-based projection – something in which I have lifelong experience.

After the world ends, Phase Scout Jess and I meet in an industrial park, attempting to harvest resources from the same dumpster. I'm wearing a Black Flag T-shirt. We discuss whether the post-apocalyptic wasteland will ever have “bands” again. In a way, she says, the post-apocalypse is the ultimate DIY venue.

At Base Camp, over bacon and fibrous herbs, I ask Jess about the anarchy symbol – a circle-A – scrawled across her white sweater. “It's a joke,” she says. Before the Storm, in middle school, she'd started covering her notebooks in baby anarchy signs – so easy to draw, intentionally messy. She didn't read Emma Goldman until years later. After the Storm, she has little interest in symbolism. The circle-A reminds her of simpler times.



In 1840, anarchist forefather Pierre-Joseph Proudhon wrote that “society seeks order in anarchy.” Later, he added, “Anarchy is order without power.” The circle-A, then, shows an A within an O: “Anarchy is Order.”

In *An Anarchist FAQ*, Iain McKay (not [Ian McKaye](#)) writes, “It seems to follow logically that since Anarchists have shied away from anything static, that we would also shy away from the importance of symbols and icons. Yet the fact is Anarchists have used symbolism in our revolt against the State and Capital, the most famous of which are the circled-A, the black flag and the red-and-black flag.” The exact origins of the circle-A are unclear: while popularized in the 1970s anarcho-punk movement, it’s been spotted much earlier. “On November 25 1956,” McKay says, “the Alliance Ouvriere Anarchiste (AOA) adopted this symbol. Going even further, a BBC documentary on the Spanish Civil War shows an anarchist militia member with a ‘circled-A’ clearly on the back of his helmet.”

British anarcho-punk band Crass are often given credit for spreading the circle-A among first-wave punks; Crass cofounder Penny Rimbaud said they likely came across the image in France. In an [interview](#) with *LA City Beat*, Rimbaud expressed indifference: “I don’t own the [circle-A], and I don’t care about it . . . I’m really not interested in symbols or any sort of public statement made in that way. It’s just logoism, isn’t it? I don’t wear Nike shoes and I don’t wear an ‘A’ on my lapel. It’s one and the same thing to me.”

Still, in 2017, a circle-A spray-painted under a bridge inevitably invokes those mysterious anarcho-punks. In 1977, The Sex Pistols' "Anarchy in the U.K." became an anthem for malcontents. Lead singer Johnny Rotten snarled, "I want to be an anarchist / I get pissed, destroy!" These lyrics feel traitorous in 2017, [after](#) Rotten supported Brexit and announced his affection for Tr\*mp. But back in 2007—slightly undermining Proudhon's idea that anarchy is order—Rotten and several of the surviving Pistols couldn't find the original multi-track master and re-recorded "Anarchy in the U.K." For [Guitar Hero III](#). "A bit of anarchy in a videogame is alright by me," [said](#) Rotten.

*Fortnite's* post-Storm world isn't particularly anarchic, despite its total lack of government. Most authority figures – [presidents, congressmen, cops in waiting](#) – disappeared along with the rest of the population. But in-game, *I'm* still the commander; I have all the power. There's not much room for anarchy when you, the player, act as dictator.

Jess has never rebelled against me; I've kept her busy fighting monsters. Her circle-A strikes me more as a nostalgic scrawl than a political statement: a desperate assertion that she had interests before her only viable interest became Husk-slaying. Like my Black Flag T-shirt, it's a pop cultural hand waving towards the political. 🇺🇸







## Saved State

There are no checkpoints in *Nier: Automata*.

Okay, I've already told a bit of a lie in my first sentence. The game does occasionally do the odd autosave after particular story beats. Within the moment-to-moment events in the game, though, *Automata* doesn't safeguard the player's progress. No, the player must choose when and where to save, first by activating the required equipment within the world. This can be off-putting for players who dislike the busywork of having to bring up menus and navigating save slots. It can feel like a hurdle thrown in to disrupt the flow of the experience. Considering the themes the game explores about personhood and identity, though, this is an important design decision.

From the very beginning, the game makes its intentions clear, and I do mean from the very beginning. During what we can label as the tutorial section, which spans the first 20 to 30 minutes of the game, players cannot save their progress. Fail during the sections' climactic boss battle (as I did) and the game boots you back to the start to retrace your steps.

This serves several purposes. It accentuates the isolation your android avatar 2B is feeling while they fight their way through enemy territory. You had been part of a squadron that was blown out of the sky on their approach to the oilrig that serves as the game's first area. Other than the game's other protagonist 9S working recon from the sidelines, you're utterly alone. It makes sense too. Why would the enemy use the equipment and digital networks that would give you an advantage over them?

It's indicative of *Automata*'s sense of humor. Much like the original game, *Automata* plays with genre conventions. In what is traditionally supposed to be the easiest section of a game, players run a gauntlet before they've acquired any new weapons or upgrades. More importantly, your save isn't commodified to the point of neglect. While the player never goes without a save so long as in the opening, the player is now acutely aware of how fragile their progress is.

This embeds in the narrative. With each death 2B, or any of the other characters, emerges from the save point in a brand new body, their records stored up until that point and ready to continue. Through the many twists and turns of the narrative, we find out that 2B's model was designed to execute the 9S model when they eventually, inevitably, figure out the ultimate fate of the world. We don't know how many times 9S has been wiped and rebooted. We only know that for our pair of android heroes, "It always ends like this."

With its existential heart, *Nier: Automata* tries to explore how cycles of abuse, violence and bigotry are perpetuated. What this does to the individuals trapped within the cycle? They're trapped within a system that has already determined their fates. How does this warp their identity? We, as players, are complicit in this. We control their actions. We load up our games and save when we feel they've made sufficient progress.

By the time the end credits roll on the final "true" ending, we're confronted with the choice, the one that, looking back, feels inescapable. It's a familiar setup to those who played through the first *Nier*, but it retains its weight. The credit roll is just another part of the stage on which we act. Instead of renewing the cycle anew by choosing to engage in a new game, one must sacrifice their very self. You devote your save data, the accumulation of your experiences, to another player. So that they can continue on their journey and, in doing so, remove yourself from the system. In a game that is rooted in antagonism and in which all of your actions are steeped in violence, cooperation is a radical act. Then a bullet strikes your blip. In an instant, the data you've cared for and updated meticulously is gone and you turn the game off.

It always had to end like this.

\* \* \*

It seems I've ended this year's column how it began: talking about save systems and checkpoints. I wasn't planning that. I hope you're not coming out of 2017 with too many new scars. Enjoy the holidays and I'll see you next year. We'll keep trying to break those cycles. 🍷



## Music Loves, Too

No piece of art meant more to me this year – or, arguably, any recent year – than the return of *Twin Peaks*.

That includes the music – spread over three records, it's a treasure trove of score and songs and sound effects, from Angelo Badalamenti, Dean Hurley and David Lynch to Nine Inch Nails, Sharon Van Etten and Eddie Vedder.

Taken as a whole, it's my soundtrack of 2017.

But it isn't my Album of the Year.

When I started my award a quarter century ago – yes, this is my 25th(!) winner – I set two basic rules for myself I reserve the right to change on a whim but have stuck with ever since anyway:

The record must be released during the calendar year.

It must be made up of original recordings – covers, for sure, but not old material or compilations that include the prerecorded work of others.

There was a lot of that in the music of *Twin Peaks*, but because it was curated so well, I was ready to throw those rules right out the window – until the week of Thanksgiving.

That's when I took a brand new record with me to Mexico City and, during a fabulous family vacation that took us from Frida Kahlo's house to the top of the Pyramid of the Sun in Teotihuacan, I fell asleep each night to Bjork's *Utopia*. I've been falling asleep to my 2017 Album of the Year nearly every night since.

It's been 16 years since I loved a Bjork record like this. *Vespertine* was my top record of 2001, when I'd listen to it sitting in the window of my apartment

in Prague, or riding the tram across the Vlatava, watching the snow fall. And hearing the snow fall – in particular the sound of boots making tracks in the soft, thick powder – through my headphones.

On *Utopia*, there are growling wolverines and the bitter leftovers from a devastating divorce. But similar in some ways to *Vespertine*, which wraps you in the warmth of winter, this record is blanketed with tropical birdsongs and flutes; where *Vespertine* sings of secret loves and hidden places, *Utopia* explores sex and romance through the swapping of mp3s and the swiping of apps. Where *Vespertine* pleads for a do-over on its most powerful track, “Undo,” a choir-filled prayer for a new beginning, *Utopia* carefully plots out its do-over, point by point, culminating in a pair of songs as moving as any in Bjork’s incomparable catalogue.

“Music loves too. I am here to defend it,” Bjork states on “Saint,” her voice low in the mix as the swirling sounds overpower her words and attempt to leap from the speakers to form tangible objects in the air.

Bjork didn’t play The Roadhouse on *Twin Peaks*, but the surreal world of this record draws you in. And in the same way Lynch embraces the comic and the dramatic in the same moments, so does the final track – at least for me. When Björk sings, “Hold fort for love” on “Future Forever,” it’s the proclamation of a survivor, coming back to life after a loss – or a “Losss,” spelled with three s’s in the title of Track 8. But when I mishear the lyric, over and over, in Bjork’s Icelandic accent as “Hold fart for love,” the humor does nothing to diminish it for me. Nor do the bird sounds all over the record – lush and exotic, yes, but still I imagine what it would be like to be surrounded by so many flying creatures, and all the bird shit that would surely land on me.

But that’s love, isn’t it? Opening your heart to someone, sometimes getting betrayed, sometimes getting shat on, and then, sometimes, at least in those early days of romance, sucking in your gas to make her love you more than you think you might deserve.

\* \* \*

Rounding out the Top 5: 2. *The Music of Twin Peaks*; 3. Mount Eerie – *A Crow Looked At Me*; 4. Offa Rex – *The Queen of Hearts*; 5. Hurray For the Riff Raff – *The Navigator*. 🍷







Pastiche is an aspect of post-modernism that involves borrowing from pre-existing aesthetics, cultures and time-periods when creating new work. It's "the imitation of a peculiar or unique style, the wearing of a stylistic mask, speech in a dead language," as Frederic Jameson writes in his essay, *Postmodernism and Consumer Society*. A post-modern artwork that uses pastiche presents an ahistorical experience, built from imagery that is isolated from its own history and context.

Jack King-Spooner's *Dujanah* is an exercise in pastiche and post-modernism. It follows in the structural footsteps of King-Spooner's previous game, *Beeswing*, delivering a series of narrative vignettes, told through characters that populate King-Spooner's surrealist worlds. Where *Beeswing* is firmly rooted in the Scottish villages and footpaths of King-Spooner's lived experience, *Dujanah* is set in an amalgam of Middle Eastern imagery and tropes. It follows the story of a Muslim woman, Dujanah, who is on a quest to uncover the whereabouts of her missing husband and child, killed in an introductory scene by a drone strike. The game uses the fictionalized setting to explore themes of occupation, revenge and death.

Dujanah's quest takes her to a jingoistic (yet oddly accessible) military base, an underground lab where a recluse builds an army of suicidal robots in order to better understand death and a village full of rock venues and spider-people. Though the western military presence casts a shadow over much of Dujanah's journey, King-Spooner admits the game would likely have looked much the same even if it hadn't been set in a fictional Middle East: "I can (just about) imagine the game being set anywhere. There are strong hints in the game of real places (Afghanistan, Algeria, New Mexico) but I opted for the artistic liberties of a fictional setting."

When placed together, these disparate cultures and locations create the effect of being in a non-place. The reverb-heavy guitar riffs that would accompany a new wave Western like *Six-String Samurai*, transition to more traditionally orientalist motifs as your character leaves the world map and enters a North African-styled village. Characters speak of middle-class amenities and gather for Lamaze-like pregnancy classes, despite living in ostensible pre-modernity. And though Dujanah covers up with the hijab, we hear no call to prayer, see no mosques and rarely hear Islam explicitly mentioned, despite it being the primary religion of the setting.

Though *Dujanah* may be a non-place, there are endless examples of real places experiencing the real pain of occupation. Palestine is in the midst of [violent protests](#) after Trump brazenly declared Jerusalem Israel's capital. Yemen faces [famine](#) and epidemic, thanks to a U.S.-backed Saudi incursion. Events such as these surely inspire the mood and imagery of the game, but because it is set in such a detached and hodgepodge setting, *Dujanah* is unable to deliver an impactful vision of what it means to be occupied. The military, its drones and the grieving families they produce, are all reduced to symbols and metaphors, there to help the player explore metaphysical themes that could have been represented in any number of other ways.

There's a responsibility that comes with using the art, language and symbolism of another culture. More steps are involved than plucking it from a gallery, music concert or book, and dropping it into a game – especially when you are approaching a culture that isn't your own, especially when that culture has so often been [exotified and appropriated](#) in the past.

The upcoming game *Donut County*, by Ben Esposito, was originally called *Kachina*, and featured Native-American-inspired artwork like totem poles and carved statues. After being called out for his ignorance on the subject by a teacher [writing for](#) the American Indians In Children's Literature website, Esposito decided he would prove her wrong by properly researching the game's visual influences. After reaching out to members of the Hopi tribe for help, [he realized](#), "A lot of what I was doing was hurting them. I couldn't do it justice, because they didn't want me to do it justice." Ultimately, he concluded that, "if it's really important to tell someone's narrative," to "let them tell it," and changed the game's art style, setting and name.

After all, according to Esposito, "research does not equal lived experience." There's something uniquely compelling about playing a game that's solidly about a place and an experience as opposed to art which has been "driven back inside the mind," and which can "no longer look directly out of its eyes at the real world for the referent but must, as in Plato's cave, trace its mental images of the world on its confining walls." as Jameson writes in his essay.

Comparing *Dujanah* to its predecessor, *Beeswing* highlights this distinction. *Beeswing* exists on a level that is personal and authentic, rather than symbolic. You play a young man as he explores the town he grew up in, talking to neighbors and old friends. You brush the dust off the keys of a piano that's been in your home since childhood, as the tinkling of the real life version of the instrument plays over the game's soundtrack. You wander around the woods, run into a friend and have an awkward conversation. You pass through a flock of sheep on the way to visiting an old folks' home, where those closest to death slowly fade away. It's a slow meandering walk through an old, deeply familiar neighborhood. The wider scope of *Dujanah* – racing around the vast desert on a motorbike and popping back and forth between different locales – contrasts with a narrow focus on small towns and people your character has known for decades. *Beeswing* allows more space to breathe, and to relate to each of the characters you meet and speak with. These stories resonate not only because of the game's intimate focus but because they so seamlessly share the tone and texture of the environment they arise out of – they truly could not have been told anywhere else.

In relying on pastiche and by separating the environment from real people and real stories, *Dujanah* is unable to connect in as meaningful a way. It remains successful as a window into King-Spooner's vivid imagination shone through a prism of collected Middle Eastern artifacts and orientalist imagery. There is still value in witnessing the results of that refracted image: the “Caves of Dujjal” arcade game-within-a-game which resembles an EDM remix of *Prince of Persia*; the quiet and self-reflective artist's gallery tucked away in the spider cave; the solemn graveyard and the game's thoughtful exploration of humanity's relationship with death. But like all pastiche, these images wind up eliding and obfuscating their inspired setting, choosing instead to wear it like a patchwork robe. As a result, *Beeswing*'s personality and authenticity evade *Dujanah*, which chooses, instead, to tell a story not about the Middle East, but with it, and ultimately through it – leaving the personal, honest narratives that could have been far behind. 🇺🇦







## Romanticizing the Nile

Three formative impressions of ancient Egypt:

1. The museum catalog from the Treasures of Tutankhamun exhibit has been floating around the house since my parents went to see the travelling tour at the Metropolitan Museum of Art in 1979. The book is filled with photographic plates, some in color with a deliciously retro quality, detailing the art objects in the show. Two threads compete in my perception of Egyptian art, springing directly from this book: the sumptuous beauty, bedecked in gold and jewels, and the alienness of its flatness, its elongated proportions, its geometry. Many of these artifacts I had only seen in photos were at the Franklin Institute in 2007 – the memory of their impossible beauty in person feels more like a dream than real life.
2. The *Ancient Egypt* volume of the Time Life Great Ages of Man series had many more examples of art, but the photographs of temples and ruins are what stuck with me. In feats literally monumental, the ancient Egyptians remain unmatched. Many trips to the Met to see their collection of statues and the Temple of Dendur have reinforced this. They are small by ancient standards, but humbling. In the back of the book,



there is also a gallery of line drawings of the major Egyptian gods – my first introduction to that animal-headed pantheon (and probably the gateway drug for Dungeons & Dragons' *Deities & Demigods*).

3. When I plucked *Masks of Nyarlathotep* off the shelf of the Waldenbooks at the local mall in 1990, with no real understanding of the Call of Cthulhu roleplaying game and only vague notions about the work of Lovecraft, it delivered much of the mystery of Ancient Egypt previously promised by legends of Tutankhamun's curse and the Karloff Mummy movies. This is Egypt through the pulp lens – slightly racialized, thoroughly exoticized – full of mad gods, bloodthirsty cultists and a good number of fezes. Though set in the 1920s, the shadow of the Black Pharaoh that stretches across the centuries is an apt metaphor not just for the influence of ancient Egyptian culture on Western civilization, but also the West's perception of Egypt as a place of wonder and splendor, of decadence and deviance.

Taken together, the vision of ancient Egypt that lives in my mind is one of a desert split by a single fertile river valley and pockmarked with canyons only inhabitable by the dead. The people are either poor farmers, scheming priests or decadent royalty, but all are obsessed with death. So much so that their primary accomplishment – until Hellenistic and Roman ideas were introduced





at the sword points of conquerors – was in creating tombs that exist on a scale unrivaled anywhere in the world, even thousands of years later.

That is a very one-dimensional view of a civilization that lasted thousands of years. I know it is not true. In fact, I know a great many facts that refute that picture. Yet the idea of Egypt as a *setting* rather than a place endures as my first thought of the region – a barren desert, full of hidden treasures, which breeds villains of a swarthy sort. Heroes aren't born in Egypt, they just go there for adventures. Such is the power of 200 years of less-than-nuanced depiction in popular culture. Worse, that one-dimensional Egypt can, and often does, still thrill me.

Take *Raiders of the Lost Ark* as an example. With the exception of Sallah (who is played by an Englishman), the only Egyptians of import in the movie are the mummies that harry Indiana Jones' escape from the Well of Souls. Egypt is merely a backdrop for a conflict between Americans and Nazis; a stylish skin for MacGuffins. I am aware of this; *Raiders of the Lost Ark* is still one of my favorite movies.

*Assassin's Creed Origins* might have changed that for me. Everything I mentioned – the monuments, the bejeweled art, the pulpy action – is still in there, but the developers at Ubisoft (admittedly, a company based in Montreal, Canada, but also one that goes to pains to stress the diversity of its staff) have made an obvious effort to reframe them in something that is, if not more realistic, at least more reflective of the lived-in world.

Set in the late Ptolemaic period, this Egypt is a melting pot of cultures born of both war and commerce. There is tension between the north, Hellenized three centuries earlier by Alexander's liberation of the country from the

Persians, and the south, which maintains connections to older, Dynastic traditions. People of many colors and creeds walk the streets of Alexandria and beyond. And, where ancient Egyptian religion is to the modern mind an abstract thing colored by fantastic notions about their animal-headed gods, in *Assassin's Creed Origins*, religion and life inextricably intertwine. People high and low petition the gods for everything from matters of state to the most mundane tasks of daily life.

*Origins* makes ancient Egypt breathe in that special way only videogames can. Leave the game's story (an excellent one, by the series' standards) to one side: by simply wandering the countryside – a terrain much richer than the windswept place that exists in my mind – and seeing the digital simulacra going about their business is enough to make me reconsider all my pre-conceived notions. I have no idea if the game's take on Egyptian life or religion is accurate, but that's hardly the point.

The Egypt of *Assassin's Creed Origins* is obviously fictive. I know that, for game design reasons, its dreamlike landscape is a representation, not a recreation, much the same way I know my knee-jerk pulpy visions of the country and its culture are a construct born of impressions rather than facts. Rather, it is in the sharp contrast between these fictions that the truth exists. Not an objective truth about ancient Egypt, but a truth about how we perceive the world that lies outside our direct experiences.

That world is complex and, to those not living in it, maybe even impossibly remote. The maxim of the titular creed begins with, "Nothing is true." Within the game's mythology, it means to reveal that the world we know is an illusion, but now I prefer to read it as an exhortation to continue learning at all costs. Even if the objective truth, about ancient Egypt, about anything, is unknowable, that doesn't mean we should stop searching for it. 🏹







## Let it Snow

Last night, I received a text from the New York Road Runners, the organizers of today's Ted Corbitt 15k race, warning that the weather for the run was being monitored. The first snowfall of 2017 was due for New York City and, according to the official Weather Channel app, it was going to start at 3:00 AM and not stop until late afternoon. I ordered another drink, sure of the 9.3-mile race's imminent cancellation. Ah, the innocence of last night's tipsy babes!

At 5:00 am this morning, I threw open my bedroom curtains, positive I'd see a blanket of white covering my downstairs neighbor's garden. Alas, Mother Nature played Martha Stewart last night, only lightly dusting the pickets of the backyard fence with a tasteful hand. It's a good thing? That remains to be seen, now that there's nary a flake of frozen condensation in sight. So here I am in my starting race corral, my head as cider-groggy and sleep-deprived as my limbs are stretched and warm (I'm not a complete amateur).

The Ted Corbitt is my last race of 2017 and the one to fulfill the 9-race requirement for guaranteed entry to next year's New York City marathon. The course is two loops starting from the northern part of Central Park, a shorter one then a long one. It seems cruel not to start with the longer loop, but I'm feeling sprightly as my wave takes off from the starting line and heads towards the west side of the park. My asthma keeps me in the back of the pack when distance-running but as a former sprinter I have a tendency to start strong.

Around Mile Two, a young woman dressed as a banana waits on the sideline to give the runners high-fives. My strong sprinter's start has already begun to bite me in the ass, as always, but her enthusiasm draws me over and smacking

her gloved palm gives me enough of a psychological boost to keep moving. A truck drives by just before the sharp turn onto the 72 St. transverse and someone shouts at us through a bullhorn to keep left. The elite runners from the first wave are already approaching to lap us. A moment later, a group of five men runs past me, a tight pack moving in perfect unison like a ten-legged perpetual motion machine. They continue south along the path of the second loop as I head east. I realize the sky's grey granite has finally cracked and tiny specks of snow are falling in earnest.

At Mile Three, I'm back on the east side of the park heading north. Men and women from the early waves rush by my right side while I lope along the edge of the inside track (I'm not a complete amateur). I watch them pass and remember my days on the high school track team. The longest distance I ran in competition was 200m and I pitched a teenage bitch-fit whenever I had to run a mile at practice. I'm proud and a little astounded that I'm running 9+ today. Still, I remember what it was to really open up on the track, to dig spikes into rubber and get up on just the balls of my feet and fly. I didn't know if I was running away from something or towards something else, but in the moments I reached peak speed I felt unencumbered and real.

Suddenly memory merges with the present and I break away from the slow lane to run at full speed in the middle of the path. I'm careful not to get too close to the faster runners approaching the end of their race, but I pick one and try to keep pace. He notices me and throws me a sidelong glance. I give a half-shrug and half-smile and try not to think about how I'm twenty years out of my sprinting days. "Come on," he breathes, "We'll carry you to Mile Four."

As soon as we make it past the four-mile mark, I shout my good luck wishes and signal to the runners behind me that I'm slowing to a walk. It was a stupid move but for one glorious quarter-mile (or less, probably less) I hurtled alongside a far better athlete than myself and felt invulnerable. Now I could feel the blood actually moving through my brain tissue and was hitting my inhaler like Mikey in *The Goonies* but for a moment, not even my asthma could touch me.

I speed-walk the next mile, which takes me by the finish line as I start my second loop around the park. Once past the finished runners wrapping themselves in heat sheets, a velvet curtain of quiet is drawn around me. The park is a snowy tintype and I smile. I steel myself to dig deep for the back half of the race, which will feel longer and be wetter, colder and more arduous due to my too-fast start and recapturing of lost youth. I know I'll finish, though. The snowflakes now are fat Charlie Brown clusters of fluff, almost floating in the ozone-scented air. 🏃



## On Loss and Let's Plays

I got into the whole Let's Play thing a bit late; it wasn't until 2013/2014 that I bothered subscribing to anybody on YouTube and, even then, I usually scoffed at the idea of simply watching some stranger play a game when I could just play it myself. Once I started getting into it, I began to understand the entertainment value of it, but the scoffing continued when I'd scroll into the comments and regularly see someone with a sob story about how crappy their life is and how watching this person's videos is what kept them going. I mean come on, that's gotta be a melodramatic exaggeration, right? Here's the thing: it's not. And it wasn't until my own life was upended by tragedy that I realized how wrong I was.

Last year (October to November of 2016, specifically) was bad. Really bad. In addition to the surface level stress of a significant chunk of the country wanting to put a hateful little goblin in charge of everything, our beloved cat Ampersand – no exaggeration, she was a huge part of our lives and in many ways the glue that held us together – was diagnosed with stomach cancer. We were scared and upset, but we also figured that we'd have a couple more good years with her as we prepared to say goodbye. Unfortunately, things moved a lot faster than anybody could have anticipated. In less than a month, we were taking her to the vet for the last time.

Alongside the misery and stress that came with all of this, I also had a serious problem with grieving. It's something that I've dealt with for most of my life and I kind of hate it. For whatever reason, it's been extremely difficult for me to be properly upset about serious grief. It might sound great, being able to

endure something tragic and not shed a single tear, but it's actually awful. Bad stuff would happen and I wouldn't have any sort of cathartic release. The events surrounding Ampersand's illness were going to be the same way and I hated knowing I wouldn't be able to let any significant emotions out.

Then I started turning to Let's Plays. More and more, I'd focus on long-running series of emotional games, played by people I enjoyed watching. Most notably, I kept going back to the end of Jacksepticeye's playthrough of *Undertale* (plus the playthrough by Barry and Ross from Game Grumps' Steam Train), as well as Jack's playthrough of *The Last Guardian*. For whatever reason, seeing these emotional videogame moments play out and watching/hearing other people crack started to break down whatever barrier was preventing me from dealing with my own grief.

I cried along with them, and it felt good. I mean it felt bad, because I was miserable and distraught over the loss of a family member, but I was finally able to let that misery out. In a way, it almost felt like they were grieving with me, even though I know that's not true. That perception helped a lot, though. This isn't to say that a couple of YouTube videos made everything better, but they helped me a lot as a coping mechanism.

It took me a while, but I finally *get* why people will become emotionally invested in the Let's Players they watch regularly. They are there for you when you need them, whether it's with a timely and poignant upload or a two-year-old video that you can always go back to when you need to feel better about things.

I have nothing particularly witty or meaningful to say in order to bring this to a close, so I'll just go with this: Let's Plays helped me deal with the most painful moment of my life (so far), and I'm very thankful for that. 🐾







In a legacy board game, you write on the board, remove pieces from play and, generally, keep all of your progress from session to session. Popular examples are *Pandemic* and *Risk*. It's easy to see the appeal of the mechanics while tied to those two games – persistent control over borders or disease research and an ever-evolving game world make for play that can be novel in the physical realm of board gaming.

While *Risk* and *Pandemic* are the most popular, a couple are more intriguing, namely *Kingdom Death* and *Gloomhaven*. I can't really discuss the former, as I haven't played it (I do want it, though), but I can gladly speak at length on the latter.

Designed by Isaac Childress, *Gloomhaven* is an attempt to make a tabletop RPG that doesn't require a DM. Its success in this is up to interpretation, but my time with it so far has been entertaining. So, how does *Gloomhaven* work?

When you first open the giant box, after punching out and unwrapping all the starting stuff, you choose between six starting characters. They range through the usual fantasy fare of wizards and rogues, tanks and healers, but they all have a bit of nice backstory and artwork. These will be your first characters.

The conceit of *Gloomhaven* is that you're playing a grand campaign, as many characters, through the history of the town. When you first start a new character, you draw a quest card. Once that card is completed, you retire your character and start a new one, often unlocking a new characters along the way. You'll also get new dungeons, town and travel events, lore and, well, too much to realistically list here. The entire game evolves and changes as you play.



How do you play? *Gloomhaven* is the type of game that has a lot of rules, but they aren't overly complex. At its base, this is a card game with modular combat like *Descent*. You fit tiles together and set up monsters on hexes. These are your encounters and your dungeons. They drive the story. The game comes with a giant scenario book full of flavor text and instructions that will guide you through the set up and narration required.

Each character has a deck of cards and, based on their overall hand limit, they can only have so many in a game. As an example, the Tinkerer has 12 cards. All of these cards are in his hand at the beginning. You play two cards a turn, with numbering on the cards determining your initiative score. Once played, the cards are either discarded or, in the case of many of the more powerful abilities, removed from the game until the next scenario. If you run out of cards, you are exhausted and remove your piece from the board. If your team wins, you still win. If your entire team is exhausted, you lose.

You can only get your cards back by resting, which requires that you remove a card of your choice from the game until the next scenario. The other way you lose cards is by taking more damage than you have life. If that happens, you can discard a card at random or two of your choice to negate the effect. This is a difficult, but enjoyable, mechanic that adds a bit of planning and strategy.



Cards are the only way, other than defeating a scenario, that you gain experience. You don't gain experience for defeating monsters, you get experience from playing powerful cards. Some cards have experience point values listed on them and when successfully used you gain the experience. Many of the cards that net you any value, though, are discarded. It's a constant balancing act between leveling at a reasonable pace and exhaustion.

If you defeat the scenario, you unlock new locations on your overworld map and gain rewards. On the way to a dungeon, you perform Road Events. These are a sort of "choose your own adventure" storyline that can have good and bad effects. When you return to town, you can perform a Town Event, which is the same thing as a Road Event, but with usually kinder outcomes.

As you explore the world and do more scenarios, the map changes and the town grows. You have access to higher level equipment and more interesting adventures as your town goes from tiny stop to thriving village. It's a hell of a trip along the way.

I received my Kickstarter copy of *Gloomhaven* about a month ago and since have played over a dozen times, thoroughly enjoying each session. It has good co-op and single player rules. Though I'm playing with a friend, I can see this as a fantastic single player experience, if a bit on the difficult side.

The game will be available at retail soon, but it does bear a hefty price – just shy of 300 dollars. The Kickstarter was much more reasonable. On the flipside of that, it is, hands down, the biggest board game box I own. There is so much content that it's almost daunting.

*Gloomhaven* is an interesting experience that might be too much for some players, but if you fit the bill, it's quite the ride. Building up a fantasy town and discovering its dark secrets is reminiscent of my days as a kid, playing D&D with my friends and feeling the rush of adventure.

I can't wait to get back to *Gloomhaven*. 🏰

**You did this month's cover illustration. Can you talk a bit about your approach to illustrating the essay?**

When it comes to a process, I will usually sketch out a couple different ideas out with a few prompt words in mind. I wanted an obvious tie in to the theme of the game with examples of medieval imagery but also I wanted to touch base with the ideas of beginnings and endings. I wanted to keep a balance with the skull and the knight, creating a visual metaphor of life and death.

**How did you get into illustration?**

I grew up in a really creative household, my parents were always letting me and my brothers be artists. I studied industrial design at NJIT, building and designing products, though it wasn't until two years ago that I really got back into illustration. At the time I needed an outlet from everything going on in my life and the best thing I thought of was to sit down for an hour or two and just draw. When I started I made a goal to draw each day for an entire year, and now it's just normal practice to draw almost everyday.

**Your work is an interesting intersection of the minimal, the distorted (maybe not the right word) and the unsettling. How did you get there and why do you think those things go together so well?.**

Well it's hard to say exactly how I got there, though my style has been developed over time with a strong interests in graphic design, graffiti art and contemporary modern art.

Looking back on drawings from my childhood I usually had an element of the “unsettling”, with some skulls or a creepy figure but not until recently have I been diving back down that rabbit hole and bridging it with more of a minimal/more refined look. I think most of my art is somewhat of a balancing act between the three, sharing the page in almost equal parts.

**What are you hoping to accomplish with your art? What do you hope folks take away from it?**

Honestly I don't know, I have this drive now to continue drawing and frankly if I accomplish anything with it I'll be proud. I hope people just react in some way from my work. I am not trying to elicit any specific response but it is always satisfying to know what someone is thinking, positive or negative.

**Do you shoot red beams of light out of your eyes?**

Only after a long day.

\* \* \*

You can see more of Hank's work on his Instagram [@hanktd](#) and can buy prints and other cool stuff in his [Etsy store](#). 📖

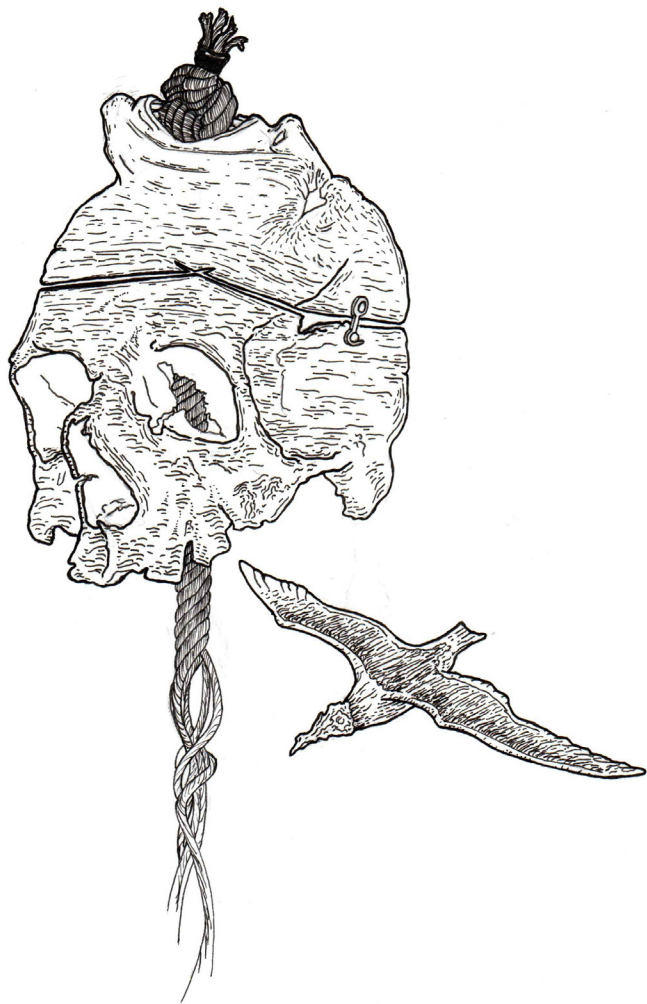


plate 1.





plate 2.



plate 3.

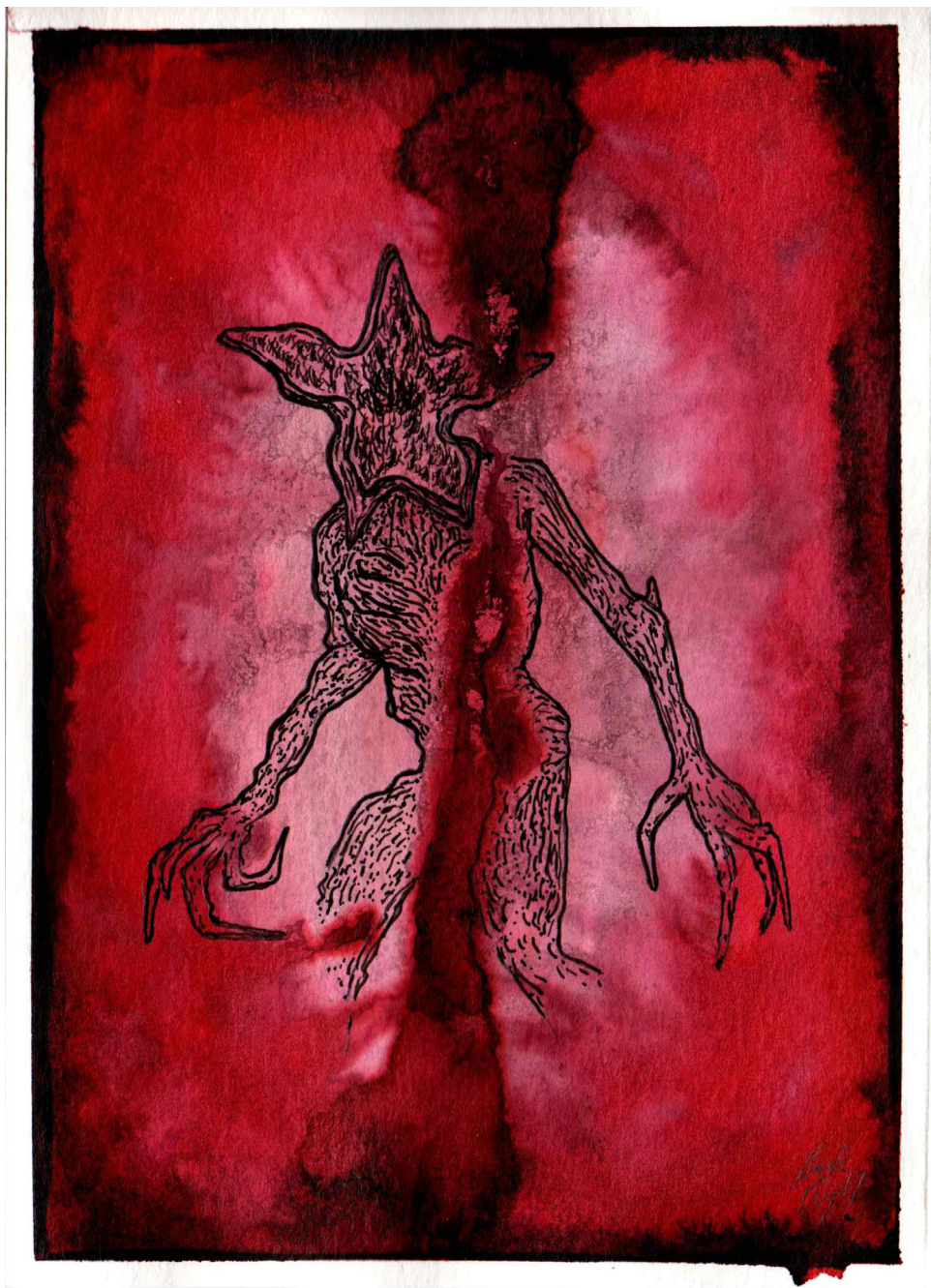


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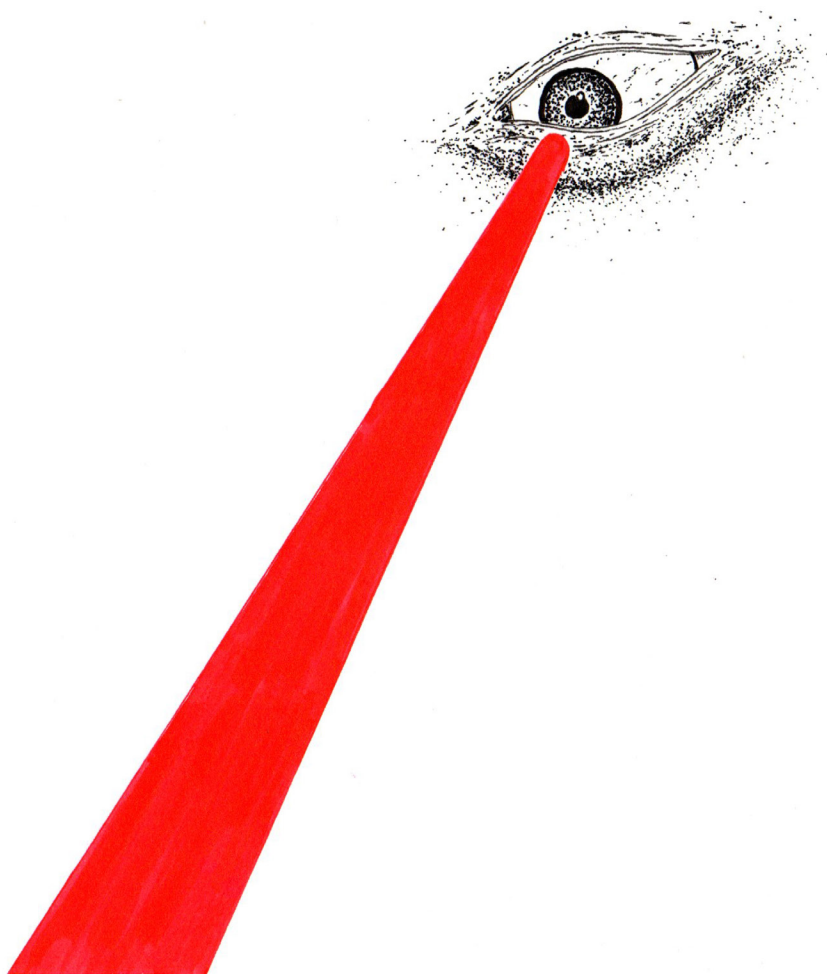


plate 6.



## Playlist |

“Witness,” by Makthaverskan  
“Stuff the Turkey,” by Alien Sex Fiend  
“My Love, I’d Do Anything For You,” by Morrissey  
“Country Grammar,” by Nelly  
“Dead Moon Night,” by Dead Moon (RIP Fred Cole)  
“In a Silent Way,” by Nico Niquo  
“Our Dance (feat. Charlotte Savary),” by Wax Tailor  
“Flim,” by The Bad Plus  
“Madness,” by Muse  
“Saint,” by Bjork  
“No ‘I’ in Team,” by Pulley

“Line of Sight (ft. Wynne & Mansionair),” by Odesza  
“Don’t Let It Get to You,” by Rostam

[LISTEN NOW ON SPOTIFY](#)

Selected by Stu Horvath, Ken Lucas, Erik Weinbrecht, Alyse Stanley, Michael Edwards, Levi Rubeck, Sara Clemens, Gavin Craig, William Coberly, Matt Marrone, Sam Desatoff, Taylor Hidalgo and Melissa King

## Reading List |

*The Stay-Awake Men*, by Matthew Bartlett  
*The Great and Secret Show*, by Clive Barker  
*The Road Beneath My Feet*, by Frank Turner  
*Dark Knights: Metal #2*, by Scott Snyder  
*Baldur’s Gate II*, by Matt Bell  
*Everything Matters*, by Ron Currie Jr.  
*Full Body Pleasure Suit*, by Elsbeth Pancrazi  
*The Flamethrowers*, by Rachel Kushner  
*The Color of Law*, by Richard Rothstein  
*Golden Hill*, by Francis Spufford

*It*, by Stephen King  
*What Remains of Me*, by Alison Gaylin  
*Kingdom Hearts II*, by Alexa Ray Corriea

Selected by Stu Horvath, James Fudge, Erik Weinbrecht, Alyse Stanley, Austin Price, Michael Edwards, Levi Rubeck, Sara Clemens, Gavin Craig, William Coberly, Matt Marrone, Sam Desatoff and Taylor Hidalgo



***They Remain*** – A horror movie, directed by Phil Gelatt and based on the short story “-30-” by Laird Barron, we join two corporate scientists researching the remote wilderness locale one (still?) haunted by a Manson-esque hippie murder cult. The discovery of an impossibly large and slightly diabolic-looking horn marks a shift into decidedly cosmic and hallucinogenic territory. Not your typical slasher in the woods horror flick, *They Remain* is a quiet and dense exercise in dread. Fans of films like *The Witch* should seek it out when it hits its release in the spring. [Full disclosure: I’m friendly with both Phil and Laird.]

(Stu Horvath)

***The Invitation*** – I may be the last on the hype train, but oh man, this movie. Old friends reunite for a dinner invitation, only to discover that two of them have joined a cult. There’s enough tension and doubt thrown in to keep you hooked during its lulls and the ending exemplified what I love about horror done well: the silent, slow realization.

(Alyse Stanley)

***Three Billboards Outside Ebbing, Missouri*** – Martin McDonagh is one of my favorite filmmakers and, being a Southern exile, I’ve got a strong love of Southern gothic, so I’ve been anticipating his spin on the genre for a while now. And while I think the messaging at the end is a little pat, it’s another excellent addition to his body of work with some fine acting from Frances McDormand that does as much to realize her character as McDonagh’s spot-on dialogue. Don’t believe the ads you’ll see on TV: this is no endorsement of kick-ass, tough-as-nails vigilantism but a brutal take-down of the self-righteous, self-serving morality that damaged people often use to hide their pain.

(Austin Price)

***Thor: Ragnarok*** – Fun times! It scratches that dumb distraction itch while also being well-made. It did new things while also being a funny, action-packed, fast-paced and eye-popping adventure with an awesome cast.

(Michael Edwards)

Pretty sure this is my favorite non-Captain America MCU film.

(Dan Becker)

**Rear Window** – Grace Kelly, you deserve way better than this dingbat.

(Levi Ruback)

**Get Out** – *Get Out* caused me to have my first bad trip in a lake house in Lake Placid, NY, in zero degree weather, surrounded by white people. I'll have to write down that story sometime.

(Yussef Cole)

Not a comedy.

(James Fudge)

**The Lion in Winter** – Sometimes you have to remind people about the best movies from 1968. *The Lion in Winter* is one of the best movies ever made, with dynamite performances from Katharine Hepburn and Peter O'Toole, and one of the best scripts ever filmed. If you've never seen it, you owe it to yourself to fix that. Every TV/film portrayal of an Old Warrior King Who is Confronting the End is indebted to Peter O'Toole's Henry II in this movie and none has ever surpassed it.

(William Coberly)

**Addams Family Values** – As a mall goth teenager, the Addams Family were my idealized family. Delightfully weird but ultimately supportive, even if their specific values were more attuned to murder than being on time to a meeting. Rewatching this film as an adult, I find that not much of my initial opinion has changed. Wednesday and Morticia still dominate, and the real tragedy of the story is that Debra will never realize that she had found a supportive family even in her murderous intent.

(Amanda Hudgins)

**Star Wars** – Too often I rely on memories to form opinions on things fresher. It's worthwhile for me to delve back into the archives and bounce the ideas I think I have against the things I formed this ideas on, and see how both have changed (and how *I* have changed). Revisiting *Star Wars* was something I felt I should have done years ago, just a blindspot in my experience too worn over the years to be worthwhile. Though it's seemingly aged more than I have since I first watched it, I still find it has something to show me, even if it's just how much I've grown too.

(Taylor Hidalgo)

**Star Trek Discovery** – The newest *Star Trek* series is a prequel to the original series, featuring a black woman protagonist who isn't a captain and a design sense that lifts heavily from the aesthetics of the *Mass Effect* videogame series. There is a lot here that doesn't feel like *Star Trek* (no matter how you choose to define *Star Trek*) but I'll be damned if the mid-season finale wasn't some of the most exciting television I've seen in a long time.

(Stu Horvath)

**The Flash** – I'm curious about this season. The last few seasons were a non-stop rollercoaster ride but things seem to have simmered down a bit. Or maybe it's a slow build to something world-shattering. Maybe a Crisis? Who knows. If you are not watching *The Flash*, you're doing yourself an injustice. I don't usually watch this type of show nor am I really a fan of the character, but I have been hooked since episode one. It deserves all the praise it gets. Grant Gustin and the rest of the cast shine in their roles and, despite all the times Barry screws up, it's still a feel-good show.

(Ken Lucas)

**No Game, No Life** – A brother and sister duo of elite gamers get transported to a world where everything's decided through play. The writing's fast and quick-witted and the art style is gorgeous, reminding me of *Madoka Majica* mixed with the strange explosion of color that was *Me! Me! Me!*. Though I could do without the gratuitous panty shots, the deep cut anime references almost (almost) make up for it.

(Alyse Stanley)

**Big Mouth** – I'm bored outta my gourd by coming-of-age stories, particularly those set in or around middle-and-high-school, but this is a surprisingly funny, and even sometimes disarmingly emotional, little look at all the horrors and attendant hilarity of adolescence. A lot of this is likely due to the top-notch comedic and acting talent they've assembled, but I'm also consistently surprised at how well it nails the absolute worst of growing up (and, in one particularly spot-on episode, the social attitudes of New York City's social "elite").

(Austin Price)

**The Orville** – It's actually not bad! Sure, when I get around to watching it, *Discovery* will most likely be better, but at the end of the day this is basically a Go-Bots/Transformers comparison. Something is a little off about *The Orville*, but the basic enjoyable ingredients are there and it's a little cheaper to obtain than getting a CBS All Access subscription. Now if they could just not feature that smug guy who plays the captain as often as they do. How'd he even get that role and why does he sound like Brian from *Family Guy*?

(Michael Edwards)

**The Good Place** – This show is so good that I could probably spoil its main twist and it wouldn't hurt the experience. It's a deceptively smart, hilarious show that uses brightly lit sitcom sets to stage morality plays and develop character relationships that approach the emotional warmth of a show like *Parks and Rec*. Also: Janet is everything.

(Yussef Cole)

**The Punisher** – Look, it's the Punisher, so if you don't like the Punisher, don't watch it, because in *The Punisher*, the Punisher does Punisher things. Jon Bernthal's take on Frank Castle was the best part of the second season of *Daredevil*, so I was excited to see what he got up to as the star of his own show, but I was also worried, because often, Punisher-centric media is boring, gross, vaguely fascist torture porn. The Punisher is, after all, a man who executes and tortures people without due process, and I'm not super into that sort of thing. This show manages to pull off the difficult feat of making Frank Castle seem human, as a man consumed by PTSD and grief, without sugarcoating the things he does. You root for Frank, because the people he's fighting are even worse than he is and because Bernthal's amazing performance is impossible to look away from. But I don't think the show ever lets you get entirely comfortable with who he is or the choices he makes.

(William Coberly)

**Samurai Gourmet** – *Samurai Gourmet* follows a retired Japanese businessman as he lives the life of an imagined, masterless samurai who strides the lands and lives, drinks and eats to his pleasure. It is an unabashed and decadent journey built on the love of food, its preparation, and the joy of eating. Without the burden of a significant story, it is instead an itemized list of relished small moments and the food that accompanies them.

(Taylor Hidalgo)





**Secret World Legends** – I returned to *Secret World Legends* again with the release of the entirety of the endgame Tokyo storyline, which I never had the patience to slog through in the original iteration of the game. I was met with some obnoxious areas and puzzles, but excellent writing. The recent introduction of a new power allocation system also frees the game from tedious equipment management. Items used to be tied to a particular purpose - healing, damage or survivability (read: extra hit points), requiring you to build up separate sets of items if you wanted to be able to switch roles. Now they have a general power rating, which you can allocated on the fly to any of the three poles, with no penalty, from encounter to encounter. Is the game easier now? Yes. Is that a problem? Not for me!

(Stu Horvath)

**Guns of Boom** – I can't remember the last time I powered up one of my game systems. I no longer have the time needed, so I've turned to mobile gaming. I downloaded *Guns of Boom* on a lark and found myself hooked. It has an art style similar to *Team Fortress* and is a fun, fast paced online FPS. Currently most match types are Team Deathmatch, but occasionally a tug-of-war style mode pops up. There are daily and never-ending game quests and drop boxes that unlock new skins and patterns. Super fun for a gamer on the go!

(Ken Lucas)

**Crypt of the Necrodancer** – Every play a roguelike and think “You know what would make this better? Dancing!” The split-second decisions and frantic pacing allowed by this game's *DDR*-style controls made the D&D genre of monster hunting tolerable for me for the first time.

(Alyse Stanley)

**Starfox 2** – This is a weird one that can be found on the SNES Classic Edition mini-console. Never released, it's a pretty fascinating look at how the Super Nintendo still had legs in the mid '90s and could have possibly continued as a system longer than it did. It's an ambitious game hampered by odd graphics and done better on later editions, but it's still fun to play.

(Michael Edwards)

**Netrunner** – Been participating in an online Core 2.0 tournament, mostly as a way to commit myself to playing. Doing OK, about 50/50 at this point, which is surprising especially since the deckbuilding aspect of this game is not my cup of tea (yeah, yeah, sue me) but I did my damndest with some meager assemblages. I love piloting, playing buffs as Jinteki, executing surprise turns as Shaper, running hail marys as a self-destructive Anarch. I should really try to get out to the friendly local gaming store's casual night more often.

(Levi Rubeck)

**Animal Crossing: Pocket Camp** – All of the characters are just as cute as in previous installments, but this mobile version is lacking the heart that made those earlier versions of *Animal Crossing* so charming. Fishing, fruit-picking and bug-catching are no longer meditative pastimes, but straight-up chores. Chatting with your animal friends is reduced to them mostly giving tips on how to use the pay-to-play features. It's not even fun decorating a campsite, since each animal requires you change the furniture to suit their needs before they visit. I'll keep playing as long as people are sharing their funny antics on Twitter, but I have a feeling *Pocket Camp* is not long for my rotation.

(Sara Clemens)

**Hidden Agenda** – Yes, the story is trash, the characters are trash and the uncanny valley has somehow gotten deeper since the studios earlier game, *Until Dawn*; but having an entire room full of people screaming at the top of their lungs as we attempted to overturn each others final decision was perhaps the best gaming moment of 2017.

(Yussef Cole)

**HQ** – I've started writing a column for Unwinnable about this live game show, played daily via a smartphone app at 3 p.m. and 9 p.m., several times but it just hasn't come out right yet. The host is hokey but he almost – almost – grows on you and the idea is fantastic. It's also become a regular bonding ritual with family members. And maybe I'll actually get past Question 6 someday.

(Matt Marrone)

**The Quest for El Dorado** – A runner up for the Spiel des Jahres last year, *El Dorado* is exactly what I'm looking for in a family game. It combines deckbuilding with racing into an elegant and easy to learn package. With just a handful of rules, you'll be hacking your way through the jungle just a few minutes after opening up the box, and the modular board makes every

expedition unique. No shade to *Kingdomino* but after a handful of plays, I can't help but think that *El Dorado* got snubbed in the game of the year voting this year.

(Sam Desatoff)

***Binding of Isaac: Afterbirth*** – When I was playing the PS4 version of this game a few years ago, I remember a friend coming over and being completely aghast and what I was playing. Looking back to my screen made me feel like my eyes had been reopened to the horror that had eluded me before – I was a near naked baby, running around the halls of a blood soaked dungeon fighting literal monsters of shit with my tears. *Afterbirth* does more of the same, but now I can play it on the Switch.

(Amanda Hudgins)

***PlayerUnknown's Battlegrounds*** – I mean, I'm probably alone out here, right? The faint echoes of gunfire in the distance seem to promise that this little slice of island is mine for the moment. I don't feel like I need to cower inside, I should be pretty okay for the most part. I still crouch-walk everywhere I go, careful not to sprint unless I need to. (Noise, y'know?) But it's quiet, an empty space that feels a lot like visiting campgrounds in off-seasons. It's familiar, but empty, like nature has reclaimed the worst of the rat race and we're taking a moment to enjoy the intersection. There are guns on the floor, we have the opportunity for security here, but also the knowledge that we're not in the thickest of it. For more than a few moments, there's an oasis here in the swaying weeds and hungry grasp of the blue. The moment, at least for as long as it lasts, approximates perfection.

Then the gunfire starts.

(Taylor Hidalgo)

***Final Fantasy XV*** – No spoilers, but the emotional impact of the story's second part hit me harder than expected? Also, props for the clever use of the Yoshitaka Amano art at the end.

(Melissa King)



# A MOST CURIOUS BLACK HOLE

Maxwell Neely-Cohen

I have been trying to figure out how to write about *Crusader Kings II* for three years now. I've spent hours looking for the sort of take or angle you're supposed to have when you write about a game, book, movie, person, or earthshaking political event in the year of our lord 201X. Yet the closest to a concise summation I can get to is this: the game is a hole. It can swallow you. It doesn't need monsters. It is a monster. An eater of life and time.

For the uninitiated, *Crusader Kings II* is a medieval dynasty simulator that came out in 2012.

It's a game of feudalism. This means that most of the time it's a de facto strategy game. Single-player pausable real time, but who cares about categorical buzzwords – it's an attempt to model

an entire sociopolitical system, then let the player loose. For a game so complex, where sifting through family trees can be more important than leading armies, it has been unpredictably successful. Seven figure sales. In 2014, about 100,000 players were playing a month. The average playtime was 99 hours. It has been expanded 13 times and counting, not including unit packs, music and other ephemera. All this despite having one of the worst in-game tutorials of all time. It's the first game where I had to watch an

instructional video to learn how to play.

It's possible to view it as farcical, packed with humor and irony and caricature of fucked up medieval family and court drama. It's also possible to view it as a dead serious strategic challenge of realpolitik and economic development. I haven't decided what it really is. I probably never will.

One night, before I'd ever played, my friend Amy texted me, furious that the Scottish Duke she inhabited was producing an endless series of daughters.

In real life, Amy has no preference as to the gender of her future children, but in tenth century Scotland, her incentives changed.

*Crusader Kings II* accomplished one of storytelling's most difficult tasks: to transpose

the audience to a different time, with an incentive totally opposed to their own, that in no way is exploitative or glorifying or patronizingly gentle. Just real. Economic. Structural.

In an interview with *Paper Magazine*, author Ta-Nehisi Coates once [spoke](#) about how hard it was for us to truly appreciate the full weight of Ulysses S. Grant's decision to free the single slave he inherited through his wife's family on moral principle. "You have to understand what that meant in the 1850s. People





would let their slaves buy their freedom, because slaves were really expensive. It would be like walking away from your house.”

When looking back at history it's easy for you to think, “Oh, I would've been the hero then.”

Coates later tweeted “Every motherfucker is John Brown or Harriet Tubman – post-bellum. In 1859, all of you would have sang another song. I know I would have.”

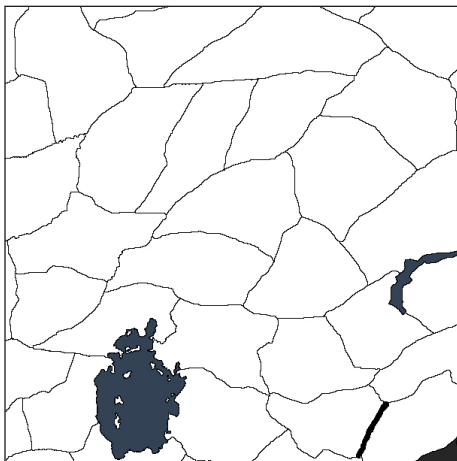
That's the larger point. *Crusader Kings II* doesn't let you do the “right” thing just because you, a thousand years after the fact, think it's right. Or it makes the “right” thing really hard. The game does its best to fight against the anachronism that you, a 21st century being, are playing it.

We do a bad job distinguishing between fascination and reverence when it comes to history. Too many pretend it's one when they feel the other. This is the line *Crusader Kings II* walks most of the time. You can roleplay under a different moral standard, but it doesn't feel reverential or exhilarating. It's almost academic. There's built-in critical distance. Empathy is not reserved for the person, but for the system. When you throw someone on the rack in the dungeon, there's no great

aesthetic payoff, no artistic component designed to tempt a player into cruelty in promise of a thrill. Like everything else in the game, individual actions are banal clicks followed up by pop-up messages. There's no cutscene when you execute someone. Just the disapproval of your vassals if you didn't have a good enough reason for your tyranny.

The first time I played *Crusader Kings II* I did everything wrong. I fired it up and thought, just out of strategy game muscle memory, that because I was looking

down at a map of Europe it was my job to conquer and expand as quickly as possible. 4x like clockwork. I didn't understand that I would need actual causus for my belli, or that inheritance and marriage could be more powerful weapons than



soldiers, or that that wasn't necessarily the goal of the game at all. I didn't comprehend that it was more about people and family instead of empires and nations. That there were no victory conditions. That the game means what it says when it calls itself a “simulation.” Plenty of its players almost feel it is more an RPG than a strategy game; my friend Amy liked it because she felt it was “the new *Sims*.”

When people talk about this sort of strategy game, they use words like “big,”

or the pseudo-technical designation “grand,” but all too often, these games are small disguised as big. They only show us what we know. *Civilization*, the *Total War* series, even Paradox’s own *Europa Universalis*, like to map or disguise a Westphalian-style nation state onto societies in times before such notions existed. The idea of a nation, ruled by a single government with set borders and citizenship, or even our concept of “a people,” are relatively recent global developments.

*Crusader Kings II* is set in a period where the idea of a nation was almost always absurd: there was only tribe, religion, family and family title to land. It is amazing to play something where nationalism itself is a progressive idea.

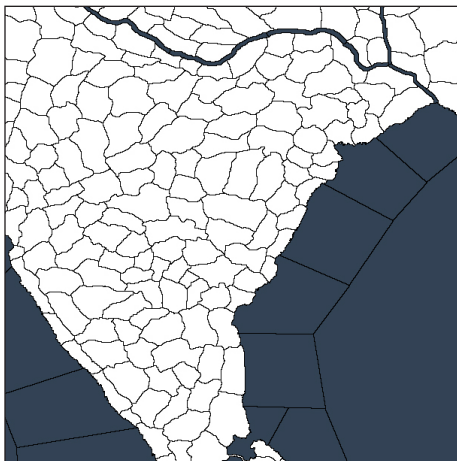
Where even the concept of a national identity divorced from servitude of a limited set of powerful dynasties, is radical. As a player, the attempt to implement it, even as an emperor, is resisted at every possible turn by your opponents, your subjects and the game system itself.

At a certain point, this breaks down. You can game *Crusader Kings II* like any other system. Bend it to your whims. Which is why the game might be best when you don’t know all the rules. When

it is kicking the shit out of you. When you are not in control.

In this respect, the fact that Paradox keeps changing the rules, keeps adding DLC, tweaking the system, is an unintentional act of game design brilliance. *Crusader Kings II* is most authentic when you don’t totally have the game wired, where the system has shifted in a way you don’t understand, because that’s how political and economic systems actually work. They keep *moving*. There’s a weird gamedev lesson in there

somewhere, about depth, about the future of immersive games. What if the player can never truly know the rules or the borders of the universe? What could happen if the environment just keeps evolving and expanding forever?

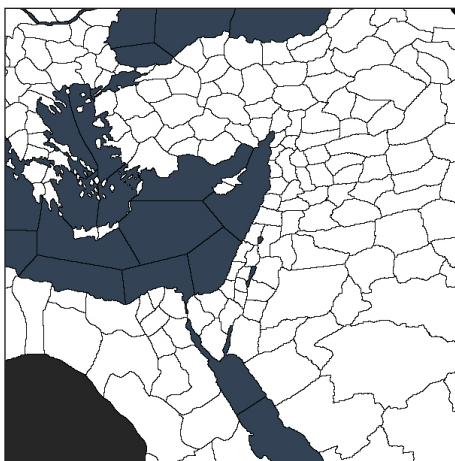


There’s even something funny about the avalanche of DLC. A life-imitates-art-imitates-life dynamic. Players upset about having to keep paying tribute to their liege as the game grows.

The forums debating rule changes and updates feel like medieval councils, questioning economics and succession rules and diplomacy. It’s all about how the world *should* work. It reminds me of the times I’ve hung out with international relations kids at George Washington or Monterrey. Frustration about change

(or the reluctance to change) directed at leaders who operate behind a curtain of opacity.

I've started looking at the real world like *CKII*. The way technology isn't controllable by the player (outside of small passive steps like investing some coin in universities) and, even better, is not uniform. Different technologies have different distributions and spread at their own rates. The tech and economic overlays in the game aren't all that different from the sorts of gaps in regional development you see in real life. If you look at health data, county by county, in the United States, it [looks](#) a lot like a *Crusader Kings II* map filter. Are the constant legal disputes between federal, state and local authorities



in our country that different from the liege-vassal tensions in the game?

The city of Charlotte, North Carolina passes a transgender bathroom ordinance, the Governor and the state legislature pass a law to preempt the law, the President denounces the law, the Department of Justice informs the state violates the Civil Rights Act and sues, other states and parts of corporate America boycott the state. Eventually, a new governor is elected, the state legislature repeals and replaces part of

the law, but the battle still rages under a new President who surely wouldn't denounce the law. Pressure and opinion, legalism, public and private relationships, money, it's all the same factors driving the same things.

We have our own political dynasties, families that keep breeding rulers. You can look at a politician and imagine their traits in the *Crusader Kings II* system. We have our Indulgent Wastrel of a president (arbitrary, paranoid, lustful, deceitful, gluttonous, envious, greedy,

proud, ambitious, cruel) who keeps firing his council members and cares more about enriching his family than enriching the state.

In science fiction author Kim Stanley Robinson's *Red Mars* trilogy, there's a pervasive

argument that feudalism never went away, but simply disguised itself within capitalism and kept on living. Maybe I play *Crusader Kings II* so much because we are still living in the world it portrays, we just don't think we are. There's a strange comfort in that. A different version of "the overview effect," the documented psychological condition astronauts get when looking down at the earth, feeling more peaceful and connected and small when confronted with the greater context of the universe. The way the

sound hisses with wind when you zoom out high above, the fact that the world keeps going even after a tyrant – there's comfort in that. At least for me.

There are strains of radicalism in its model, subtle rejections of the bad history you were taught by school and Hollywood.

*Crusader Kings II* builds its entire frame around great men, around the progeny of landholding dynasties, but it might be the only game of its type that occasionally undermines the “great man” style theory of history – where events outside of your control, like diseases, can seem to determine things more than your own actions.

The “Europe” of *Crusader Kings II* is a single system that includes the Middle East, Northern Africa, India and, recently, China. And in a sense, this is “Medieval Europe.” For most of history the term meant the area around the Mediterranean, or the borders of Rome (including North Africa and the Middle East), or the western church, but not always pre-Christendom Scandinavia or Russia or even Germania. This isn't a question of branding or terminology. In the game, events in India can affect events in Europe. A war between two families over a Silk Road trading post thousands of miles away can torpedo

your economy. Africa, Asia and Europe aren't just in conversation as separate entities, but part of the same sphere of influence. And true to its title, faith is the dominant driver of conflict, the battle between religions the central question of the social order; modern concepts of race are totally nonexistent in that world. It may not be perfect, it could not be, but the game attempts to show the sheer magnitude of Medieval cultural complexity, at no point falling back on the whitewashed movie cliché.



*Crusader Kings II* demonstrates what a shitshow human history actually is, the randomness, the collapses, how fickle and temporary whole institutions can be.

Few works of art attempt to tackle the actual mechanisms

by which our societies are contrived. The game shows how “France” is a contrivance, an invention, because as a player, you can invent it. It shows precise devices by which national and cultural and ethnic identity are not fixed, the migratory patterns of individuals and groups a total clusterfuck of happenstance, driven by disease, wars and mad kings.

The stories players have created within, from conquering the entire map, to resurrecting the Roman Empire

and exploiting a glitch to turn the ruling families of Europe into dynasties of horses, to the countless unknown narratives that never rose to the status of Reddit screenshots or YouTube tributes, the narrow escapes, the tragic deaths, the spying and subterfuge, the genius marriage proposal that allowed the winning of a war, the Ethiopian reformation of Israel, the Bengali invasion of Russia.

*Crusader Kings II* gives you stories.

The first time I united Britain, having started as a measly count in Wales, I took a phone video of my realm while playing Drake's "Started from the Bottom" and texted it to all my friends, almost none of whom had any idea what they were looking at.

In another game, intently focused on my own realm in eastern India, I zoomed out to discover that, through a bizarre series of inheritances, France became the de jure liege of Afghanistan by the middle of the 10th century. I had not been involved in that at all. It just happened, no player needed. The game birthed its own strange version of history, which maybe isn't all that strange. Certainly no stranger than the Mongols reaching the gates of Vienna in 1241 (which, in our real world, actually happened).

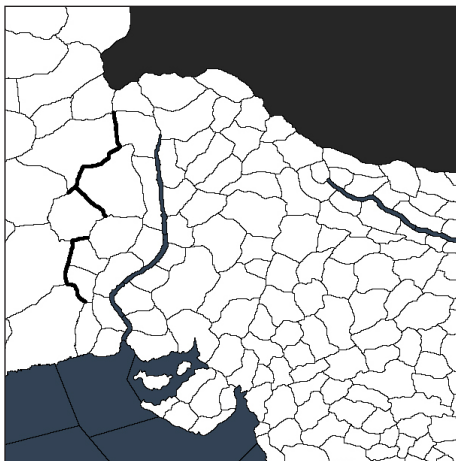
The game may have infected me beyond its play. I've become the sort of person who discusses the finer points of real world royal succession laws in everyday conversations, like the UK's 2015 shift to absolute primogeniture.

There are moments, late at night, watching time crawl, totally immersed in an invented universe, when *Crusader Kings II* becomes an absurd ritual of waiting, or a pit of existential angst. The freedom traps you in a hole where you have no idea what to do next, what to play

for, or why you are playing. Even when you play as a strategy game, working your dynasty up from a single county all the way to emperor of a sprawling empire, it feels more like building something than taking something over. The experience

is one of construction rather than conquering. Laboring, being annoyed at having to hydrate or sleep or feed yourself in the real world, yearning to keep the arrow of time moving forward.

My friend Amy's Scottish Duke did finally have a son after seven daughters. Her dynasty didn't end. She got to keep playing. And when he died, she confessed that she actually cried. No fancy animations. No voice acting. Yet he was a fully formed character in her brain. One that only she could know. 🇬🇧





# Lasagna Cat & the Internet We Lost

By David Wolinsky



Before the internet deteriorated into a lethally destructive force making democracy impossible, it was a playground for sharing stupid jokes and dumb videos – usually about cats. In this primitive era of one decade ago, YouTube was young and emerging as an exciting and amazingly reliable frontier for people to stream the same clip to countless others without having to host it themselves and get hit with a colossal ISP bill. There were no YouTube stars or people supporting themselves with ad revenue; in 2008, the platform's big news was you could upload in 480p. The point of sharing was to share.

Even so, YouTube was capable of generating breakout hit-makers and one of the first was Fatal Farm, an early web-video production duo that share an aesthetic Tim and Eric are credited with making popular: disturbing high-concept videos trucking in as much satire as needless effort on production values. When FF's Jeffrey Max and Zach Johnson unceremoniously uploaded a batch of "Lasagna Cat" videos in January 2008, the pair already had a reputation for alternately weird and understated humor, ranging from "alternate" versions of TV show intros to Infinite Solutions, a web series cheerfully offering deceptive tech tutorials.

"Lasagna Cat" is a baffling clothesline, equal parts homage and violation of Jim Davis' "Garfield." The formula: After an understated live re-enactment of a strip and a pained laugh track, there's an overdone stylized remix music video. Strange, simple and unnecessary though it may sound, these videos catapulted

Max and Johnson into directing episodes of Adult Swim's *Infomercials* and Comedy Central's *Key & Peele*, plus ads for [Snickers](#), [Oreo](#) and [Old Spice](#). They didn't do "Lasagna Cat" to further their careers; they fully expected the original videos to be taken down and hopefully seeded by strangers to old-internet's foremost comedy destination, eBaum's World.

But deep down, Johnson and Max have an undying love and appreciation for humor that only works online. That's part of why, nine years after making their biggest digital splash, the two came back in 2017 with 13 new installments of "Lasagna Cat," the opening of which was an outlandish invitation for their fans to call a toll-free number and leave a message stating their number of sexual partners. (That video is nearly five hours long, and [is worth watching until the end](#).) Unwinnable talked to Fatal Farm about resurrecting "Lasagna Cat," their devotion to effects-driven comedy, how the internet has changed nostalgia and sincerity, why YouTube kind of sucks today and much more.

**Why wait nearly ten years to release a second season of "Lasagna Cat" videos?**

**Zach Johnson:** We matured professionally with being okay that we were stealing a bunch of music and a character. Even though character abuse or misuse is still rampant or casually accepted on the internet now, it's still a faux pas and amateur to not have royalty-free music or to not respect the licensing rights.

That really felt anachronistic or just out of touch. I was just as embarrassed to

steal a Lady Gaga song as I was to spend all this effort revisiting Garfield. I don't know how Jeff feels about it.

**Jeffrey Max:** I agree, it's also just the nature of telling people, "Yeah, we made a web series just for YouTube and we spent a lot of our own money on it and we can't monetize it." The whole thing seemed sort of de-legitimizing.

**Zach Johnson:** People ask, "Who's your partnership? What's your monetization?" YouTube is so cold now. It's such a business.

Before, it was like going to a coffee house, an open-mic night. If we are going to do another YouTube video, it's not gonna be some partnership-channel thing. Maybe I'm an old fogey, but I think YouTube exists in the experimental playground. If you're trying to make money on YouTube, good for you. That's what you do now but I don't want to do

that ever. Anything I put out on YouTube I think could go away in a day. I don't expect to make a dollar off of it.

**Those were the expectations of YouTube nine years ago. What would have been the best-case scenario nine years ago on YouTube?**

**Zach Johnson:** Exactly, and I just haven't updated my standing on that platform. I have not grown mentally with the platform.

**Jeffrey Max:** I don't get the sense that people are trying as hard on the platforms anymore.

**Zach Johnson:** I think all the ambition is on Vimeo now. That's a slam on YouTube. It's been good to us. It seems like everything that works on YouTube is community. It's what they want. I think early on, YouTube was an interesting



video-artist play-place where you found influential Adult Swim and original content creators. Now it's just vloggers.

**What assumptions do people make about you because you have popular YouTube videos?**

**Jeffrey Max:** I don't know what people assume. I think amongst some of our peers, because we took nine years to put these out we've gained the reputation of being stubborn and very exacting in what they want. Unwilling to compromise. Our friends think we're crazy.

**Zach Johnson:** There's an expectation that we are a contributing member of the YouTube community, rather than essentially a YouTube hit-and-run terrorist, which is more what we are.

**You have reverence for platforms being places for specific things. Do you have a sense of what comedy posted online seems to age best?**

**Zach Johnson:** People want to tell stories on the internet and I don't know that that's right. The internet is "Row, Row, Row Your Boat." On the internet, you wanna say, "Come sing a song with me." That's what the internet is for. These people that are like, "I wanna tell you a story?" Get off the internet and figure out a way to get yourself into a TV development office. I don't want to be talked to on the internet.

**Jeffrey Max:** The things that age the best on the internet do something more

than you would expect from any other medium.

**Zach Johnson:** The internet is just dessert. It's not a full meal. It's just a flavor, it's not even a taste sampling. When someone tries to present me the whole meal, I think, "I didn't sit down for this." Garfield was like this massive cheese plate. That's what it felt like. We treated you with one flavor, we're just doing an extraordinary amount of it.

**I'd put Garfield up there with Shrek and Sonic, these long-ago characters who just keep coming back. Why do these things keep enduring as a canvas for digital folk-art? Or is that overstating it?**

**Zach Johnson:** I think it's a milestone. It's just a cultural reference point. Sonic the Hedgehog is a fairy tale. It's a nursery rhyme for our generation, it's Humpty Dumpty. Everybody knows who Sonic the Hedgehog is.

**They might have been too prolific, perhaps cheapening themselves to the point where it felt like an invitation to anyone to make their own versions.**

**Zach Johnson:** That's interesting. That's fair.

**Jeffrey Max:** I feel that with Sonic, I feel that with Mario, and I feel that with Shrek, but not of a Pixar property. You might be zeroing in on something that I didn't consciously recognize. Yeah, there are second-tier things that seem more whorish in their conception.

**Zach Johnson:** I think our generation has developed an aversion to marketing tactics and being sold something so aggressively. The things that get ridiculed the most tend to be things that try to shove certain things down everyone's throat.

**Jeffrey Max:** You see it very recently with *The Emoji Movie* – just streamlines of ridicule. You absorb it and immediately regurgitate it back in some mutated version, and it's part of it. *Minions* is a great example, you can find anything *Minions*-related and find a corrupted version of it.

**Zach Johnson:** *Garfield* is like sampling MC Hammer. It's finding the tackiest stuff and being ironic about it.

There were those old internet *G.I. Joe* videos and “*Marmaduke Explained*” and *Garfield Minus Garfield*. What determines which projects like these take off and which don't?

**Zach Johnson:** I think *Garfield Minus Garfield* is a much better thing to have brought into the world than what we brought into the world.

**Jeffrey Max:** It's a greater work by leaps and bounds.

**Zach Johnson:** It's diligence on the behalf of the creator. Had “Lasagna Cat” been an enormous project that referenced *LuAnn* or *FoxTrot*, it might have worked just as well. It just so happens we came across a *Garfield* costume. I'm disappointed it wasn't a different thing we came across because there are so many “*Garfield*” projects. Our intent wasn't to go after “*Garfield*.” We wanted a vehicle to screw around and we came across a gross *Garfield* costume. That was it.

**Jeffrey Max:** If we could go back in time, I might discourage us from buying that costume. But I think nostalgia plays into [success] a fair amount. I don't know that a web series about *LuAnn*





or *FoxTrot* would do quite as well. It'd be certainly interesting to find and question its existence, but I think there are intersections of experiences that a lot of people had, and they tend to gravitate towards them naturally.

**Do you have a sense of how the internet has changed nostalgia? Because, you know, we don't really get to miss anything anymore?**

**Zach Johnson:** I think the nostalgia cuts both ways. One thing that characterizes some of the higher profile nostalgia things is the production capabilities of the people that are revering it or making fun of it exceed the original content many times now. We are exceeding the capacities of "Garfield" to ridicule it. but in other people's case, they're exceeding it to revive it because they love it. One thing that's unique about nostalgia now is the original content creators are sometimes outgunned by the fans of the content. That is a new place to be. The fandom has surpassed the original source media in terms of capabilities.

**Do you have a sense of how the internet has changed sincerity? Michael Cera's character on *Arrested Development* has ushered in a resurgence of that archetype, playing vulnerability for laughs. I think about Infinite Solutions a lot: How rare it is to see YouTube videos where the joke subtly undercuts itself and you're not sure what you just saw?**

**Jeffrey Max:** [Infinite Solutions](#) is a weird example because they're all just lies.

The internet is a place where you can't trust anything, so sincerity on it is such a bizarre thing. Dating back to vlogs and LiveJournal, you have people taking it way too seriously while simultaneously other people are taking it not seriously at all. It creates an interesting dynamic and I think that's still where we are at and that is even more polarized.

**Production values clearly are a big part of your humor. Can you talk about your writing process? Not where you get your ideas from, but if there's a specific place you feel you're often reacting to or from?**

**Zach Johnson:** "Why would somebody make this? Why would somebody spend time making this?" There's a little bit of absurdity in what we gravitate towards.

**Jeffrey Max:** When we worked on professional things, the bigger the production, the less risks you're allowed to take.

We like pitching movie ideas back and forth to each other like, wouldn't it be cool if Michael Bay did *this* with 200 million dollars? It's just something pure that I would love to see I don't want to see a 200 million dollar movie that everyone wants to see, I want to see a 200 million dollar movie that nobody wants to see. Why? Why was this made? That's exciting.

**Zach Johnson:** We want to ruin the format.

**Other than how many sexual partners your fans have had, what did you learn doing that survey?**

**Zach Johnson:** There's a big audience of people that wants to be challenged or that want non-traditional things. People who just want experimentation. That's what I get. There are people willing to do some heavy lifting for their viewing, even on the internet.

**Jeffrey Max:** I think traditional media feels very fake. It feels like we're getting enough of it and enough of the same thing that nobody is playing with the

expectations. Nobody's toying with the idea of what it means to be a Marvel movie really.

**Zach Johnson:** Yeah why can't there be a comedy *Tree of Life*? Why do all the experimental things have to be so inaccessible to people who want to laugh?

**Jeffrey Max:** I think that is a revelation, that there is a Venn diagram overlap of a Terrence Malick movie and comedy fans. 🍷



# LOCALIZE IT!



By Jun Wilkinson

**E***arthbound* recently turned 23 and, as one of Nintendo's acclaimed RPGs, devoted fans still pore over the game. One of the most interesting recent developments is the confirmation that Tony, the best friend of the playable character Jeff, is gay. An interview from 2003 with Shigesato Itoi, the game's designer and writer, established this, but Podcast64's April 2015 interview with Marcus Lindblom, the Nintendo of America translator who worked on *Earthbound*, solidified this, even in translation. Tony is gay. In a game steeped in Americana and eldritch horror, what does it mean for a game to feature a young, gay adventurer as one of your best friends?

In Itoi's interview about Tony's sexuality, he discusses how he made the character gay because it felt logical – an attitude many game developers, especially in the 90s, wouldn't necessarily take. In the translation of his 2003 interview, he says that, "in a normal, real-life society, there are gay children, and I have many gay friends as well. So I thought it would be nice to add one in the game, too." It's obvious through the themes and subject matter of the game that Itoi was coming from a higher place of understanding than many developers at the time. The way Tony is written and translated is also more respectful of gay identity, and of gay children in particular, than most contemporary works – Tony is not treated as a gay and is not sexualized. Too often, gay characters fall into the trap of being unrealistic, especially if

they are the only gay character. Despite Tony being the only openly gay character in the game, he is still allowed to be a child and to experience his queerness along with his childhood.

*Earthbound's* religious undertones don't conflict with Tony's identity. Elements like the Happy Happyists show that Itoi prefers a more understanding Christianity through his criticism of the cultlike behavior of many religious groups, an important commentary to include in a game that is so focused on American themes. At a time when the Christian right in America was lobbying against games, for *Earthbound* to make religious zealots a main villain was bold; at the end of the game when you must call on everyone's prayers to save the world, perhaps Itoi is asking for people of all faiths to unite and support each other.

In this, the game did not stay as true to the source material and it exemplifies why narratives can differ in translation. While the commentary is still largely in place, as the cultists are still present, their designs were altered to have less directly combative tones – the original sprites for the cultists featured an HH on the hood, meant to stand for Happy Happyist. When combined with their hoods, translators felt they could be mistaken for KK and interpreted as a reference to the Ku Klux Klan. Considering America's history with racism and religious





fundamentalism, [localizers deemed](#) this a hard to sell for an American audience, so the letters were removed and a pom-pom added to the point of the hoods.

And while the retention of Tony's identity in the English translation is important, there are other important translation decisions that made the game have a stronger feminist take for the American version. In the American release, Lindblom and his localization team decided that at a time where attitudes about women in games were so steeped in stereotypes that it was important to have a female character who had agency, was vital to the story and had a fully fleshed out background. Paula, a playable character, had a much more stereotypical role in the Japanese game

in terms of her dialogue and interaction with other characters. Lindblom felt this was an important change because his daughter had been born during development and he didn't want her to feel disenfranchised by games as she grew up.

When should a developer make these sorts of decisions? Is it more important to preserve the original message of a piece of media, or to make it more palatable to more consumers? *Earthbound* is in many ways a very Japanese game, but its reliance on Americana and themes of horror send an important message about the way America interacts with the rest of the world and cannibalizes culture. The melding of innocence through child characters and whimsical scenery,



enemies and music with more monstrous elements like Giygaz – the final boss of the game who is a horrific aberration that causes glitches on screen and forces the players to pray for mercy – reflects the forced cultural exchange between the US and Japan after World War II and the effects Americanization has had on Japanese culture over time. Much like Giygaz’ evil creeping through the idyllic landscape of *Earthbound*, Western influence forces its way into Japanese consumer culture and is inescapable. These themes are largely preserved in translation, but we should always critically examine how consuming a translated game differs from consuming the original material.

In recent years, localization decisions have become something of a hot button issue for gamers. One of the supposed focuses of gamers who call themselves “consumer activists” (typically former or current Gamergaters) is the “censorship” of games, something they insist is a result of political correctness gone mad. Yet game companies have adjusted content for different audiences for as long as games have been sold in multiple markets, and the examples here from *Earthbound* are testament to that. Certainly, some decisions by companies are objectionable – for example, Nintendo choosing to continue localizing Birdetta with transmisogynistic gags or companies removing outright gay and hinted gay dialogue between female

characters in Western translations of games like *LoveLive*.

This is an important element to discuss along with Tony’s identity, as identity politics are often used as a bludgeon against supposed censorship in games. If *Earthbound* were localized today, it’s entirely possible (and I would even say likely) that rampant critics of the supposed Social Justice Warrior cabal controlling “game censorship” would say Tony being gay goes too far and is unnecessary to the game, that the changes to Paula are pushing a feminist agenda, and the adjustment of the cultists is trying to say all religions are evil. These critics, however, fail to recognize why companies self-censor in the first place – they are seeking the greatest sales for their titles. It is only recently that this process has caused issue.

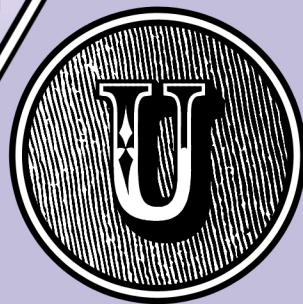
With *Earthbound*’s anniversary having just passed, it’s not likely we’ll see an official port of *Mother 3*, the final game in the *Earthbound* series that has never received an official American release, for Western audiences anytime soon. The game was absent from any of Nintendo’s E3 coverage and many fans of the franchise have been anticipating an official release for upwards of a decade. If *Mother 3* is ported, I hope that Nintendo will make decisions in its translation to preserve the message of the game without taking too many liberties with the game’s continued criticism of American culture and imperialism. 🇺🇸

# REVVING THE ENGINE

A SERIES PROFILING THE RECIPIENTS OF  
UNREAL DEV GRANTS



SculptrVR



This series of articles is made possible through the generous sponsorship of Epic's Unreal Engine 4. Every month, we profile the recipient of an Unreal Dev Grant. While Epic puts us in touch with our subjects, they have no input or approval in the final story. [Click here to learn more.](#)

The act of creation is about as basic a human impulse as there is. With the advent of digital media, creation has become untethered from the physical world in surprising ways. One example of this is *SculptrVR*, a virtual reality application. Like its cousin, Google's *Tilt Brush*, it allows you to create, using a variety of hand-held tools, within a virtual environment. But where *Tilt Brush* allows you to create three dimensional sculpture-like art on a small scale, *SculptrVR* lets you create whole worlds.

Created by Nathan Rowe, who works primarily on the voxel engine, and Brandon Hjelstrom, who handles almost everything else, *SculptrVR*'s genesis as a creative tool is a bit unusual. Hjelstrom has a game development background, while Rowe's experience is in mathematics, particularly in machine learning, 3D printing and medical CT image processing. Which, it turns out, is just the set of skills you need to build an engine within an engine.

*SculptrVR* runs on octrees. An octree is a data structure that allows each voxel (think a pixel, but in a three dimensional space) to be broken apart into eight smaller voxels. Each of those can be broken apart, and so on. The result is an interface that supports 10,000x zoom and the [ability to create or destroy at any scale](#). Because of that, you can build your world and fill it with detail down to the millimeter. And since the engine managing the octrees runs inside Unreal Engine 4, *SculptrVR* allows cross-platform creativity for a number of devices like Steam VR, Daydream and many more in the pipeline.

**First, let's get real basic. How do you approach developing something like *SculptrVR* that is almost more a tool to build games rather than a game itself?**

Honestly it's been very hard to strike that balance. In the early days, *SculptrVR* had a lot of tools meant to be fun and interactive mixed with creative tools. It made our overall message a bit confusing.

Our new model is to make *SculptrVR* (the app) a creative tool first, and we'll use the *SculptrVR Engine* to make games later. That said, We have left in some fun ways to explore creations in *SculptrVR*. For example, you can shrink yourself down to be an ant on the side of the sculpture, and climb up the sides with your hands Then after climbing

to the top, you can hang glide down off what feel like mile-high cliffs.

We can't wait to get back to making games with the *SculptrVR Engine*. We've used it a couple times for game jams and came up with one experience we're extra proud of. *Gravity Architect* used *SculptrVR's* *octrees* to create a gravity field that warps around all sculpted material. The game was then to guide these particles through a set of goals using gravitational mass. We built it for a Ludum Dare jam, but it provides hours of challenging entertainment.



***SculptrVR* is an engine built inside Unreal Engine 4. How did you go about doing that? I suspect it posed some unique challenges (and seems existentially consistent with *SculptrVR's* multiscaling capabilities - its engines, all the way down!)**

Building an engine within UE4 is actually incredibly awesome and easy. UE4 is already an engine full of engines. It's got a hundred modules and components and plugins. They've built up an incredible system for modding and extending the engine's capabilities.

Usually if you build your own engine, you have to spend 70% of your time making build systems, dealing with file IO, linking libraries and hoping for an early death. Only 30% of your time is making the fun unique stuff. We let UE4 handle as much as possible and get to spend 100% of our time building the fun unique stuff!

The end result is that we get all the power of UE4 when we want it, and our own engine to do some of the cool stuff UE4 doesn't already support.

## **What is it that appeals, to you, about creating worlds in virtual spaces?**

When we first introduced scale changing, that's what clinched it for us. Being able to build a mountainside and then shrink down to stand on that mountain's peak to feel its massive scale is something you have to experience to understand. Once we had that working, world building instantly became our focus.

VR is a new medium where everything feels new. Even just picking up an object and looking at it, or exploring a scene, can be a surprisingly compelling experience. But when you've built it yourself, or you know it was built with the same tools you have in your hands, that's next level.



**By introducing multiplayer, you've captured an experience very similar to one familiar to anyone who played in a sandbox with friends as a kid – an experience adults rarely get to have. What inspired the desire to develop a multiplayer creative game like this? Was it your intention to reintroduce folks that backyard sandbox?**

We think of multiplayer as a creativity multiplier. When I was a kid, I could play alone in a sandbox for hours building volcanoes around the hose and then letting it erupt and dissolve my world. Now that I'm an adult, I have to really try to get my creative juices flowing, but when someone else is in there with me, the ideas never stop. One person will make a tree and that will inspire me to make a river, which then



begs for a water wheel and a snow-capped mountain feeding that river.

Playing with others is so much more spontaneous and creative!

**You've got smooth sculpting and you've got blocky sculpting. Can you talk about the differences between both, in terms of development and execution?**

*SculptrVR* has been only blocky sculpting for almost a year and a half. From day one, our most common request was for smooth surfaces.

Smooth sculpting was waaay harder to code than blocky, and it's also quite a bit more computationally intensive. Over the last year and half, we've optimized the hell out of our engine. Ten times reduced memory usage, 22 times faster sculpting, a dynamic LoD system allowing over 100 times as much detail before dropping frames. Without all of those upgrades, this smooth sculpting could never run in VR.

It's taken us half a year to add smooth sculpting into *SculptrVR*, and it needed every one of those optimization we picked up along the way.

That being said, we love blocky artwork and still support it. *SculptrVR* lets you mix and match smooth sculpting with blocky and flat-shaded polygonal sculpting. We've built a layer system into the app and each layer can choose its render style.

**The hang gliders are a great way to encourage exploration of large virtual spaces. How did that come about?**

VR is rapidly evolving. At first we were all afraid to "poison the well" by making users sick with locomotion. Every VR app stuck to the tried-and-true teleporter for nausea-free locomotion. For me personally, I get very motion sick from almost any artificial locomotion.

Before *Climbey* came out Brian Lindenhof (*Climbey*'s developer), asked me to jump in multiplayer with him and help him make a trailer. *Climbey* has some of the most intense locomotion of any VR title but I lasted over an hour before getting sick! It turns out that by tying locomotion to physical actions, players get less sick.

With this in mind, we decided to figure out how to fly in VR. We didn't want boring linear flight, we wanted to be able to make

sweeping high-speed dives and dodge through canyons. Eventually we found a way for users to feel in complete control the glider by using their bodies to steer and sort of Superman-ing their arms out in front of them. But before finding something that worked, I went home feeling sick every day for about a month. It was awful.

The hang glider lets you reach insane speeds over 100mph and the only way to properly experience that is in one of *SculptrVR*'s massive worlds. It's a fantastic pairing, and I still love carving a twisted canyon just so I can fly through it at high speed.



**3D printing objects made with *SculptrVR* seems almost magical. What lead you to implement that feature?**

Before I quit my job to start working on *SculptrVR*, I worked at a 3D printing company. We built these powerful, easy-to-use printers, but they would still only appeal to a very small set of people: those who knew how to 3D model. Without the ability to model in 3D, a 3D printer can only make objects you find and download online.

I wanted to make 3D creation accessible to everyone so that 3D printers would finally be useful to the majority of people!

The reason we chose voxels as *SculptrVR*'s back-end was so that everything would naturally be watertight/manifold meshes. That makes 3D printing *SculptrVR*'s models extra simple and painless.

**Destruction is the flipside of creation, and you've provided rocket launchers for that purpose. Can you talk about why you encourage**

players to wreck their hard work and maybe elaborate on why that has such a long tradition in gaming (I'm thinking about how much I used to love unleash natural disasters on my painstakingly constructed *SimCities* back in the day).

As kids, I think we all loved to destroy things. The more intricate the creation, the more joy you would get from its destruction, but that joy is brief and can only be experienced once. Eventually, every creation crosses an invisible line where it becomes too painful to lose, so you don't allow yourself the brief joy of stomping it to pieces. *SculptrVR* and *SimCity* both give you a save button, so that you can experience the joy of raw destruction without having to give up what you created.

The first tool we built for *SculptrVR* was a sphere. The second tool was a rocket launcher. I think we originally put that in there to give people permission to play. Creation can sometimes be too serious, intimidating and overwhelming. Having the rocket there reminds people to have some fun.

In a strange way, the ability to destroy what you build in *SculptrVR* adds a lot of value to the creation. Most people never take advantage of exporting *SculptrVR* meshes, but everyone can't help but destroy their worlds at least once after hitting that save button.

**Why did you choose Unreal Engine 4? Are there any unexpected benefits or challenges to using the engine?**

We actually built the first prototype of *SculptrVR* in Unity before switching to UE4. I originally chose Unity because I had been programming in C# in my previous job, but right away we realized that multiplayer was going to be a huge pain, and C# was not going to be fast enough for the vision I had.

*SculptrVR*'s octrees are kind of a worst case situation for C#. Every time you follow a pointer, C# adds overhead for safety and garbage collection. After converting from C# to C++ we could let users carve with about ten times as much detail!

Before working in UE4, writing C++ was daunting and awful. Figuring out toolchains is the worst! You'd need to find open source projects and link them with CMake and then cross compiling was an

extra nightmare. With UE4, you can download the source from github, run setup.bat, and then hit the compile button and it *just works*. I will never write C++ code outside of UE4 again (hopefully).

That being said, Unreal Engine is massive and took quite a while to learn. It took us six months to port over a Unity prototype that was originally built in three months. The initial hurdle was worth it for Unreal's speed and built in multiplayer system. And god I love blueprints.

**Has the Dev Grant allowed you to do anything you otherwise would not have been able to?**

The first six months of *SculptrVR* were self-funded. I spent my own money working with contractors and gave up my income by quitting my job. After losing half of my life savings and not being anywhere near launch-ready, I turned to Silicon Valley for investment. What I didn't realize is that investment negotiations can take months. I was down to my last two weeks of funding before the Epic Dev Grant came in, and then seven weeks later, we finally closed a round of funding from Draper Associates. I don't know what we would have done during those five unfunded weeks without the dev grant. The dev grant may have saved *SculptrVR* from bankruptcy.

\* \* \*

*Previously SculptrVR had been a blocky sculpting application with a similar look to Minecraft. By the time this is published, SculptrVR should have released its Smooth Sculpting update.*



## Contributors

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## Illustrations

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