

UNWINNABLE MONTHLY

Volume 5, Issue 7 - July 2018



**KNIGHTS OF THE OLD REPUBLIC 2 • MUSEUM GAMES
• DETROIT: BECOME HUMAN**

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This machine kills fascists.



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I hope summer is treating you well, or you at least have a good air conditioning system to help you make it through.

Speaking of hot, let me tell you about this month's issue (see what I did there?). For our cover story, Katherine Cross delivers a brilliant essay about Kreia from *Knights of the Old Republic II*, arguing that she is a nuanced and compelling portrayal of female power. The amazing Oscar Joyo, apparently specializing in portraits of people in hoods (his last cover was *Assassin's Creed Origins*), is back for the cover art.

Our other features are just as good. Daniel Fries takes a look at videogame museum and ponders what they say about how we interact with art and the spaces that hold it. Malindy Hetfeld, meanwhile, comes out hard against the systemic racism apparent in *Detroit: Become Human* despite (or perhaps because of) best intentions.

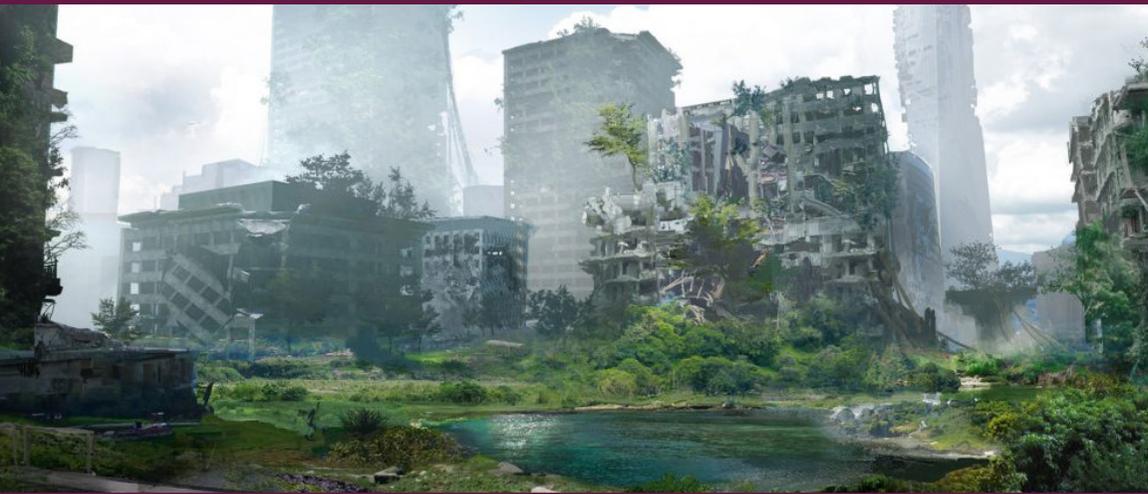
As ever, we've a big old pile of interesting columns for you. Gavin Craig worries about the world ending while he's on vacation and Megan Condis is moved by the Mr. Rogers documentary. Astrid, of course, hauls in another catch of quality (read: brutal) metal albums. Brock Wilbur checks out the ur-survival horror game *Sweet Home*, which is anything but in all the best ways. Deirdre, meanwhile, hates the beach and prefers to stay in the air conditioning with her pal Spyro the dragon.

Corey Milne takes *God of War* to task for the ways in which it colonizes Norse mythology. Matt Marrone barely has time to even write his column because of all the *Snake vs. Block* he's playing. Yussef Cole wonders why cyberpunk, for all its themes of oppression and resistance, never travels to the hood. I explain how *Dungeons & Dragons* is often both a gateway and the end-destination, and how that kind of sucks for all the tabletop RPGs that aren't D&D. Sara Clemens is still amped about *The Terror*, particular the way its sound design conveys its horror.

Rob Rich points out that Superman's Clark Kent isn't as ridiculous as you might think. Adam Boffa digs into the troubling political gestures of *Justice League*. Jason McMaster gives us one final essay about his cats and mortality. Finally, we chat with monster artist Dominic Black.

That should get you through to August. See you then!

Stu Horvath
Kearny, New Jersey
August 16, 2018



Absence Makes the Heart Something Something

As I sit to write this, a clock is ticking. A car is packed, a journey planned and there is a bed and a beach on the other side. Somehow, I am beside myself. There are ten hours of driving ahead and I'm already exhausted. I have unmet obligations, and more, it seems, that will accumulate while I am away. To be a cultural critic is to be perpetually behind, and, as I have observed repeatedly in this space, I seem to be worse than most who aspire to that label.

A week these days is a lifetime.

I am trying to remind myself that a vacation is a luxury and I'm trying to convince myself that I am headed toward a vacation and not simply an absence. I will turn off the computer and look at my phone for nothing but recreation at least as much as I can bear.

I am trying to think productively about caring and not caring.

While I am away, the world will carry on, for good and for bad, and the only real impact will be this last-minute cobbled together missive recording little but my intention to finally get to *Paratropic* when I get back. (It would be too ambitious, if you happen to be keeping score, to expect to catch up finally, finally on *Nier: Automata*. Even my self-delusion has its limits.)

My cat is climbing all over me and it is breaking my heart.

I have only minutes now to give purpose to this, a note on the temporary, a dispatch to myself on the value of being away. What does it matter when by the time anyone reads it I will have returned?

A week these days is a heartbeat.

I will, if I can, remember than an absence is not an escape. I will, if I can, breathe differently. I will, for a while, be silent differently. I will eventually return, sooner likely than I will then prefer.

The work will, thankfully, remain, and I can hope that I will do it better.

This is not an apology. This is not a farewell. This is a statement of being and transition, and even a hope that if you are reading this that you will yourself have an opportunity to get away in the coming weeks, somehow, from something, to somewhere, whatever that looks like for you. May you have the luxury of not caring, for a while, about that which merits indifference. May we all be better when we return. 🍷





A Job for Mr. Rogers

In early June, a [viral photograph](#) of a colorful poster in a Kindergarten classroom was being passed around on Twitter. The poster was designed to teach kids the lyrics to a song that would help protect them in case of an emergency. Sung to the tune of “Twinkle, Twinkle Little Star,” the lyrics read:

Lockdown. Lockdown.
Lock the door.
Shut the lights off.
Say no more.
Go behind the desk and hide.
Wait until it’s safe inside.
Lockdown. Lockdown.
It’s all done.
Now it’s time to have some fun!

The photograph captures our woefully inadequate attempts as a society to prepare our children to deal with a problem that we adults have utterly failed to handle on their behalf. But it also raises the question: how *do* we teach kids

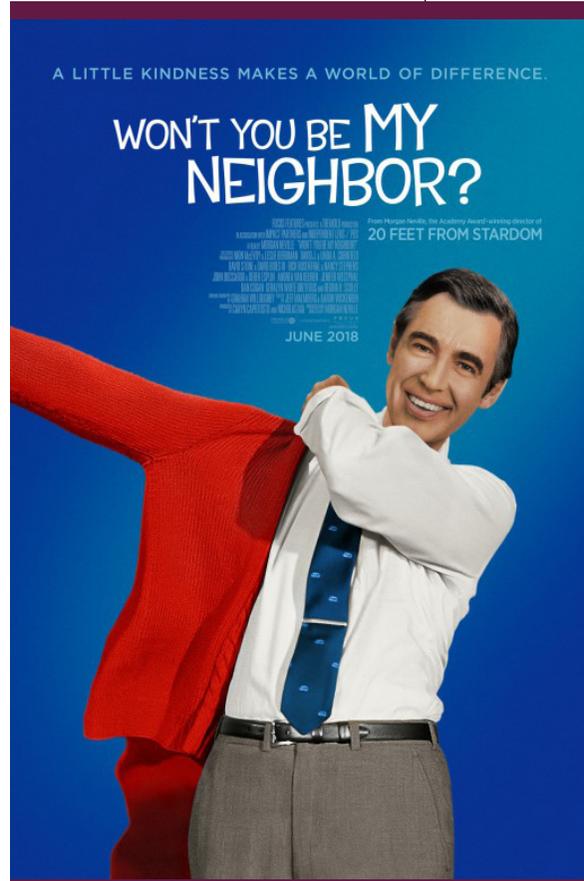
about those huge, hairy topics that sometimes throw even the grown-ups for a loop? How do we tell our kids about things like terrorism and racial discrimination and war? How do we explain the images of tearful children being torn from their parents' arms along our borders?

This looks like a job for Mr. Rogers.

Unfortunately, we can no longer rely on Fred Rogers, the host of the long-running PBS children's program *Mr. Rogers' Neighborhood*, for guidance. He died from stomach cancer in 2003 at the age of 74. Luckily, we can look to Morgan Neville's documentary, *Won't You Be My Neighbor?* (2018) to get an idea of what he might tell us if he were still around. It seems that our cultural instinct in the current moment is to wrap children up in noisy, colorful distractions, the better to hide the horrors of the wider world from them. But this strategy is more about protecting ourselves from the discomfort of speaking seriously with our kids (and taking them seriously in return) than it is about protecting them from danger.

Pete Hammond, a reviewer for the website *Deadspin*, calls the film the “[perfect antidote for the Trump era](#)” and, of course, we cannot help but compare the rapt faces of children eagerly absorbing messages of love and acceptance we see on the movie screen to those horrific photographs coming out of facilities that are, essentially, concentration camps for migrant children (our behavior has certainly been anything but neighborly). But it is important that we not surrender to the sense of calm and safety that the film instills in its audience. *Won't You Be My Neighbor?* must not be viewed as a mere vacation from politics. It is a call to action.

After all, as the film demonstrates, Rogers himself regularly engaged with political topics on his show, soaking his feet in the same kiddie pool as his African American policeman friend in an era where swimming pool owners



would rather throw caustic chemicals into their pools than allow black children to swim in the same water as white children and dedicating an episode to explaining what “assassination” means in the wake of the murder of Bobby Kennedy. Especially poignant in our current moment is the special focus given to the very first week of his program, which featured a storyline about King Friday XIII calling for the creation of a [troop of border guards](#) and the erection of a [wall topped with barbed wire](#) to prevent the Neighborhood of Make-Believe from [undergoing change](#).

When I left the theater at the end of the screening, I found myself wiping tears from my eyes, strangely buoyed by the reminder that someone out there liked me just the way I was. My fellow patrons were also affected and we found ourselves laughing at our shared secret vulnerability. But as I walked out of the matinee show and into the sunlight, I knew that I had been charged with a sacred duty: to care for the people in my neighborhood and to let them know with word and deed that they are loved. Imagine if those kids being kept in cages down in Texas were [instead being told](#):

I have always wanted to have a neighbor just like you!
I've always wanted to live in a neighborhood with you.
So let's make the most of this beautiful day,
Since we're together we might as well say,
Would you be mine?
Could you be mine?
Won't you be my neighbor? 🍷

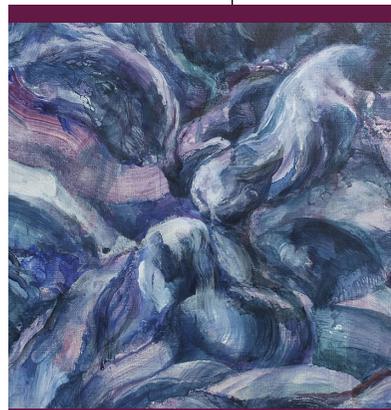


It's July, which means two things: one, it's real humid, and two, the new Deafheaven record is out. I don't have a lot to say about it – it's not going in the roundup – but I still don't know what this band does that gets people quite so hot. You read writing on Deafheaven and the sheer amount of superlatives will give you blood toxicity: “[i]n search of something quietly universal, Deafheaven can't help but notice the tiny miracle in each breath,” “ecstatic celestial bombardment,” et cetera. The music itself can't support the weight. It's Deathwish screamo (Oathbreaker, Loma) with post-rock interludes. It's fine! But it's not like . . . the black metal Raymond Carver that the hype has been selling for years now. “Dream House” is a good track.

Let's move on, but before we get into it I just wanna say that I really undersold the Varathron record from a couple months back – it's a monster, give it another spin.

Pale - EP

Pale are a Tokyo “post-black” act, and [EP](#) is their first release after a two-song demo. It is absolutely crushing. Blast beats, tremolo picking, tortured screeches, high-wire melodic leads, head-nodding breakdowns – superficially, there's not a lot of distance between Pale and, say, Deafheaven. Pale are harder, more unforgiving, even when they're essentially rewriting Deafheaven (“Gossamer”). There's no Chelsea Wolfe guest spot on this thing, no slide guitar or Explosions



in the Sky meandering. It's lean, vicious black metal with the emotional heft of good screamo. Beautiful and pummeling; highly recommended.

Supreme Carnage - *Morbid Ways to Die*

Alright. Let's talk about some fucking *metal*. Supreme Carnage play midtempo death metal, like an HM-2-ier Bolt Thrower or early Entombed. *Morbid Ways to Die* is packed with brutal riffs played with conviction. The production is clear but doesn't sap the music of energy. This is just really solid traditional DM, the kind of stuff that sounds like a circle pit.

Ghastly - *Death Velour*

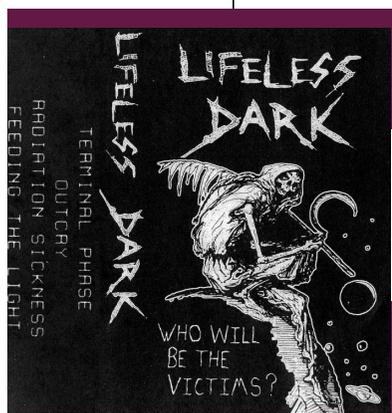
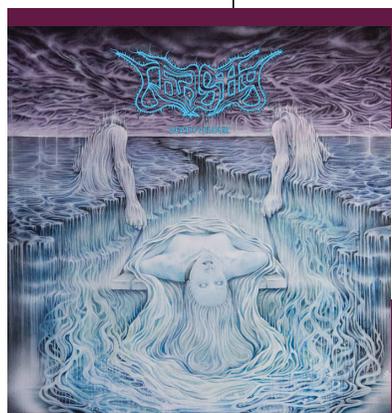
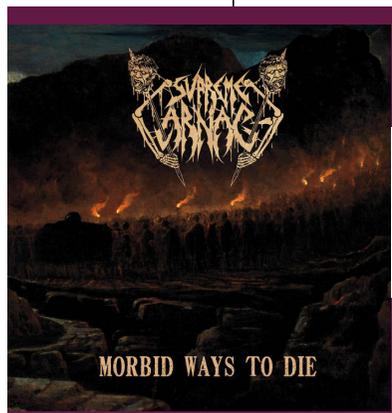
Do you wish Tribulation would stop the bullshit and get back to being a good metal band instead of a shitty classic rock one? Then *Death Velour* might be your speed. Like the standout death metal-with-a-little-extra acts from the past half-decade (Morbus Chron, Emptiness, Horrendous, Obliteration), Ghastly cut clamorous DM with eerie guitar leads and a general spectral weirdness; there's a lot of air in the mix here, a lot of reverb carrying sound into the ether. Quietly adventurous stuff, even gorgeous if you have it loud enough. Again, if you like any of the bands I mentioned, or are looking for something that's heavy but *textured*, give this one a try.

Lifeless Dark - *Who Will Be The Victims?*

Bitch!!!! Lifeless Dark *fucking shred*, dude. There's no other way to put it. The moment you start talking about this thing a ratty battle jacket and Axegrinder shirt appear on your body. Pounding, lo-fi metal with vitriolic vocals and some welcome detours into dual-guitar Slayer riffing. This is already one of my favorite releases this year, intensely likable stuff.

A Needle Under the Nail - *The Third Impact*

Minor second chords, syncopated chugging; *it's*



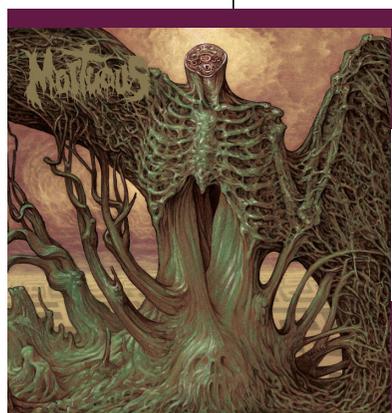
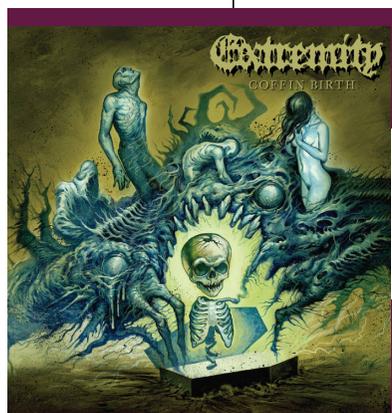
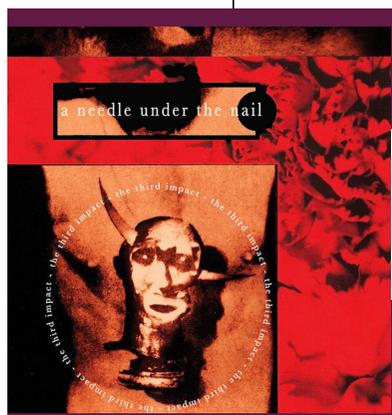
metalcore, baby! A Needle Under the Nail are reminiscent of metallic hardcore bands gone by, but they play like they've never heard Botch or Integrity, like they're discovering this stuff for themselves. The vocals are dead serious and angry, and the guitar lines are cleverly harmonized for maximum disquiet. Vein? Never heard of them.

Extremity - *Coffin Birth*

Hands-down one of the grisliest death metal records in a long time. Where Supreme Carnage are tight and crisp, Extremity are bleeding all over the place, snot running down their noses, stinking like dogshit. Their debut EP *Extremely Fucking Dead* (yep) was great, but *Coffin Birth* is on another level. Guttural bass tone, squelching guitars, boxy thudding drums and hoarse shouting. The pedigree of this band is untouchable; drummer Aesop Dekker has had a hand in everything from Ludicra to Agalloch, vocalist/guitarist Marissa Martinez-Hoadley is the lyricist and vocalist in poetic-grotesque grindcore act Cretin and guitarist/bassist Shelby Lermo is in the equally filthy Vastum. Highest recommendation.

Mortuous - *Through Wilderness*

I guess it's a death metal kind of month. *Through Wilderness* is a painfully dense slab of death-doom that has the Chris Reifert guest vocals to prove it. I listen to most of my music in the car and this thing is like a sensory deprivation tank at the right volume, just a head-filling mass of sound. Not flashy, not sexy, just pure fucking grinding death. 🍷





My favorite part of this column is the ability to dedicate my time to the kinds of games that I'd only read about before. The best example of this, so far, is getting to sit down and finally entangle myself in *Sweet Home* for the Nintendo Entertainment System. Previously, I've talked about how *Home Alone* on the NES terrified me as a child because adult men murder you and there's no way to not die a terrible child death, and how *Spelunker* was a game about the frailty of the human condition but also ghosts. Those are two of the three NES proto-survival horror titles I've known about, but *Sweet Home* was always the gold standard. I'd read enough to know that *Resident Evil* wouldn't exist without *Sweet Home*, but I'd also fired it up in emulators a few times over the years and immediately died, so I wasn't ready to commit myself to figuring out what this was all about.

Until today.

Sweet Home was a game made by Capcom in 1989. There's also a 1989 film called *Sweet Home* directed by Kiyoshi Kurosawa. You may think the two are linked. Indeed, they are. They released on the same day and this is good because the game is tied to the film's plot so closely that it would have been an incredible spoiler. The fact that the game was held in higher regard than the film is a feat that has almost never been replicated – it speaks to the power of games as a medium in Japan being recognized as art decades before America even broached the subject.

In the film, a five-person film crew enters a haunted mansion to film a documentary about finding five haunted frescos. Along the way, members of the team are possessed, ghosts try to murder them and it becomes wholly psychedelic.

Having not seen the *Sweet Home* movie before today, I realize that I'd always mistaken this for the horror film *Hausu* (1977). Well. Here I am. A gigantic idiot. *Sweet Home* is a fine movie. I already know that the game is better, just from a few minutes.

The game begins with the same five documentarians arriving at a haunted mansion. Kazuo carries a lighter that can burn through barriers. Taguchi is a cameraman who can decode hidden messages and deal damage to a very limited number of enemies. Akiko has a first-aid kit for healing team members. Emi has a key which can open doors. Finally, and I know how weird this is, Asuka is a maid who carries a used vacuum cleaner that can be used to clean things. I . . . I don't know. It solves some puzzles? There's occasionally broken glass that can hurt you but then the maid vacuums it up, the way real vacuums don't, and you can walk over it. Anyhowdy, just after entering the obviously haunted house, the floor collapses to cut off the entrance, and the mission of assembling the frescos becomes the only means of escape.

Lemme jump forward here. Tokuro Fujiwara directed *Sweet Home*, the videogame, and went on to produce the first *Resident Evil* game. It is impossible to not see the connective threads between the two and, in turn, how the survival horror genre would simply not exist without *Sweet Home*. I don't mean this via

the sort of tenuous thread I draw when covering something like *Home Alone*, I mean obviously and directly. Feel free to play *Resident Evil* bingo while I cover the next run of details.

The members of the team split up to solve the elaborate puzzles presented to them throughout the house. While you can only fight one enemy at a time, it's often very dangerous to take this on without bringing multiple members, or the entire crew. As this an RPG, everyone engaged in combat gains experience points and levels up, so it behooves you to include as many folks as possible. You wind up navigating a gigantic mansion and having to retrace your steps through various areas, as the puzzles that allow you to progress are often bizarre. Also, each time you open a door, there's a long animation of a door opening. You have limited inventory slots which makes the management of items you find its own sub-game, and monsters are just as likely to attack you



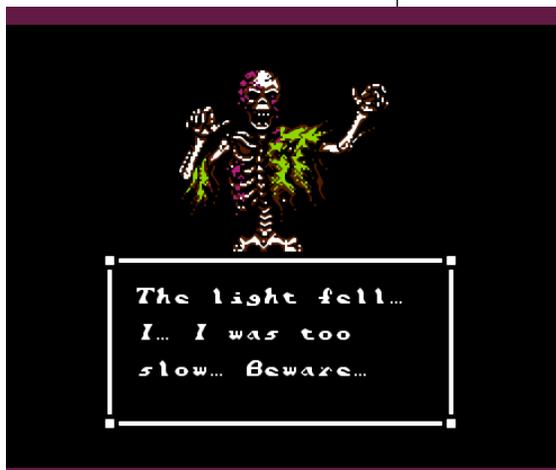
as environmental puzzles or straight-up unfair traps – like an entire room bursting into flames. Sometimes, this feels more like the horror trap film *Cube* than *The Haunting*, but it always finds its way back to its roots.

You and your team can barely survive the many encounters you are beset by, which include foes both hidden and visible on the world map. Evil dolls, wisps, piles of worms, madmen and even very zombie-ish dogs can come from nowhere, while large boulders can tumble towards your party on the meta-map at any point. Blue Spirits, and a few other monsters, can also randomly teleport your party member to other locations in the house, which is a near certain death sentence for a game where unity is the key to survival.

The house is the biggest antagonist in the game and the design team pays it proper tribute. No sections repeat and just setting eyes on a new area feels like a reward. There's a pleasant sort of checkpoint feeling, even though nothing like that exists in the game. It is just the feeling of progress.

The truth is much worse, because it is two-fold: *Sweet Home* is almost impossible to beat but is also breathtaking in its ability to define branching, open-ended narrative paths. For example: if you don't know how to put the fire out in the aforementioned exploding firetrap room, most of your team will die. If you weren't prepared enough to have two different teams, each with fire extinguishers, prepared for the same trap – again, you're losing people. Permadeath exists from start to finish in this game, with no options for restoring health to a fallen comrade.

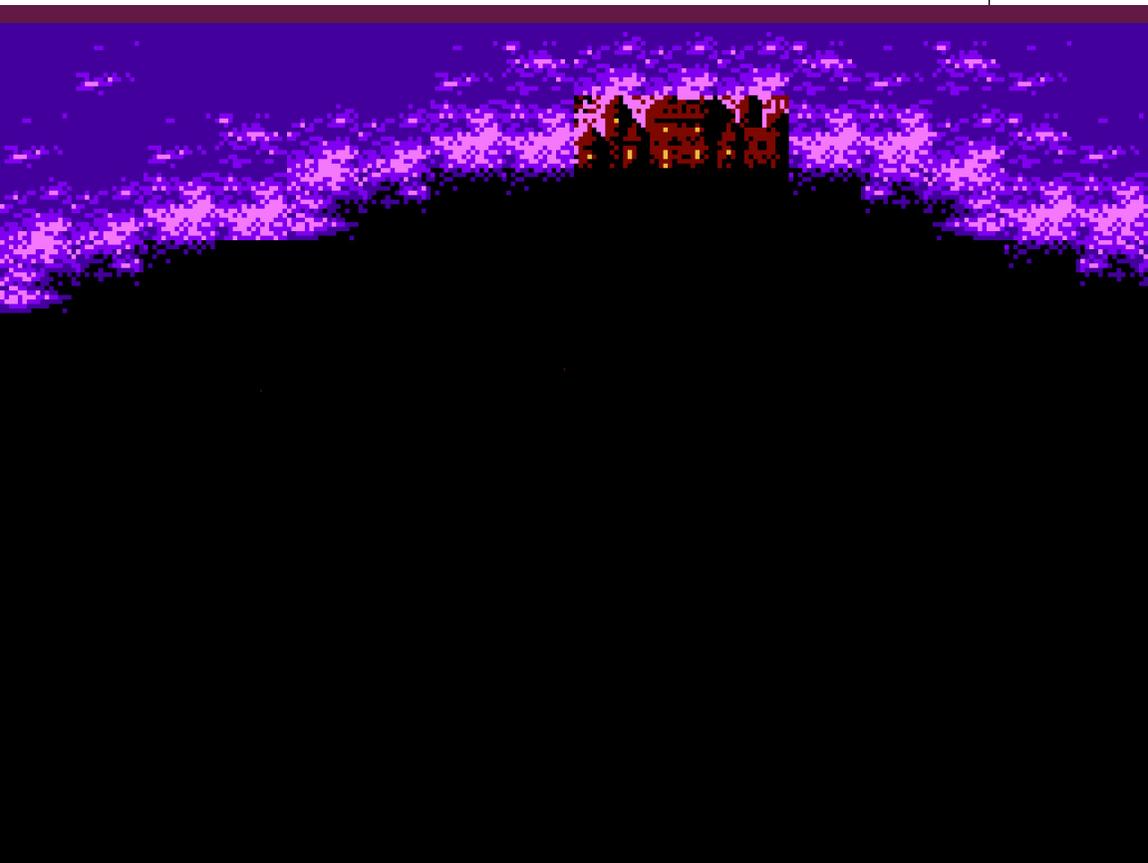
Despite requiring each team member's skill to navigate this world, the game is designed in such a way that, even missing up to four of your five teammates, items exist in just the right location to allow you to venture forward. Which is somehow worse than death. If two of my five characters die, I assume I need to restart because this densely packed puzzle hell feels nearly unsolvable with my entire set of tools; assuming I can keep moving forward while handicapped is unexpected. But that's what happens. You can limp to the finish line of *Sweet Home* with just a single character, but holy god will it take more effort. At now point will the game tell you that this is possible. It just never stops you. Which is a brutal choice to inflict on an unwitting player.



There's a frightening soundtrack and further game mechanics best explored on your own, but also a fully realized world that takes liberties with the expected forms of videogames. Much the way *Super Mario 2* was the result of *Lost Worlds* being perceived as too difficult and punishing for Western audiences, Nintendo made a similarly (good) call by never releasing *Sweet Home* in America. It's easily findable/playable by emulator at this point, with an excellent fan-made translation, but there's no way it would have been accepted here. The puzzles were hard, the violence was brutal, the atmosphere was terrifying, and oh okay . . . if I'd rented it as a kid, I'd have been singing its praises for the last twenty years as the height of the form.

It truly deserves accolades, because the game mechanics are just as tight today as they were in 1989. Aside of Nintendo's flagship games, it is difficult to point to Famicom entries of similar longevity. There'd be no *Resident Evil* without it and I have a firm understanding of how many decades of horror games couldn't exist without that. This feels like expanding my education, but also expanding my belief in what is possible on such a limited scale.

Sweet Home does the impossible with so little, and the creators now haunt the home of three decades of spiritual successors. 🏠





I don't hate the beach because I'm goth, I hate the beach because it sucks. Have you ever experienced sand fleas? They're bad. Sunburn? Bad. Three sting-rays brushing against you in open water so you run shrieking onto land only to have a bunch of adults not believe you? Weak.

I like the *ocean* – mermaids live there and the xenophyophore-sprinkled Marianas Trench is goth as hell. But chatting with mermaids (or xenophyophores) would still involve going outside and that's always been a tough sell for me.

It's July now, which means my cooler (if less goth) friends are filling my Instagram feed with their beautiful faces in beachy landscapes, their windswept hair fanning over beer cans, waves rollicking in the background, casual laughter implied. One such beautiful, beach-loving friend is Spyro the Dragon, a purple winged reptile I haven't heard from in a few years, but who's slated to return in September 2018.

I met Spyro in the seventh grade, when I helped him rescue the Dragon Realms from Gnasty Gnorc, a shitty orc-gnome, in Spyro's titular first game. After defeating Gnasty, Spyro and dragonfly pal Sparx decide to vacation in a water park/beach realm, Dragon Shores, in *Spyro 2: Ripto's Rage*. En route to the waterfront, Spyro and Sparx are pulled through an alternate portal into the land of Avalar, where they're greeted by a cluster of cute magical creatures looking for dragonian help in defeating an evil, reddish, bushy-eyebrowed overlord (sound familiar?). Vacation thwarted, Spyro can't get to Dragon Shores until he helps these lovable nerds – and if he could, there wouldn't be a game.



* * *

I played *Spyro 2: Ripto's Rage* at the beach – not Dragon Shores, but the shores of Lido Key, Florida. The ocean crashed outside the beachside condo where I vacationed with my mother and my friend, Lucy. I'd packed my PlayStation, which I connected to the TV in the room farthest from the water.

Lucy and I spent the week playing *Spyro*. We were both very invested in the story, but luckily for me (an only child who dislikes sharing), Lucy didn't actually like "driving" the controller; she preferred to co-direct Spyro's and my movements from a safe distance. So I played while she watched and co-directed, and my mom tried to get us to go outside. No thanks!

But as much as I avoided the perils of sunscreen, physical reality and children other than Lucy, I relished the in-game landscapes. Avalor boasted underwater kingdoms, enchanted forests, grassy plateaus and mountainous tundra. Its fauna involved life-extending butterflies, money-hoarding bears and Snail Elephants; the nonsensical flora included a seed that became a flytrap that bestowed a rubber duck, which Spyro exchanges for a turnip in order to complete a quest.

It never struck me as counterintuitive that I enjoyed diving around the waters of Aquaria Towers while sitting several hundred feet away from the Gulf of Mexico in physical reality. While killing the enemies of seahorses as Spyro, my earthly body remained comfortable, eating Little Debbie Fudge Rounds in an air-conditioned condo. As Spyro, I was a much better swimmer. As Spyro, I

could resurrect if a sea beast (or stingray) killed me. As Spyro, I could fly. I've [already established](#) that flying with dragons is a lifelong goal.

* * *

After nightfall, when the sun was down and the more obnoxious swimmers (other children) had left, I did walk out to the Floridian beach, whispering to mermaids while looking for sand dollars. Twilight always felt like a safe time to be outside, a liminal space when “reality” gained elasticity. Those dusk memories hold, but even now, I don’t regret having spent the bulk of that week charging around Avalar instead of Lido Key.

After defeating the final boss, Spyro and Sparx get to take their vacation. In the epilogue, they appear to have fun playing Dragon Shores’ mini-games: riding roller coasters, breathing fire at unsuspecting ducks and boating through a love tunnel.

I’d still rather be inside. If I’m not playing videogames, I’m reading; even if the books I’m reading *are* about the Marianas Trench, I’d prefer to learn about its mysteries from my temperature controlled apartment.

All that said, if Spyro invited me to Dragon Shores – or if a mermaid invited me back to Lido Key to hang out – I would totally go. 🐣





The Blind God

Balder the beautiful

Is dead, is dead!

- Henry Wadsworth Longfellow

Viking culture and its mythology are strikingly hard concepts to pin down. This is true to certain extents of any ancient civilization, but the lack of written records of Scandinavian origin means scholars must rely heavily on archeological evidence to piece these people's lives together. Many popular ideas about these seafaring raiders are 19th century inventions, while most historical records are of Irish or Anglo-Saxon origin. This makes the Vikings particularly malleable on the cultural stage, where they can be stretched and molded into a form most suited for the required role.

God of War is the latest game to adorn itself in Norse trappings. The series has bid farewell to the Olympian heights and Aegean shores from whence it made a name for itself. Kratos, the ever-furious protagonist of these adventures, now continues his role as a bad father in a new land. If the goal is to grant greater nuance to a character who has up until this point acted as a one man murder factory, then what better place than an ever-shifting popular mythology?

The events of the game barrel towards a conclusion that involves the death of Balder (Baldr), the first sign of the Norse destruction myth Ragnarok. Both Kratos and his son Atreus take on the roles of Hodur (Höðr) and Loki respectively. Atreus is revealed to really be the god Loki and is still responsible

for revealing Balder's weakness to mistletoe. Kratos lands the killing blow in lieu of Hodur, the blind god who in the mythology is tricked by Loki.

Kratos is almost too perfect in this guise. While in myth the god was actually blind, here he's metaphorically so. Early on, the game sends players to the Elven realm of Niflheim. There they find light and dark elves at war with each other. In response to Atreus asking if they should intervene, Kratos responds it's none of their concern. He then proceeds to kill any elf that gets in his way. Empires were and continue to be built on the rationale that local affairs are inconsequential. If a motorway needs to go through historic land, so be it. Your game's use of Icelandic being described as offensively lazy by actual Icelanders doesn't matter, as long as it's suitably immersive.

Kratos plays the role of a colonizer throughout. He never has qualms about asserting his dominance over any of the people he encounters, primarily through indiscriminate violence. His desire overrides everything else. This is all he can be. He's the result of treating other traditionally white cultures as a unified ethnic group, so that American developers don't have to feel bad about using them as narrative tools to sell their games. Look at the original *God of War*. David Jaffe wasn't crafting a nuanced take on Greek myth. It's always been set dressing in service of the violent wish fulfillment that drives profit.

God of War is just the latest example of how outside narratives are at the mercy of the established Western studios. Revealing that Atreus is actually Loki makes the god inextricably linked to Kratos in these games. It's a stamp of ownership by a studio, who has given themselves the license to do whatever they like with this mythology. Balder the bright has become Balder the thug.

The colonization of myth isn't a new phenomenon. At the turn of the 19th century, Loki was seen as an outright villain or evil god by some Western writers. This viewing glosses over the more flexible role he seemed to play among the pantheon, but it was a useful tool. As in American poet Henry Longfellow's eulogy to the Swedish poet Esaias Tegner (*Tegner's Drapa*) in 1849, a villain is needed to end the Viking age of gods, so that the mythology could be led into Christianity.

This might seem like a lot to lay at the feet of Santa Monica Studio, who made an enjoyable enough big budget action game even with its problems. At the other end of the scale, we still have to contend with white nationalists fetishizing and co-opting Viking iconography to further their racist beliefs. If we let the seemingly smaller aspects go unchallenged in our entertainment, we're laying a foundation of acceptability that'll give the worst kinds of people a platform to stand on. 

4

1

37

2

20

10

Snake vs. Writer's Block

If you're reading this, thank you. Also: It's a small miracle.

As I write this now, here in the past, it's hard to imagine a future in which this column has been finished, edited and placed on a page.

My ability to complete tasks has been compromised. I have lost the desire to do almost anything at all – except play *Snake vs. Block*.

Some people have real addictions. Some succumb to them. I'm terrified of developing a real addiction, because I can't shake *Snake*. I can't block *Block*. It took me 17 minutes to write that paragraph because I just stopped to play eight more rounds.

I'm a hamburger. A long, winding hamburger that gets longer as I pick up buns and add layers. I'm a hamburger that gets shorter as I crash into numbered squares or get attacked by smiley faces, or fists, or ice cream cones, or pelotons, or actual snakes if I'm playing Versus mode. I'm a hamburger by choice. I could've been any number of other unlockable avatars, but hamburgers are the best and I rule at this game and I'm addicted so just take my word for it.

Back in a minute.

It's been a half hour. Two of my coworkers and I play during lunch and over the weekends. We reconvene on Mondays to compare scores and our progress on the challenges. There are 50 of them. My Solo-mode high score is at least triple Kevin's and Corey's, but Kevin prefers the challenges and Corey prefers Versus. It doesn't matter. I've beaten more challenges than both and, last I checked, I had the highest Versus score, too. I imagine them pulling out their

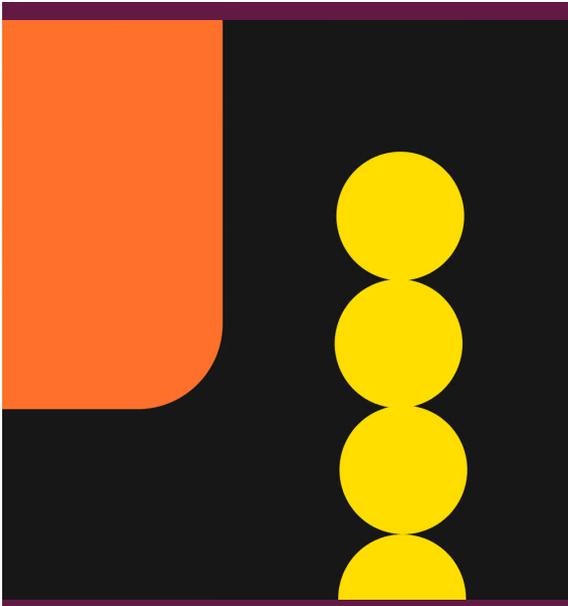
phones only periodically, sneaking in a quick game, smiling and then heading off somewhere, anywhere, to do something, anything else. Like healthy people.

That might actually be true for Corey, but Kevin just told me he started a furious *Snake vs. Block* marathon after his wife went to bed the other night. He's trying to break three blocks of 45 or more and he's convinced he'll never do it. I did it. It's challenge No. 41 and I knocked that off several challenges ago. Right now, I simply cannot score 500 #^*+%#*&\$@ points with Crazy Blocks.

We chuckle, but the pain is real.

Wait a minute, I need to pick something up from the grocery store. Apparently, I still need to eat.

OK. Done. Boneless, skinless chicken thighs purchased at Key Food. Two quick *Snake vs. Block* games played in line. Thank goodness my wife's cooking the chicken. Otherwise, my child might starve. 🍲





Hood Cyberpunk

The science fiction sub-genre of cyberpunk largely established itself during the neon-tinted, globally insecure years of the 1980s. Authors like William Gibson, Bruce Sterling and Neal Stephenson contributed to the genre's post-modern departure from the antiseptic space operas that came before, turning their efforts instead toward the depiction of a globalized and technologically advanced, yet deeply unequal and dystopian Earth.

A lot of formative cyberpunk stories, from Gibson's *Neuromancer* to Stephenson's *Snow Crash*, take place in megacities, in the rain-soaked gutters between glistening high rises. They also tend to feature solitary, nihilistic main characters who, in clear reflection of their authors, are mostly white men.

Gibson writes out of Vancouver, Stephenson lives in Seattle and Sterling spends most of his time in Europe. While the worlds they create draw from the politics of the 1980s – Reagan's dismantling of the social welfare state, for example, combined with his pro-corporate agenda, in addition to the influx of goods and competition from an economically resurgent East Asia – the perspective through which these politics are framed is that of an elite creative class who “live off the despised bureaucracy,” according to literary academic, Darko Suvin.

Gibson famously describes the future as “not evenly distributed,” while at the same time spending the majority of his time writing about the least even aspects of it. What might the genre look like, were it to shift its attention to people who are *today* experiencing the kinds of authoritarian intrusion, the hyper-policing, the corporate dominance that make up the settings of future



dystopias dreamed up by well-off white people? What, basically, would a Hood Cyberpunk look like? And, just as importantly, how might this approach allow for outcomes that are normally forestalled in cyberpunk fiction, where assumptions are largely made that the keyboard cowboy will always have a new network gig waiting; that the corporations, who both antagonize him and hire him in turn, will continue forever.

When I think of Hood Cyberpunk, I think of visiting my grandmother's apartment in Co-op City. Constructed on slowly settling marshland, a dozen miles away from New York's bustling core, Co-op City is a major experimental building project in the Bronx, one of the few of its kind, and remains the largest cooperative housing development in the world. Massive, brutalist, concrete high-rises dot the landscape, looming over rectilinear, identically designed and largely vacant, strip malls and parking lots. Thanksgivings at my grandmother's found us all cramped inside her tiny apartment dozens of stories above the ground. Wind howling in off the Long Island sound would buffet windows crammed with satellite dishes and drying laundry. One of the three televisions my grandmother always had on would toggle between grainy closed circuit feeds of the building lobby and the laundry room. I grew up in an apartment building too, but Co-op City, like many government-funded housing projects built to house the poor, feels like a signpost leading to a one-time valorized, but now aborted future.

Not just Co-op City, but most of America's government funded housing falls in line with cyberpunk visions of the future, designed, as they are, around heavy surveillance and curtailed individual freedom. In her book, "The New



Jim Crow,” Michelle Alexander describes the “One Strike and You’re Out” policy which stipulates that “under federal law, public housing tenants can be evicted regardless of whether they had knowledge of or participated in alleged criminal activity” carried out by their house guests. What this amounts to is collective punishment: a mother losing her home because her son is busted for pot; an elderly resident evicted because their caregiver might come back positive from a drug test. Policing has always been unevenly applied, particular when it comes to drug offences and some of the harshest policies are carried out in the projects, often without much public attention or outcry. What serves as fodder for the grimy cyberpunk backdrops applied by writers like Gibson are the mundane and daily indignities faced by poor families of color, stuck in the prison-like public housing system.

These same sites, which certainly see the harshest forms of policing and least amount of public resources, often tend to be the sites where the most dramatic forms of resistance take place. In “The Corner,” Gary Simon describes the common practice among Baltimore’s poorest residents of relying on “electricity pirated by extension cord from a back-alley utility pole.” Elsewhere, heroin addicts strip houses of copper plumbing, whether they’re lived-in or not, and sell whatever they can haul to local construction crews.

This version of off-the-grid living isn’t as sexy or cool as the criminal contract work of keyboard cowboys, genetically engineered diplomats or mind-enhanced data couriers. Mostly, it’s vilified and mocked. But it’s a real example of resistance to a social structure that ignores you at best and locks you away at worse. In West Baltimore, “a working, viable caper is to be celebrated.” It’s a small and petty way to fight back, but it’s reflective of a real desire to break out from under a repressive system. Meanwhile, cyberpunk stories sample



freely from imagery of criminality devoid of context or motivation. Gangs and triads run the streets because gangs and triads are iconography that handily represent individualist priorities and libertarian beliefs – an inherent distrust of government met not with rebellion or other kinds of political resistance, but with self-aggrandizement and shortsighted nihilism.

That distinction is important, because it reflects the priorities and lived situations of those telling the stories. Most cyberpunk authors build their visions of the future by imaginatively slumming in the present. Their protagonists choose the margins, not because they are forced into that position but because it allows them to live out their fantasies of unrestrained frontierism. As such, these original cyberpunk stories don't generally want, or need, to change society. It seems, rather, that they're perfectly content partying in the rubble.

Someone who has actually suffered deprivation, who has experienced oppression under existing social systems, might want to see a model of cyberpunk that *does* incorporate political struggle and organized mass movements. They might not want the same unfair government systems that currently dominate their every waking moment to be depicted as untouchable status quo monoliths in the books they read, the movies they watch or the games they play. A fictional future built from Hood Cyberpunk tenets might hopefully provide energy with which to confront and even challenge the oppressive reality that we're currently used to, that we expect to go on forever, unchanged. 🍷



Dungeons & Dragons is a Double-Edged Sword

1.

Dungeons & Dragons was the first tabletop roleplaying game. Gary Gygax and Dave Arneson created D&D in the early 70s and published it through their own small company, Tactical Studies Rules, in 1974.

2.

Though expected by its creators to be a niche product, D&D became a sensation and rapidly overtook the tabletop wargaming scene that gave birth to it. Games imitating and inspired by Dungeons & Dragons soon flooded the market. Many companies made a healthy profit creating generic supplements for use in D&D games.

3.

No tabletop RPG has captured the popular imagination quite like Dungeons & Dragons. Thanks to a toy line, a Saturday morning cartoon and several scandals (of dubious merit), D&D was part of the greater cultural consciousness in the early 80s in a way no other RPG could manage. This, coupled with its position as the innovator of the field, gave TSR the cash flow and name recognition to publish on a scale that dominated the market.

4.

Despite the market's constant boom and bust cycle, despite the eventual shuttering of TSR and its purchase by Wizards of the coast, despite a rules set that has changed radically over its different editions, Dungeons & Dragons is *the* tabletop roleplaying game. To my mind, only two serious challengers to the throne have ever emerged – *Vampire: The Masquerade*, in the mid-90s, and the contemporary *Pathfinder* system, which is itself a Dungeons & Dragons offshoot.

5.

In this way, D&D is as classic as blue jeans, accepted by most as a casual standard, often uncritically. For years, regardless of what game we might have been playing, my friends and I referred to it as D&D as a kind of short hand. Regardless of the game, we played them all like D&D, too.

6.

Dungeons & Dragons is a particular sort of tabletop RPG. It is about the accumulation of power over time, played out in a mix of exploration and tactical combat scenarios. The rules themselves serve as mathematical simula-

tions of reality with a heavy reliance on randomness, facilitated by dice and elaborate tables. This has held true regardless of the (sometimes radical) re-vamping of the rules across the five main editions.

7.

Today, Dungeons & Dragons remains the premier tabletop roleplaying game, with its books regularly appearing on best-seller lists. If you want to try out a roleplaying game for the first time, it's a good bet that someone is running an open game for beginners in your area. If not, the explosion of digital tools ensures you could join a group to play online. Thanks to *Stranger Things* and other TV appearances, it's a good bet that Dungeons & Dragons is enjoying penetration into the mainstream that outstrips its success in the 80s.



8.

But.

9.

Tabletop roleplaying was created by white dudes and almost exclusively made by white dudes. Over the decades, this created a sort of self-reinforcing structure that encouraged mostly white dudes to play. For evidence, you can turn to the art. Most obvious is the chainmail bikini phenomenon: scantily clad women increasingly appeared in D&D illustrations through the 80s and 90s. Portrayal of non-white characters was usually confined to exoticized campaign settings like *Oriental Adventures* and *Al-Qadim*. I can think of only one illustration featuring a black character (*Tome of Magic*, 1991).

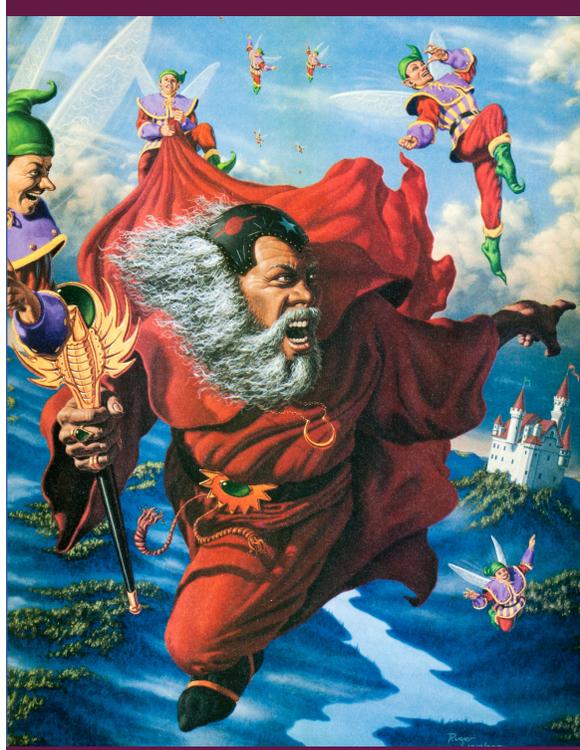
10.

While efforts had been made in previous editions, with the release of Fifth Edition, Wizards of the Coast worked to make Dungeons & Dragons accessible and welcoming to all players, from the presentation down to the nitty gritty of the system. Again, this is most obvious in the art – women wear more reasonable clothes (and appear in larger numbers); the first illustration in the *Player's Handbook* is of a black fighter. It isn't perfect (matters of representation, being based in perception, seldom are) but it felt like a move in the right direction back in 2014.

In the years since, Wizards had continued its efforts to some success. I regularly see mention of ongoing campaigns on social media with queer themes and characters of diverse ethnicities and body types.

11.

While I support the idea of an inclusive Dungeons & Dragons, it is still Dungeons & Dragons. There are several hurdles to diversity intrinsic to the game. First and foremost is its focus on combat. There is always going to be a battle



in D&D – that’s what the rules are built around. The very idea of the dungeon crawl, the exploration by intruders into a settlement of Others with the express purpose of looting treasure is inherently colonial. Race as defined by fantasy conventions (your dwarves, your orcs, etc.) has a long history of being reductive and reinforcing casual stereotypes.

12.

You can certainly run a D&D game that minimizes all of these issues, but minimizing them only ignores or works around the existing structure.

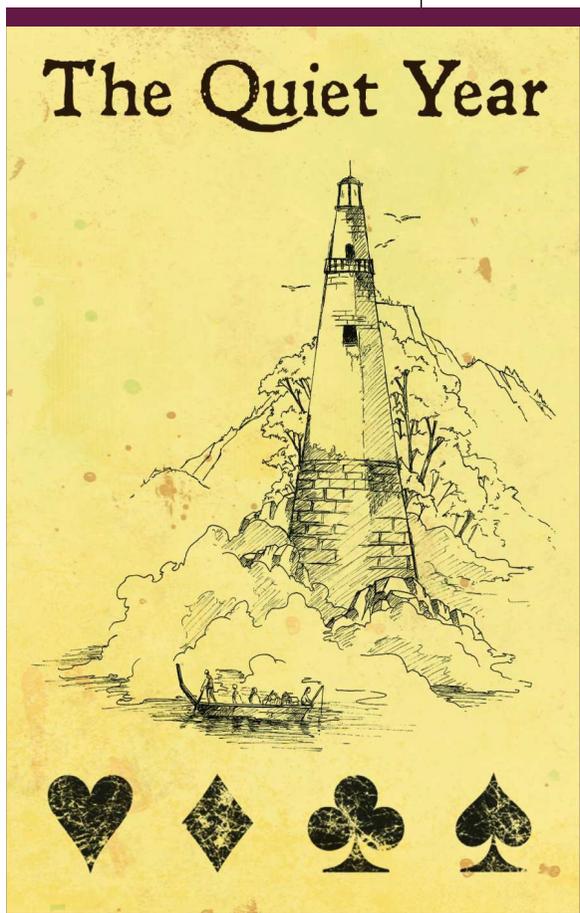
13.

Thanks to the popularity of Dungeons & Dragons, we are in a golden age of tabletop roleplaying. With more money being spent on RPGs, more writers and publishers are putting out games that are extremely different

from D&D, games that eschew combat, heavy rules and simulation. These games exist because D&D has expanded the market. There are all kinds of games out there, for all kinds of players.

14.

Some examples. *Bubblegumshoes* is a teen detective game that focuses as much on the complicated lives of teenagers as it does the mysteries they seek to solve. *The Quiet Year* is a game that plays out through mapmaking, about helping a community build something good in the wake of an apocalypse. *All We Love We Leave Behind* is a solo letter writing game about lost love and abandonment. *Spire* has players take the role of revolutionaries doing whatever it takes to overthrow an oppressive regime. *Skeletons* ponders mortality and doesn’t require dice or a game master at all. *Microscope* allows players to chart the history of an entire civilization using a timeline mechanic. *Under My Skin* is a free form storytelling game about secret love.



15.

Have you heard of any of these games?

16.

While it is admirable that Dungeons & Dragons works toward increasing diversity, the games I listed and others like them are largely free of the structural issues that created the problems D&D has to work to solve. They are designed specifically to appeal to people wanting to explore inclusivity, who don't want to resort to violence to solve their fictional problems, who feel alienated by elaborate rules systems that necessitate gatekeeping and often slip into adversarial relationships between players and game masters.

17.

Thanks to the popularity of Dungeons & Dragons, these games exist. But because of Dungeons & Dragons' popularity, they exist in a tiny niche.

18.

Usually, demographics start in the broadest category and drill down to specifics. I play videogames > I play first person shooters > I play *Payday 2*. With tabletop RPGs, the widest part of the funnel is "I play Dungeons & Dragons." The pool of folks who can accurately say, "I play roleplaying games," plural, is actually much smaller. I suspect that people who are deeply interested in unusual and experimental storytelling-focused games, and are willing to search them out, occupy a very slim portion of the community.

19.

Even with this column, I spend most of my time talking about Dungeons & Dragons.

20.

Dungeons & Dragons is a double-edged sword. 🗡️





Death Rattles

Lots of people can't stand the sound of nails on a chalkboard. I've always hated the crunch of footsteps in snow. The bassy, bitter grit of tiny crystals squeezed and rubbed together rips a pit in my gut that reaches all the way through to the base of my spine. When stepping into a fresh blanket of the stuff, I find myself unconsciously curling my upper body inward in an attempt to, I don't know, protect my heart? Soothe my stomach? There is something sickeningly satisfying in it, after all – the auditory confirmation that I'm the first to ruin a place. I'm guessing this is why I responded so viscerally to the sound design in AMC's *The Terror*.

The show's inaugural season focuses on Sir John Franklin's lost expedition to discover the last bit of the Northwest Passage. It tells the tale to the finish and because of the ready availability of history texts and Wikipedia, relies on careful pacing to elicit its twists and turns. There's no worrying if these men will die, there's only the dread of not knowing when. It's a perfectly contained story told in ten chapters, a smoldering burn that builds to an intense heat – or maybe freeze. At these temps, it's hard to tell the difference.

For nearly half its run, the men of the *HMS Terror* and *HMS Erebus* are trapped ice-locked in their ships. Their perfect and imperfectly inflected speech (rank-dependent, naturally) floats above a foundation of constant creaking shifts and displacement, the ice rearranging itself around the wooden crafts like skin sealing itself over a splinter. Later they make a desperate bid to reach the Canadian mainland on foot, traversing wide beaches of stone. The gravel is large enough to make each of their steps unsteady and they kick stones into



stones into stones as they walk, a sound like teeth constantly chattering in an already bare skull. Even when the men stand still, pebbles continue to tumble and settle below the frame. At any given moment in the series, the sustained din of ice and rock creeps into every pause in dialogue, a persistent reminder of the otherworldly landscape just beyond the trappings of Her Majesty's Naval Service. Nature will have her way, even when the good silver's on the table.

As masterfully as this technique brings the harsh exterior ever inwards – be it to vessel or camp or soul – it's outshone by *The Terror's* use of silence. For a brief time, the first episode does feature the ships actually moving through water. Before the interminable groaning of settling, stagnant ice, the ambient noise is of wind and waves. Until it isn't. In an early indication that *The Terror* is truly a horror story and not just historical reenactment in fancy dress, Sir John Franklin wakes from his sleep with a start, exactly as if someone's slammed shut his cabin door. It's not noise that causes his eyes to fly open however, it's the distinct lack of any. As he emerges from below decks he turns his back on his handful of officers to look out on the now-still landscape surrounding him. Only we can see his face and for a moment, his mask of leadership slips. The shadow of death passes across his features. The warm, wise, fatherly rear-admiral, a protector truly loved by his men, is afraid.

In another wonderfully intense use of near-silence, a man loses his life. The man who dies sees flashes of the past in between conscious glimpses of the present world spinning wildly in whiteness. He sees the incongruous orange of glowing coals in a brazier set to burn in a frozen world. He sees his own blood marring the pure ice and the deep pit of black that will be his most final destination. In another show, this scene would sound as chaotic as it looks.

Here all we get are the muted grunts of an animal and the man's own small and hesitating cries – he doesn't have the time to process his experience to a level that would allow them to evolve to full-fledged screams. We hear the revolting yet brief sizzle of flesh meeting heat then a soft splash of faraway water. The man is gone, dead, gone. In the aftermath, we see other men shouting his name but their voices are heavy and distant, as if deep beneath the sea.

Another masterful use of quietness: a man takes the life of his comrade. The man who kills does so in complete and utter silence. He's fast and feral, stripped to the waist and stabbing another man's chest and stomach as if he's a locked-out drunk banging on the door to be let in. There's no shrieking strings, no squishy fruit as Foley. We're left without an acoustic way to make sense of the proceedings, precisely as disoriented as his victim.

This is all to say nothing of the score. In terms of who's responsible for what in the production needs of a television show or film, score and sound design are often separate departments. Both make up the soundscape as a whole, of course, and I'd be remiss not to mention the genius at work here. Immediately after finishing *The Terror*, I found a playlist made up of tracks by the show's late composer, Marcus Fjellström. I listened to it often as I headed to the train for my daily commute home. Fjellström had a knack for composing spare yet evocative tracks that needle efficiently into emotional spaces. On one trek to the subway I noticed the desiccated carcass of a dead robin at the base of a particularly colorful patch of flowers. The brilliant fuchsia of the daisies belied the annihilation of life beneath, just as the northern lights oppose the harsh, unyielding landscape of the arctic in *The Terror*. What a shame we've lost Fjellström's particular talent for aural conjuring.

Even the actors contribute generously to the overall tenor of the show. In a particularly grueling scene, a very well-liked man who's dying believes his commanding officer to be willfully abandoning him. He tended to his superior when the officer was sick and had the favor returned when he began succumbing to illness himself. The abandonment is not true – his captain has been kidnapped and it's the other camp survivors who are leaving him – but this man dies believing his caretaker and commander rejects him. The show makes us watch. He claws across the grainy and freezing ground, believing he sees his captain seated at the head of a lavish banquet table, turned away from him and laughing. He cries "Captain!" over and over, the gutters of his voice clattering like stones being endlessly kicked across a beach of bleached bone. I find myself unable to take it, and like any true horror aficionado I clamp my hands over my ears. It's no use. In the end, the merciless quiet is all any of us will find. *The Terror* has already taught me that silence equals death. 🍷



We've all heard the jokes about how ridiculous Superman's disguise is. There was an episode of *Lois & Clark* that poked fun of Superman simply putting on civilian clothes and donning a pair of glasses. *Saturday Night Live* had a sketch devoted to it. Yeah, ha-ha, how could anyone be so stupid as to not realize that Clark Kent was just Superman with glasses and a tie? But here's the thing: it's not as far-fetched as we like to think it is.

Now, of course, the idea that close friends and family wouldn't realize that they just saw Clark pick up a building on the six o'clock news is a bit much. Even if they weren't already aware of his secret, it's not exactly difficult to spot someone you know really well in a different outfit. I'm talking about the general populace. Some random citizen on the street would not look at Clark Kent and see Superman (or vice-versa) and anybody who's ever worked in a job that requires a uniform can confirm this.

It sounds weird, I know, but speaking from personal experience – and from similar stories I've heard from coworkers and people in similar positions – the general public usually doesn't recognize someone in uniform versus out of uniform. When I worked at a coffee shop, we had to wear very specific types of clothes as well as aprons and hats. We'd see the same people every day. We'd make small talk for what probably totaled several hours over the course of a year. And yet, these same people would never recognize us on the street.

There's probably a scientific explanation for it, but I believe the long and short of it is that our minds contextualize people we know, and seeing them outside of a familiar context can be difficult to parse – at least at first. I mean heck, even when you see someone like a close friend or relative at a store unexpectedly, you have to take a moment to make sure you're not

seeing things. Well it's even more pronounced when the person you run into is normally wearing a uniform. I've walked right past people who knew my name and saw me five days a week without so much as a nod, because without my telltale hat and apron I was just another random stranger.

I'm pretty sure close friends and family wouldn't be fooled by the outfit changes, but the rest of us? We'd totally fall for it. Within the confines of the fiction the whole world knows Superman, but only a very small number of people know Clark Kent. Realistically speaking, we'd all get used to seeing the man in red and blue spandex saving the day on the news, probably every night, but would never recognize him walking down the street because by our own perceptions he wouldn't be the man in red and blue spandex anymore - he'd just be some bespectacled guy in a suit.

So sure, joke about the super-powered alien playing dress up if you must, but chances are you'd have fallen for it. We all would've fallen for it. 🍷





Justice League and the Absence of Politics

Justice League does not benefit much from a political reading, but it repeatedly asks viewers for one. Given the film's complicated development, it's tough to say for certain when its most overt attempts at political messaging were written, but whether the context was the 2016 election season or the first months of the Trump presidency, the filmmakers apparently saw an era of societal divisions and hoped to reflect it in their work.

The characters (and an unsubtle voice-over) make a repeated point of discussing the miserable social climate they find themselves in. People are hostile and distrustful of each other and a general hopelessness has taken hold. "I don't recognize this world anymore," Alfred states at one point. It's bleak, and in case the film's allegorical intentions here were unclear, it takes time to relieve viewers of doubt. In one conversation, Martha Kent tells Lois Lane she "can hardly read the news, anyway" – there's just "too much bitterness."

For the film's heroes, the cause of this angst is readily identifiable: it all began with the death of Superman. His death at the end of *Batman v Superman* prompted a loss of hope at both a personal and a social level. The world seems dimmer without him, and the League – particularly Batman – feels like it is missing something vital. To hear the team speak of him, Superman represented something that transcended himself. His absence routs all their efforts at defeating super villain Steppenwolf. They're simply not strong enough to beat the antagonist without the Man of Steel.

Throughout the film, characters stress notions of teamwork and mutual support. Loners like Aquaman are reprimanded for their reluctance to join the crew and learn later to appreciate the communal approach. But it isn't until Superman shows up that the possibility of the League's victory is even entertained. The group is doomed without him.

Once he returns, the battle with Steppenwolf is trivial. Superman easily triumphs over the villain, the League saves the planet and the film ends with the world in more optimistic spirits. Lois Lane's voice-over confirms the new mood and again clarifies the allegory: "Our darkness was deep and seemed to swallow all hope, but these heroes were here the whole time to remind us that hope is real, that you can see it. All you have to do is look up in the sky." Bitter news media, a sense of lost hope, the feeling that our heroes surround us - it would be easy to mistake all of this for a boilerplate campaign speech for the upcoming midterms.

If we take the film's implicit request for political interpretation seriously, we might find ourselves asking what the hell Superman is supposed to represent here. "Hope" is key vocabulary in the script, but that seems too ambiguous for real-world commentary. Is national unity the issue, maybe? Is *Justice League* suggesting that something

once held this country together but, over the past two years, was fractured and now appears to be in disrepair, maybe lost for good? Superman would then stand in for the things that used to, and might again, unify America.

This seems like an innocuous enough reading, but the problem is that the film refuses to dive into the specifics of its message, instead only gesturing in broad, bland terms. This results in a work that is both politically incoherent and vulnerable to exploitation by reactionary interests. The film never examines the difficulties facing society beyond superficial observations about disunity and distrust, and never looks further into what might create such schisms within a community. It never risks placing blame on anyone or any-



thing in particular, instead attributing the entirety of a societal crisis to the absence of a superhero. There are no political stakes here. No principled stand is taken. Similarly, no actual solutions are proposed.

At best, this is bland speechifying. It avoids a substantive discussion in favor of platitudes with an air of relevance. This evasion of specifics also makes possible regressive, traditionalist interpretations. Superhero narratives necessarily lend themselves to individualist (often authoritarian) world views and *Justice League's* flat attempts at contemporary political conversation exaggerate this tendency. Despite its insistence on the importance of teamwork, the film hinges on the reappearance of Superman, who brings with him not just the power to defeat the team's enemies but also the unique charisma and spirit that will restore harmony to the world he left behind. The notion implied here – that there was a time before now in which we were great and we can return to that time by embracing a heroic spirit now lost – is uncomfortably familiar.

This is perhaps not the intended reading of *Justice League*, a film that may not even have an intended reading in the first place, but because the film is so vague and politically noncommittal, it allows for readings like this. *Justice League* is not the first film with this issue, though. It reappears in any work that aims for “relevance” without actually digging into the specifics that define a particular political moment.

This is the problem with bland appeals to “unity” and “civility” that we’ve heard from politicians the past three years. These empty pleas often reflect a refusal to engage with the specific discriminations, abuses and oppressions that have brought the country to where it is now. By referring to a sense of division – “divisiveness” is a common descriptor in our current climate – these messages suggest that there was a unified moment we could go back to, if only we spent more time listening to each other. This is a mischaracterization of history. There is no going back and “back” itself – that idealized moment when the country was just and harmonious – never existed in the first place. This approach to politics ignores the hard work of addressing inequality in favor of a return to an earlier status quo with similar inequality but more decorum.

“The world needs Superman,” Batman tells Alfred. Within the narrow perspective of *Justice League's* narrative, Bruce is right. Beyond that, though, this statement becomes much more questionable. *Justice League* believes it is speaking to our moment in history and championing some kind of virtue. It isn't quite doing that, but in its own way, it is speaking to a different reality: that of a political class hoping to outlast the current crisis by announcing its support for nothing in particular. *Justice League*, for the record, never made back enough to justify what it cost to produce. 

The Deal

We recently adopted two kittens, brother and sister, and named them Henry and Georgia. They are wonderful! I think about them all the time and love to spend time with them, just like my other cats. Of course, they're babies, so I feel a particular need to protect them. I guess that doesn't really go away with age. My 17-year-old cat, Sally, is just as much a kitten to me as these new ones.

It was a big deal for me, getting the kittens, as it hasn't been a great year for cats in the McMaster household. As I wrote earlier this year, we had Murray put down because he was in a lot of pain and his body was failing. You may have noticed that I haven't been around much since then. I've had a very hard time with his passing, and then a younger cat of mine, Floyd, suddenly went in his sleep. He and I were very close.

He wasn't even supposed to be my cat. A friend to whom I rented a room adopted him and then had to go out of town for several weeks. He was small at the time and needed supervision. I worked at home and would take care of him. After a couple of days of him sleeping in my lap while I worked, there was no chance my friend was getting him back. We were inseparable after that.

Floyd didn't have papers, but he had all the characteristics of a Maine Coon – including weighing 30 pounds. He was a giant, but quite gentle. When we brought home a kitten my niece found in a box, Floyd adopted him. The other, older cats wanted nothing to do with little Mitchell. He was kind of a terror. One night, he had been tormenting one of our older cats, Gus, and got smacked. Floyd heard Mitchell mew and came barreling out of nowhere, tackled Gus off the couch and chased him away.

There are a thousand stories about Floyd. One time he tried to charm a cheeseburger by chattering at it while we ate. He was huge but somehow stealthy when it came to pizza. He loved to talk to you which led to flopping on your feet and wallowing. He would sleep on his back next to me and snore.

Every life disaster, Floyd was there. He always knew when I was upset and came to me. He followed me around the house and would wait for me to come home every day. In "I Grieve," by Peter Gabriel, he says, "The news that truly shocks is the empty, empty page." I believe that's the heart of the issue. When something so constant, and good, in your life is suddenly gone, the pain is astonishing. That's what it was like when Floyd was suddenly gone.

Losing a pet is horrible, as most of us know. Being there and holding Murray while he passed was one of the hardest things I've ever done. Looking back on it, though, we do the same thing for humans. My father-in-law had been very sick for years and when it was time, my wife and I were with him. They call it palliative care, which sounds fancy, but it's when they can't save you they make you comfortable and help you die. It's profoundly crushing to witness an ending. More so when you'd give anything to change it.

I've reached this point in my life where things don't look up very often. I can't have children. My grandparents are all gone and so is my dad and father-in-law. The little joys and victories start to come less and less. I make a few thousand more dollars than I did last year and some of my joints ache in the mornings, that's the kind of life I live now. I don't think we're meant to live as long as we do and we certainly aren't meant to be as closed up as we are. When normal people can put their love into children, what do the rest of us do? I suppose that's what Floyd was to me.

The night before, he had been acting a little weird, but I coaxed him over to me and we hung out for a while on the floor. His front leg had bothered him off and on for a few years after he got a hairline fracture landing poorly from a jump. Earlier in the evening he had played with my wife and her friend for a good long time. The next morning, I petted him as I always did and left. An hour or two later I received a panicked phone call that Floyd wasn't breathing. I came home, and he was gone. My wife found him in his favorite spot. He had laid down and passed, I hope, in his sleep.

I've been devastated ever since. I couldn't work, or even think straight for days. Floyd was eight years old, he had just turned eight a few days earlier. I should have taken him to the vet that morning. I should have done a lot of things. I pray he wasn't afraid. I'm so sorry he was alone. None of that matters now. Now it's only the regrets. The way they say it works is that after a while all the sadness drops away and all you have are the good memories. I hope that's right.

The other overwhelming feeling I get is that of shame. Not because I mistreated Floyd. Heavens, if any cat ever knew he was loved, it was that one. I doted on him. So did everyone. No, I feel shame because I've been much more upset over the loss of my cat than that of my dad. It's true. I think maybe because my dad was in his 70s and had cancer. We knew it was coming for a long time and could get used to the idea. When my dad passed, I said goodbye. I didn't get that luxury with Floyd.

I think back to when Murray passed and a conversation I had with my friend Stu. I was bemoaning the fact that I put Murray to sleep, that I felt I betrayed

him. I still do. However, Stu told me something that has, if not made feel free of guilt, has helped me sleep. He said “That’s the deal. They give us the years of love, happiness and support and we have to make the tough decisions for them. They trust us to do the right thing.” And he’s right. I know he’s right, but there’s this part of me that will always feel I killed a friend.

I have this notion, and I’m sure it’s silly, that maybe Floyd also knew about the deal. Maybe he knew how hard I took it when Murray went, and he wanted to save me the pain of having to make that awful choice.

Since Floyd left us, I’ve had some very dark times. I’ve wondered what the world needs with me. I’ve wondered what use my life is if there are no children, no golden years. Why do I need to be here? Why do I want to stay around and watch everyone I’ve loved die? It’s times like that when I remember the deal.

I have other cats, and when they are gone, I will have others beyond them. Refusing to help others because life might hurt you is selfish and cowardly. I came to a conclusion – until it’s my time, I’m going to help those that can’t help themselves. I might not be able to add to this world, but I can make a better life for some of those already here. I can think of no more fitting eulogy for Floyd than to continue to take care of those who are smaller than me, much like he always did. 🐾

How'd you get into art?

My Mom. She encouraged me from a very young age, and I just kept with it.

What inspires you?

Soooo many things. Other artists, punk rock, my mood. There's a ton of my childhood in my work.

Monsters seem to be a big thing for you. What's the appeal?

Monsters have always been huge for me. I grew up Baptist (I'm an atheist now), and there are all sorts of monsters in the Bible. All of the cartoons, movies, comics and toys I was exposed to had these great monsters, often with tragic back stories and awesome designs. They were always so much cooler than most of the heroic characters out there.

***Inhumanoids* was great and not many people talk about it. What hooked you on that show? And should I assume that D'Compose is your favorite monster from it?**

That intro! It hooked me right away, that first weekend it was on. It wasn't like anything else I'd seen in a cartoon and now, with over 30 years of digesting it, I appreciate the weirdness of it even more. It's a wonderful concoction of Lovecraft and sci-fi.

And yes, D'Compose is my favorite. So gross.

What do you hope people take away from your art?

I hope that when people see my art they

- a) become curious about it to the point where they have to stop and look
- b) either have fun looking at it or are bothered to the bottom of their souls by it, and
- c) buy my stuff to help keep me creating.

For more of Dominic's work, check out his [site](#) or follow him on [Instagram](#).



plate 1. Servitor of Janus



plate 2. Nyarlathotep



plate 3. Mind Flyer



plate 4. Grell

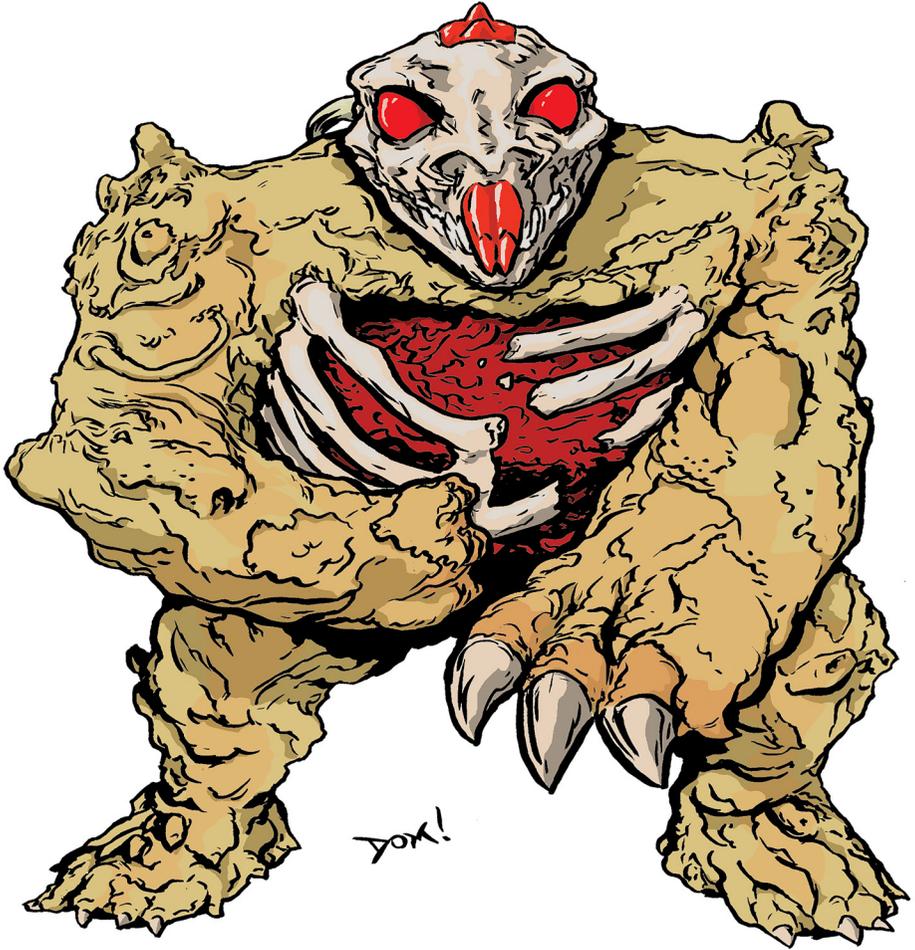


plate 5.D'Compose

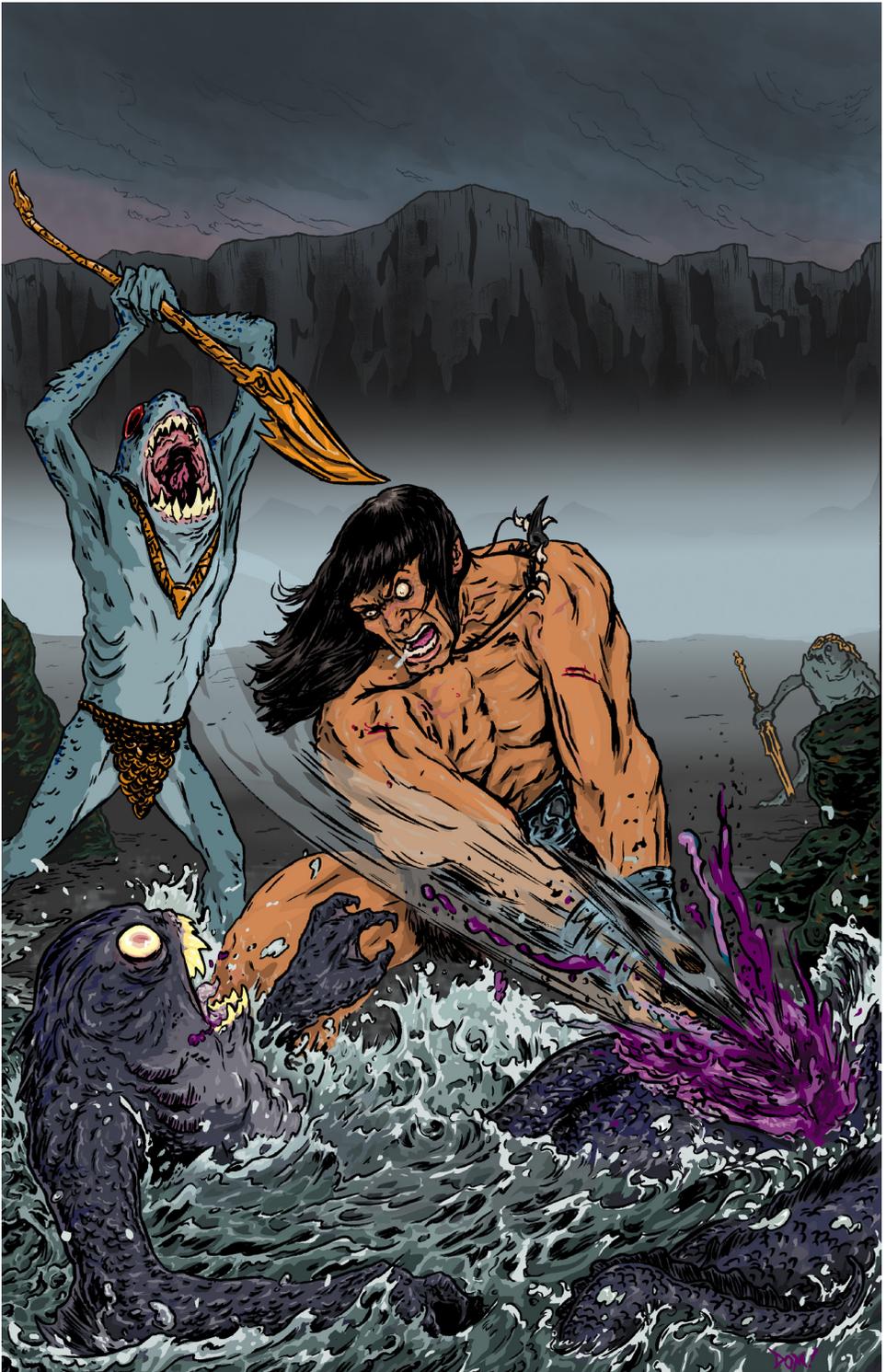


plate 6. Conan vs. Deep Ones



**FOR
SHE
HAS
TASTED
THE
FRUIT**

By Katherine Cross

It's a rare videogame character that inspires hours of philosophical analysis. *Knights of the Old Republic 2*'s Kreia continues to be in a league of her own. She embodied the essence of a game that boldly deconstructed Star Wars' tropes, challenging both Jedi and Sith ideology, and presenting a remarkable (often frightening) philosophy of her own. For all her grim Nietzschean overtones, however, there were flashes of altruism and love that spoke loudest of all. The game's climax on Dantooine presented players with a scene as tender as it was violent, and – likely unintentionally – gave us perhaps the most feminist moment in Star Wars' expanded universe.

* * *

You play as The Exile, a woman (canonically, at least) exiled from the Jedi Order and cut off from the Force for going off to fight a war against the wishes of the Jedi Council. *KotOR2* is the story of how she comes to 'hear' the Force again, under the tutelage of Kreia.

Like most RPGs of its ilk, *KotOR2* allows the player to make choices that radically alter the direction of the game's story. If you pursue a Light Side path, you're treated to the following scene. At the climax on Dantooine, you meet the last remaining Jedi Masters in the ruined temple there, ostensibly to receive their wisdom and aid. Instead, the atmosphere quickly takes on the odor of an inquisition. The Exile once again finds herself on trial, this time for relearning how to

use the Force after having been deafened to it.

As the (all male) Masters lecture your character and interpret her singularly complex experience for her, Kreia's voice suddenly echoes from afar to challenge, with profound perspicacity, their most damning assertions about you:

Master Vrook: You were deafened.

Kreia: At last you could hear.

Master Kavar: You were broken.

Kreia: You were whole.

Master Zez Kai-El: You were blinded.

Kreia: And, at last, you saw.

There is poetry in this exchange, Kreia's oppositional notes standing athwart the gaslighting that these powerful men are inflicting upon a disobedient woman. This moment always stood out to me as showing not only Kreia at her best – she does not abandon the Exile when three powerful men threaten to take away everything she is and everything she has worked for – but also as conveying a potent feminist message: that when, indeed, your eyes are opened to a difficult truth as a woman, you will be described as “blinded.”



Your enlightenment will be cast as darkness, your knowledge as ignorance; the self-assured mockery of Virginia Woolf's Dr. X can be heard in the stentorian condemnations of Master Vrook, the intellectual with bottomless contempt for women who dare to know themselves.

Kreia herself is the teacher – once considered prodigal in her own time – whose ideas challenged the dogma of a mostly male elite, leading to the indignities of her downfall. Her ideas were radical; they challenged everything the Jedi Order believed in. She had come to believe that neither the Jedi Code nor the ways of the Sith held all the answers, that Jedi self-abnegation and Sith selfishness were equally destructive, both to Force-users and to the galaxy as a whole, which had to live with the unending cycles of war between the two factions.

She stood athwart every mainstream understanding of the Force and inculcat-

ed this in her students; the Exile was the greatest of these and this meeting amid the ruins of Dantooine's Temple was meant to be a meeting where the Exile brought this ultimate truth of her life before the gaze of the surviving Jedi Council members. Kreia's lifelong academic mission would reach a new crescendo – reconciliation, vindication a new chapter in understanding the Force.

Instead, after their litany of condemnations, the Masters threaten to strip the Exile of her ability to feel the Force once again. The imagery of this – three powerful men binding a woman against her will to rob her of the hard-earned gifts that challenge their orthodoxies – should not be lost on us. And it is here that Kreia emerges onto the scene, striding in from the gardens, raising her hand to Force push the Masters away from the Exile.

“Enough. Step away from her . . . Step away! She has brought truth, and you condemn it? The arrogance. You will not

harm her, you will not harm her ever again,” she says with elegant acid. For all her depredations and moral ambiguity, it is here her love – as a teacher, as a mentor – is revealed in full bloom. Here is where she, at last, revenges herself on those who’d wronged her, “I have endured your corruption of my other students, you shall *not* have this one,” she thunders to Vrook as she intercedes to save the Exile.

A large, open arena-like area. Kreia stands in the centre, arcs of lightning radiating out from her at the three Jedi Masters on the far end of the grassy courtyard

There is something profoundly revelatory about how she deals with the Jedi Masters here. She forces a kind of empathy upon them, enjoining them to “see [the galaxy] through the eyes of the Exile.” This takes the form of robbing them of the Force themselves, to show them, however painfully, just where the Exile

has walked, why they are so unfit to pass judgement upon her and how little they actually understand of her situation. This searing blast of revelation, of a woman’s intimate knowledge, kills them.

* * *

Kreia’s dark tapestry is woven of philosophy, pedagogy and smouldering passion; each of which is illuminated powerfully by this scene. She had suffered the Cassandra-like fate of all women who speak painful truths and here she now showed she would no longer suffer in silent exile; here was where she not only saved the Exile but once again became the master of events. In attacking the Exile, the Masters had shown themselves to be obstacles in the needful crusade to counter the latest Sith threat. Instead of aiding their most promising ally, they were going to strip the Force from her in the name of ideological purity – that



same purity that had destroyed Kreia's career long ago.

Kreia reminds the Exile that she had, in fact, seen truth in her adventures, learnt something of herself and the Force, and that the Council was wrong to condemn her for these things, wrong to condemn her for knowing the purportedly unknowable.

This scene is very much Eve being punished for the sins of man, but with an altogether different outcome. Eve lives on, the fruits of Eden well in hand, while the voices of God lay stilled in an all too fitting mausoleum. Its threads, making for a Spartan scene that is considerably more than meets the eye, tell a story that is intimately reflective of many women's lives, especially the lives of those who, in Woolf's phrase, "learn the habit of freedom." The scene is tragic – lives are lost, perhaps unnecessarily – and yet its tragedy is a culmination of patriarchal ignorance rather than Kreia's own moral failings. She protected both her student and the only woman who could do what needed to be done to end a silently screaming Sith invasion.

Philosopher Martha Nussbaum correctly observes that tragedy in drama often consists in impossible choices imposed by inalterable circumstances, and that is precisely what Kreia faced here. If she let the Masters live, they would have hounded the Exile's steps, foolishly believing her to be the greater threat to the galaxy. Yet in ending their lives she adds yet another sin to a list that already weeps with innumerable crimes. But she

bears it so that the Exile does not have to; for all her lecturing about the naiveté of Jedi thinking, she does not let the Exile get her hands dirty, does not allow her to walk in the shadows where Kreia found knowledge only in the most torturous ways possible – and there is a profound love in that.

Above all, the scene is evocative of the kind of love women must share in a deeply troubled, remorselessly benighted world. And in its darkness, there is a kind of beauty. Truth's triumph, knowledge redeemed, virtue secured, an Exile set free.

For, at last, she saw. 🍷





**THE
IN-GAME
MUSEUM**

By Daniel Fries

Early in *The Last of Us*, heroes Joel and Ellie visit a museum in the post-apocalypse. Bullets fly, wounds are haphazardly bandaged. I don't remember the type of museum. I think it's a history museum, but what it's really about is its set-piece quality: it's packed with waist-high displays to take cover behind, it's a maze of rooms spread out across multiple floors and there's enough glass and big bright windows to make the space feel dynamic and exciting to play in. This is one way games can explore space, by setting moment-to-moment action within a specific location. The exhibits become a backdrop for the main event. The museum becomes a genericized setting that foregrounds what is important about one scene or another: it is a space where things happen.

Most physical museums, in contrast, use their space to carry out the primary functions of storage and display of cultural artifacts. A growing number of smaller games are interested in exploring and manipulating these functions.

Games have the benefit of being able to display work in designed spaces without concern for cost or other limitations inherent to physical museums. This way, they can examine what the museum means now and present different versions of what the museum could be soon. *The Zium Museum*, curated by Michael Berto; *A Museum of Dubious Splendors*, by Studio Oleomingus and *The Trolley*, by Nicholas O'Brien, are recent examples of works that encourage players to interact with cultural artifacts in virtual space.

In an essay in *Stedelijk Studies*, Mark Wigley writes, "The museum system has already been condensed into a cell phone. Museums have grown in size and scale, but they have yet to respond to the new asymmetric warfare in which their own arguments are now deployed with much more sophistication by literally billions of people."

The Zium Museum, with its many pieces from a large number of artists, is in some way a transposition of the museum space: works are moved from a potential physical museum context into a digital context. *The Zium Museum* resembles a white box, the kind of archetypal museum in which the architecture and design disappear in order to support the art on display. In some ways, *The Zium Museum* borrows the cultural capital and the cold modernist atmosphere that many physical museums are now trying to avoid or shed in favor of supposedly more genuine interactions with the public.

Some interesting things happen within this piece, and I would argue that it has a transformative effect on the art inside. Work that might otherwise appear on Sketchfab or float through social media timelines is collected in one place the player can revisit. Rather than appearing on a relatively small phone screen, much of the art is blown up to fill the gallery space. One wing on the second floor holds several bright notebook drawings by Ines J. It's clear they're scanned from a small notebook, and the images don't fill your computer screen, but the game's scale implies that they stretch from the



floor to the ceiling. The game's first-person perspective also serves to emphasize the finer details: the mouse movement underscores the eye movement. It's striking that by simply placing it in a virtual space, *The Zium Museum* lends an aura of grandness to work I may not have sought out otherwise.

The modular structure of *The Zium Museum* is designed by Quinn Spence and is a kind of work itself, reflecting galleries designed by famous architects like Frank Lloyd Wright's Guggenheim Museum or Renzo Piano's Centre Pompidou.

Most art museums in 2018 are also history museums: placards or guides that describe an artist's philosophy or experience contextualize even the most contemporary exhibits. *A Museum of Dubious Splendors* seeks to unpack and question this element of the museum.

Studio Oleomingus describes *Splendors* as being based on a collection by Gujarati poet Mir UmarHassan, the “omnipresent

and fictional narrator” in many of their projects. *Splendors* acts as a kind of fictional historical museum, although the art and environmental design are striking in their own right. The player navigates the museum one closed room at a time. They are presented with a short story about an unidentified object and the confusion it presents, and the story remains unresolved until the player is allowed into the room, at which point the artifact in question is displayed as an enormous floor-to-ceiling 3D object. It's a tube of toothpaste, or a cassette player, or a gigantic porcelain ear. The reveal of the object acts as a kind of punch line to the story (such that it's difficult to imagine how UmarHassan's original short stories would have read without this visual element).

Half of Oleomingus, Dhruv Jani, said in an interview in December, “I'm an exhibition designer by training,” and it shows in the strengths and the interests of their



work. There's a kind of parallel piece from Oleomungus inside *The Zium Museum*, where the player is transported to another room and invited to read a large placard about why "the exhibit" will not be present (e.g. no one survived trying to retrieve it, it never existed, etc.). Both this piece and *Splendors* are reminiscent of stories from Borges' *Labyrinths* like "The Library of Babel," in which he describes the library as having a honeycomb structure, but also mentions that it would be impossible for one person to see all of it. To Borges, artifacts themselves tend to take a backseat to their contexts. Architecture and space are important to Borges' work, but in museum games, [a more experiential understanding is possible](#).

Naomi Simon's *The Participatory Museum* is another text that encourages museum professionals to re-examine the cultural spaces in which they work. The book is a guide, or a framework, for design of interactive museum exhibits.

She criticizes exhibits that are unlikely to grab the attention of museum-goers and points out how important it is to guide visitors through a novel way to behave in a museum. In museum games, the player's actions don't necessarily require the same kind of extensive guidance because the medium is so full of examples of moving and observing.

The Trolley, by Nicholas O'Brien, initially appears to be an interactive fiction piece about the dismantling of a trolley in a local town, but I'm struck by how much it feels like visiting a transit museum.

The player moves through a space with little color. It feels like a movie set or a museum diorama. The raw, minimally textured quality of the models adds to a sense of materiality – almost like they're cardboard props. Through the act of dismantling the trolley, the player becomes familiar with many of its component parts and, as the trolley climbs further up the mountain each day and affords a

wider and fuller view of the trolley yard, the layout of the space becomes clear as well. In this wide view, the buildings in the background are very obviously all the same, which brings that sense of materiality to an alienating climax.

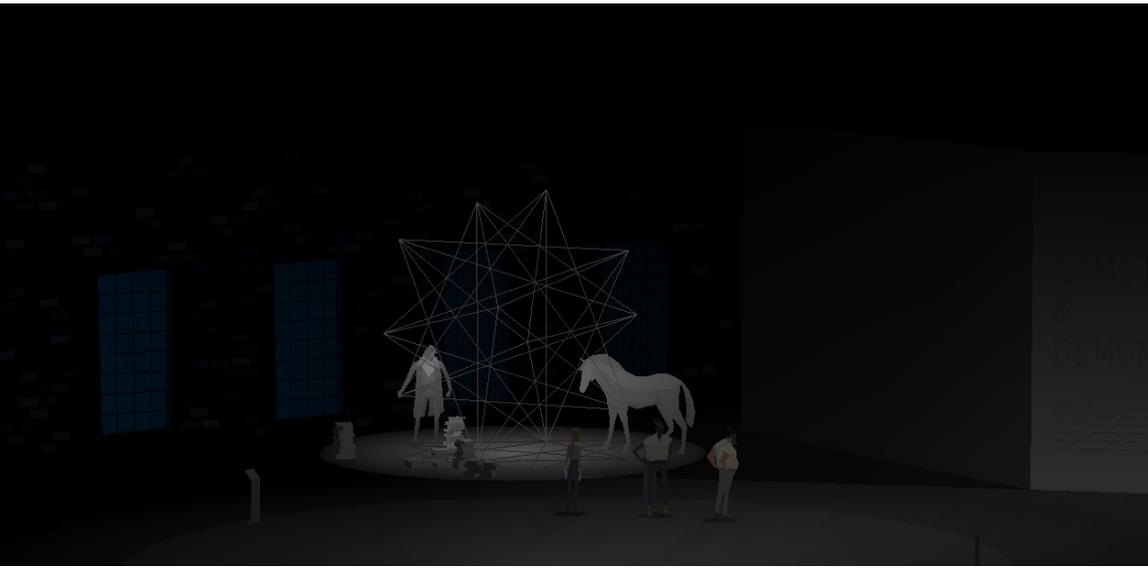
It's a nostalgic and political piece that, at the end, puts the generic unnamed player character through more specific personal difficulties as a result of the trolley's shutting down. At regular intervals, the game presents three choices at the bottom of the screen, but the player is not able to choose the way things go so much as she is able to affirm how she feels or reacts. It is wistful but focused on mechanical details that move and demonstrate the workings of the trolley. It's not quite a story about how things used to be – that frame largely serves to give the player a kind of contextual museum label with the economic implications and societal details that surround the trolley.

Both *The Trolley* and *a Museum of Du-*

bious Splendors are text-driven games interested in telling stories about the past and both twist what the player expects from a museum. *Splendors* presents a kind of inversion, where the labels are visible before the objects. The giant object becomes like a loaded line at the end of a short story. *The Trolley* invites the player to move point to point within the exhibit, taking in a small amount of text plus a visual and material experience to go with it.

The degree to which these games are educational, or are able to leave their players with some kind of idea about how the world works, may actually be diminished by their being solitary experiences by design. *The Trolley* feels enormously lonely. And to walk around *The Zium Museum* – despite the fact that all the artists have their Twitter usernames very visibly displayed – also feels like a strangely somber experience. There's a set of radios at the front of the museum, where you





can turn on an ambient track to score your visit, which I think feels like putting your own earbuds in at the museum. Not that it's impossible, just that it underscores the emptiness and isolation of the space even though it is packed with art. Both *The Zium Museum* and *The Trolley* allow the player to look beyond the bounds of the accessible space, and both present a visible and obvious emptiness.

Museum professionals internationally have reacted to downturns in visitors by increasing the programming surrounding exhibitions. Roundtables, seminars, symposia and other events encourage visitors to come for the one night, the one specific event. This relies on a local community that isn't quite there for the museum game yet. When the museum space is virtual, it's more complicated to create the community engagement that physical museums get almost by default.

Curation is the art of communicating the magnitude and the context of the

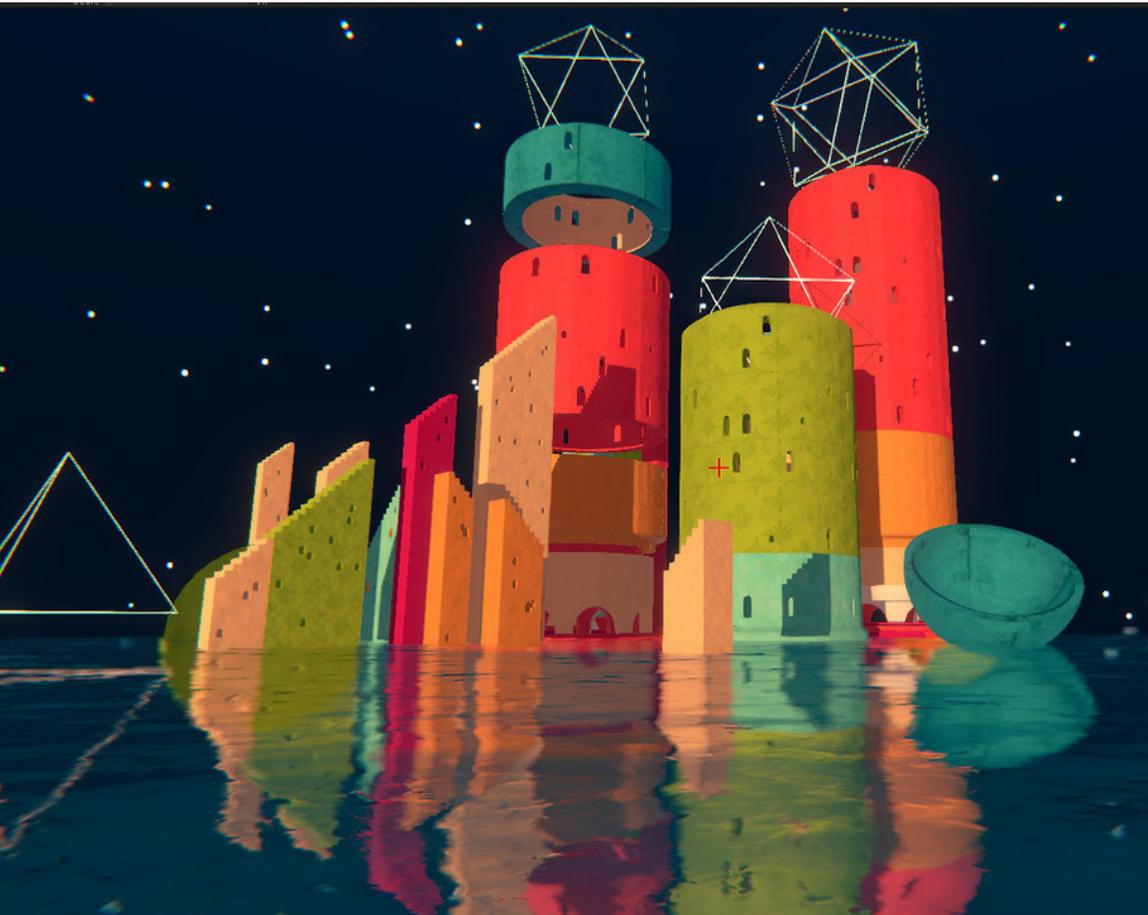
work displayed in a museum, and not only are museum games perfectly capable of this, they are able to display digital work as if it were in a physical space. Museum games cannot only use space, they can define and manipulate it. *Limits & Demonstrations*, by Cardboard Computer, is a short game that follows three visitors through a retrospective for a fictional artist named Lula Chamberlain. The game reminds the player with every piece on display that these are impossible or near-impossible to exhibit in the real world. This kind of digital conceptual art is relatively novel! Games are building a new space for conceptual art and developing ideas initially broached in museum pieces.

There are new opportunities here in terms of the kind of work that can be displayed and the spaces it can be displayed in. It is exciting to see developers who have experience thinking about spatial design in physical space use games to ex-

plore spatial design that is only possible in virtual space.

But the same kinds of things that institutional museums are still looking for – community engagement, a loyal public, cultural recognition and, yes, funding – are still things these works can benefit from. Mark Wigley's assertion that museum logic is global relies on social media, and the idea that kids especially are curating with great precision their own photographs and versions of their lives that appear online. Not only are they curating constantly, the feedback is near immediate.

In March, Studio Oleomingus showed a game called *An Indivisible Margin of Error* at the *When is Space?* exhibit at the Jawahar Kala Kendra, a museum in Jaipur, India. The exhibit was inspired by the work of Maharaja Sawai Jai Singh, who, during his rule in the early 18th century, built five observatories and the city of Jaipur itself. *Margin of Error* is about a search for a mythical observatory from before his time. The game was included by a local museum, centers around a local figure and was played by local visitors. Maybe there's even space inside museums for museum-games. 



An Indivisible Margin of Error



By Malindy Hetfeld

SKIN DEEP

Detroit: Become Human *plays into the systemic racism it claims to oppose*



Linking a story about androids to racism and xenophobia might have seemed like low-hanging fruit to David Cage when writing *Detroit: Become Human*.

After all, if you want to tell a story about the fear of otherness and the consequences of that fear, you only have to look to history. As soon as I started to conflate the experience of real-world minorities with Cage's racial allegory however, I discovered an offensive and downright harmful misunderstanding of what causes racial tensions.

It wasn't Cage's intention to add something of value to racial discourse. He was primarily concerned with eliciting a reaction and, to achieve that goal, all you have to do is propose an idea. The idea in *Detroit: Become Human* is that the situation of a people with a history of several hundred years of oppression is the same as that of a bunch of machines that became aware of their own

oppression through what's described at several points in-game as "an error in their software."

It's one thing to attempt to do this subtly, but from the very starting screen to *Detroit's* conclusion, Cage hammers the point home with direct quotes and visual comparisons to real-life events. If Cage never misses an opportunity to inform me of the immense responsibility of deciding the future of a people, then I get to tell him about all the ways the allegory he bases his game on doesn't hold up.

While *Detroit* aggressively references sci-fi films such as *Blade Runner*, *A.I.* and *I, Robot*, it focuses solely on the conflict between humans and their artificial counterparts. Unlike its inspirations however, the game never asks the underlying moral and philosophical questions that make artificial intelligence such a thorny subject: what rights should humans grant something created in their

own image? What is the right way to deal with a creation that surpasses its creator? When can people call something sentient without a doubt if they haven't found the right words to describe their own experience yet?

The fact that androids *aren't* humans is of central importance to these stories, because they put people in the role of a god-like creator unable to explain themselves to their creation. Academics still argue what basic human rights we should grant AI, with experts such as Linda MacDonald-Glenn, a bioethicist at California State University Monterey Bay, pointing out that [we still haven't reached a consensus who should be considered a person](#) and granted the rights associated with personhood.

Detroit: Become Human instead presents us with a future in which these discussions apparently never happened and people have collectively forgotten their past. In a reference to the segregation era in the United States, androids are kept in their own compartment at the back of the bus and their owners refer to themselves as masters. Cage foresees nothing but a complete repeat of history, right down to the eventual disassembly of androids in concentration camps.

Awareness of history, however, leads to important breakthroughs in attaining equal rights for minorities, especially the African-American communities to which Cage keeps referring. In his famous "I Have a Dream" speech, Dr. Martin Luther King referenced the Emancipation Proclamation that granted slaves their



freedom. He pointed to a time in history that, to him, signified that people were able to make empathic decisions. As a pastor, Dr. King also appealed to people's god-fearing nature: God made all people equal, and thus granted all of us the same rights. For many black Christians who had experienced great injustice, this idea of equality is important because the only thing left when the appeal to a shared humanity fails is the belief that a higher power will still judge them fairly.

In place of a god, androids in *Detroit* have rA9. Throughout the game, androids that have lived through severe trauma develop an obsession with what they describe as the first sentient android, who will come and set them free. The player first hears of rA9 through an android who stabs his owner in a rage after months of abuse. The android is not only black, but also left a primitive clay offering to rA9.

When asked about rA9 later in the game, the android's original inventor

simply tells you, “Everyone has to believe in something,” reducing the beliefs and methods of worship that have kept real people alive to a programmable, fanatic myth. No matter what you think of religion, to turn it into a program that triggers in downtrodden machines is tasteless. It also veers dangerously to equate religious devotion with an obsession the religious fanaticism that can lead to violence.

The portrayal of an essential part of many black people’s identity as primitive and obsessive does nothing but reaffirm the prejudice Cage claims to oppose.



Luther (Evan Parke), the android who later in the game joins Kara (Valorie Curry) and Alice (Audrey Boustani), is a tall black man, apparently designed to carry heavy loads, a choice that traces back to the belief that Africans were genetically better equipped for manual labor – a prime justification for their enslavement. His primary function

when Kara and Alice meet him is to be a threatening prison guard to fellow androids. That dissonance isn’t what shakes him into deviancy, it’s seeing Alice being afraid for Kara.

Design choices like this reveal prejudice that took root hundreds of years ago. Since Cage leans into it, rather than create characters that counteract stereotypes, he is certainly prone to systemic racism.

Despite having three main characters, *Detroit: Become Human* has only one capital H hero. Markus, played by actor and social rights activist Jesse Williams, becomes what I can only describe as a black android messiah, basically Moses and MLK rolled into one. The casting of Williams is deliberate – as a notable public figure during the events in Ferguson, Williams’ involvement seemingly legitimizes the way *Detroit* portrays the forming of a countermovement and the ensuing disputes between protesters and the police.

Markus is given to his white, affluent owner Carl (Lance Henriksen) as a gift. Carl not only treats Markus like a person, he also shapes him with the help of high culture: Markus has access to classical music and literature and plays speed chess with his owner. Markus comes to Carl for advice and implies at more than one point in the game that Carl has taught him everything he knows. Having led a sheltered life, Markus turns deviant when he he’s driven out by Carl’s jealous deadbeat son Leo, whom Carl seemingly chooses over Markus.

From this point on, Markus reacts with surprising cynicism towards all humans. Lucy, a kind of android fortune teller he meets at the hideout of his fellow deviants, tells him, “You had it all and you lost it all, now hell lives in you.” In other words, the refusal Markus experienced made him lean fully into the part of his identity he was previously mostly able to ignore. The suggestion is that as long as someone accepts you despite what you are, you can flourish and benefit from access to certain things you might otherwise be barred from. As a black person, you need someone to enable you.

This becomes particularly obvious in the public opinion mechanic that’s introduced in Markus’ storyline. Early on, Markus declares his intent by saying, “I’m not going to ask for the right to smile, or love or stand tall,” only to then in fact ask for it. After you break into a local TV station, you get to broadcast a message. After the obligatory reminder

that what you say will, “Shape the future of your people,” everything in your speech that even remotely sounds like a demand is met by a dip in public opinion. If you don’t keep public opinion favorable through pacifist actions and the constant readiness to sacrifice yourself, you’ll lose.

Meanwhile, what the group you lead thinks of you is completely irrelevant to the overall plot. Despite being hailed as free beings, every android at Jericho not only gets “awakened” by Markus using unexplained magic powers and the words, “You’re free now,” they are from that point onwards free to do what Markus tells them to do. David Cage seems to be of the idea that as soon as you know who “your people” are, complete homogeneity is a mere formality.

Like many other games, *Detroit: Become Human* needs an ending that suggests players won the fight. In the best possible ending, Markus overcomes oppression by outnumbering his opponents. Despite



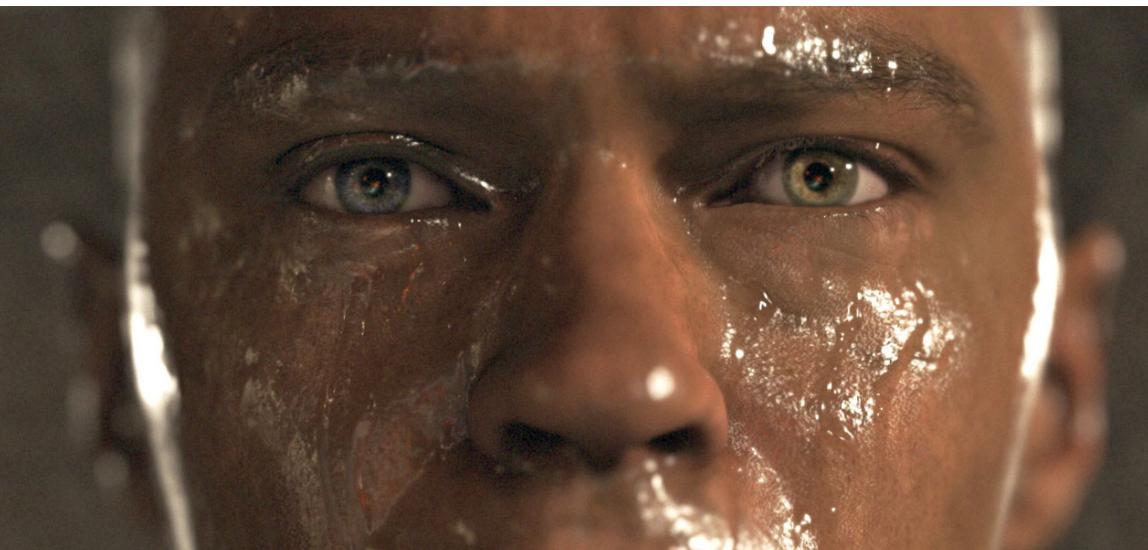
the fact that thousands of androids are being killed in concentration camps at the same time, unable to defend themselves, recruiting a small army of androids helps even out the numbers. Despite the insistence that freedom will be won through peaceful actions, the fact that you activated a number of androids this big means you could fight back if threatened. Become the majority and your problems will be solved.

For androids, the fight ends with the vague promise of civil rights, but for the black people whose history David Cage gutted for dramatic impact, the problems aren't over. Unlike *Detroit's* androids, black people can't hide the color of their skin or dodge a hail of bullets. The whole point of the events of Ferguson was that if you shoot a person, they stay dead. To know this and then take away that the quote, "I can't breathe," would be cool for your game because, ya know, androids don't need to breathe, is crossing a line.

Being black means being aware that your legal rights can be willfully disregarded. I grew up with a very clear understanding of places I shouldn't go and people I should avoid. It's a part of my everyday life. Black people don't march because they want to win anyone's sympathy; they march because they are angry. The songs and quotes Cage uses weren't designed as calculated tools that let you gain rights with lawmakers or brownie points with the media, they were and are expressions of people who often simply just want to be left alone.

No matter how peacefully I express my feelings, as a minority, I have to expect to be disregarded, despite the laws that promise me otherwise. Cage's portrayal of racial conflict comes from a position that allows him to disregard everything that doesn't have the highest dramatic impact.

Meanwhile, black people like me continue their lives. 🍷



REVVING THE ENGINE

A SERIES PROFILING THE RECIPIENTS OF
UNREAL DEV GRANTS



MINE 18



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.](#)

Editor's Note: Mine 18 is not an Unreal Dev Grant winner, but we feel it is a notable and interesting use of the Unreal Engine. We hope you enjoy this brief digression from our sponsored mission.

A team of college students from Eastern Kentucky University is creating a time machine.

It's called *Mine 18*, a walking simulator inspired by the natural landscape and the coal mines of Blue Heron, Kentucky. Blue Heron is a ghost town, one of many settlements in Appalachia that sprung up around the coal industry in 1930s, only to fade away a few decades later. *Mine 18* is a fictive recreation of Blue Heron that allows players to explore both a replica of the current environment and the lives of the people who lived there in the past.

The game started out as a class assignment to create an interactive environment. Lead developer Lacey Lansaw turned to game design after receiving a master's degree in applied anthropology, as a way to, well, apply her learning in a more engaging way. Along with the rest of the class, Lansaw created the original version of *Mine 18*, more a portfolio piece for environment and prop art than a fully realized game.

The team worked to expand its interactive elements, adding journal entries, an inventory system and an end game in order to qualify for the ESA's College Game Competition at this E3 2018 – all within about a week and half before the competition deadline. The competition selected *Mine 18* as one of the top five and ECU sent Lacey and got to attend their first E3 exhibiting their game.

Lacey took time out of developing from *Mine 18* from a demo into a full-fledged game to chat with us about Blue Heron, her E3 experience and her hopes for the game.

Let's start with a look to the future. What do you hope *Mine 18* will be in its final form?

Now that we have had time to actually think about the feedback we have gotten and where we actually want the game to go we've added in a more intriguing narrative and interesting gameplay. Play as a young archaeologist in search of her long lost grandmother as you

explore an abandoned mining town located at the base of a dam that is about to collapse. As you play you will discover real stories about the history of Appalachia while attempting to make it to see your grandmother one last time.



Blue Heron's coal tiple as it appears in real life. Photo by Brian Stansberry.

What inspired *Mine 18*? Do you have a personal connection to Blue Heron?

We created the game for a class project. We chose Appalachia as our setting because it's not something that is represented very well in media. A handful of us grew up in Appalachia and we recognize the beauty and diversity of the region. It was also something that was accessible to us as students going to Eastern Kentucky University. Appalachia is literally outside of our window. Going forward we really want to show Appalachia in a light that is more accurate and positive. Most of us are from Appalachia so we have a real appreciation for what it means to be from this region.

***Mine 18* is a walk through history. How did you go about collecting the stories in the game?**

For the E3 demo, we made up stories relating to black lung, a real danger, then and now, in mining communities. Since E3, we have been doing a lot of research. We've reached out to historians and sociologists to gather information and oral stories from Appalachian

people. For the final release we are hoping to feature true events and stories. There are wonderfully full collections of oral stories at ECU and UK that we will be pulling from.

How much of *Mine 18* is a 1-to-1 recreation of Blue Heron? How do you balance recreation against the constraints of creating a playable environment?

We used a lot of creative freedom when recreating Blue Heron. Since it was for a class, we really didn't have that much time to go down and visit so we used Google Images. Some of us had been there before so we relied on those people to help us as well. The coal tipple, the bridge and the river are pretty accurate though. Going forward we are actually using height map data from Blue Heron and other Appalachian towns to create a fictional town that will represent central Appalachia.

It's difficult to make a game fun and have it be super realistic at the same time. Reality is boring and in a game world, the landscape might not make sense. We had to change the environment around Blue Heron a lot just so we could block the player from jumping off the map completely. For this game we are going to combat this obstacle by combining landscapes from different towns and telling real stories, showing real culture. It will be historical fiction, but just because it's fiction doesn't mean we can't learn something from it, so I would also call it an educational game.



Have folks in the area seen the game? How did they react?

Yes! We have had people from the area play it and go “Hey, I’ve been drunk on that river” or “We would run across that bridge all the time as kids!” We’ve had people say how scary accurate it is, especially the coal tipple and bridge.

What led you to use Unreal Engine 4 for the game?

Most of us had only ever used Unity and we wanted to learn something different. We also heard a rumor that it was easier to make your game look really high quality with Unreal and we wanted to make our game look as realistic as we could. At this point, a lot of people on our team have spent so much time in UE4 using Blueprints, doing technical art things so we are just going to continue with it.



You participated in this year’s E3. What was that like? How did folks in the larger videogame world react to the project?

E3 was amazing, I only hope that I can have an experience like that again. It was absolutely insane going in early as exhibitors and seeing first hand all the cool displays and being able to get in line early to play various games. Being able to showcase our game was the best part. Our demo was a walking simulator so some people weren’t that into it, but we still had quite a few people who were amazed at what

we were doing. We had AAA industry professionals come play our game and compliment us on the quality, especially since it only took us three months to get it out. Going to E3 really inspired us to keep working on *Mine 18* because people are interested in the other, truer, side of Appalachia. People want to see what Appalachia can do and we are going to try to show them.

* * *

You can play a the E3 demo of Mine 18 now. It is available for [download at Itch.io](#). For more on the development of Mine 18, follow the team on [Twitter](#), [Facebook](#) and [Instagram](#). 🇺🇸



Contributors

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Illustrations

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Cover, title page for "For She Has Tasted the Fruit," by Oscar Joyo