

UNWINNABLE MONTHLY

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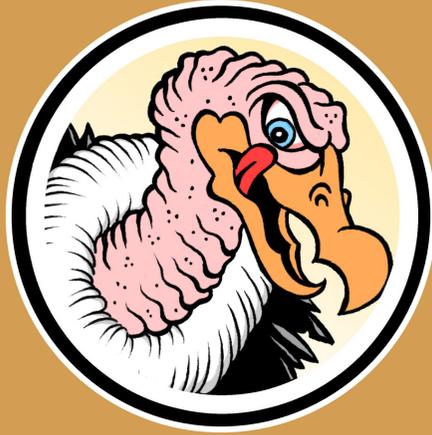


THE LAST OF US • ABUSE AND GAME DESIGN

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Monthly

131



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This machine kills fascists.



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Hi.

This month's cover story is by Phillip Russell and is a powerful read about the portrayal of Blackness in *The Last of Us*. The story speaks for itself.

I do want to talk for a second about Chris Kindred's amazing cover art. When trying to think of an artist to commission for the cover, everyone involved in the conversation thought of Chris first. When they turned in the sketch, they said this:

"I had more options to send, but I feel strongly about this idea in particular. It'd [be a] lovingly rendered image of Sam's robot seen through a cracked door, as abandoned and forgotten as the potential of the Black characters in the series."

I bring this up because my approach to cover art, I like to think, is without preconceived notions (pretty white of me, I know). Find an artist whose vibe fits, trust them to do their thing. I rarely interject with art direction. But Chris' angle legitimately surprised me and got to the heart of Phillip's story in a way I did not expect. This is an excellent example of the importance of having diverse perspectives (as in, those other than my white cis-male perspective). Chris' talents and insight reminded me of that value and delivered a perfect cover to boot.

Violet Adele Bloch delivers the second feature, on abuse and game design. Her story is also powerful and doesn't need me to speak for it.

In the columns, Noah Springer serves up a new set of hip hop recommendations. Oluwatayo Adewole lets out an existential wail, then continues their world tour with the Ghanaian film *The Burial of Kojó*. Amanda Hudgins looks at how real life niche interests enrich some fanfiction. Diego Nicolás Argüello ruminates on youthful rebellion and *Deadly Class*. Declan Taggart examines the nostalgia at the heart of *Family*.

Deirdre Coyle appreciates Geralt's horse, Roach. Melissa King appreciates Isabelle from *Animal Crossing* (Melissa's letter also seems to be aimed at Diego, funnily enough). Ben Sailer tours the hellscape of Twitter. Matt Marrone is both there and not there for a gunfight in his neighborhood. Yussef Cole looks at the unusual way the sense of tragedy drains away in *Hollow Knight*. Sara Clemens waxes poetic about *Remnant: From the Ashes* and betrayal (accidentally visited upon them by yours truly).

Autumn Wright ponders the act of returning and *Night in the Woods*. Justin Reeve looks a repurposed architecture in *Metro Exodus*. Rob Rich remembers

the isolation and dread of *Duskers*. Adam Boffa examines *Lichenia*'s ecological approach to city building.

Finally, I talk to Chris Kindred for our artist spotlight and look at the forthcoming RPG *Project Witchstone* for our sponsored feature. Oh, and I also started a new podcast, with Ed Coleman, in which [we listen to and discuss every album of Iron Maiden's discography](#), one side at a time.

I talk a lot in these letters about how themes sometimes crop up organically. This month, everyone seems to be on edge, with low key anxiety jangling even in the more light hearted stories (for good reason, given the state of current events). It might be good to read this issue across several sittings.

Be well out there. We'll be back shortly with Exploits, on October 1.

Stu Horvath
Kearny, New Jersey
September 21, 2020



I just copped *Tony Hawk Pro Skater 1 +2* last week, and I've been straight grinding. I hadn't played the series in over a decade, but as soon as it loaded up, I was hit with the nostalgia wave, both from the gameplay and the soundtrack. The unique blend of pop punk and hip hop was just the hole I needed to fall into. Soon enough though, I started adding my own soundtrack, mainly so that I could pretend to be doing some sort of work for Stu on this column while skating. Here's a little sampling of what has been on rotation.

Felt – *Felt 4 U*

Now this is an album appropriate to bang in Tony Hawk. Felt (Murs from Living Legends and Atmosphere's Slug) dropped their first album in 2002, back when *Tony Hawk 3* was the hottest thing out. Eleven years after their last album, the two are back just in time to remind us of that (slightly) more innocent time. Produced by the other half of Atmosphere, Ant, *Felt 4 U* is funky, lyrical and fun. Groovy bass-lines drive the production and the two MC's flip lyrical McTwists with ease. Together, Murs and Slug whip up detailed stories, while slipping in themes of love and sex, popular culture and violence. Despite the retro first impressions that the album exhibits, *Felt 4 U* ends feeling like the next step forward in their story.



Kenny Mason – *Angelic Hoodrat*

About a decade ago I was obsessed with whether hip hop would eventually reach back into the '90s alt-rock, grunge scenes for inspiration. I never would have thought that it might come out of Atlanta, but by the end of that decade, many Southern artists had started to move in that direction, and now on Kenny Mason's debut album, *Angelic Hoodrat*, the influence of bands like The Pixies and the Smashing Pumpkins is on full display. Although the album starts with a relaxed (but slightly menacing) tone over lo-fi, grainy productions that merge into trap beats, by the end of *Angelic Hoodrat*, Mason has put his influences on his sleeve. '90s-sounding guitar riffs and melodic singing filter throughout the album, especially in the latter half. This isn't your traditional ATL sound, and I'm excited to see how Mason can drive the genre forward with some off-kilter influences.



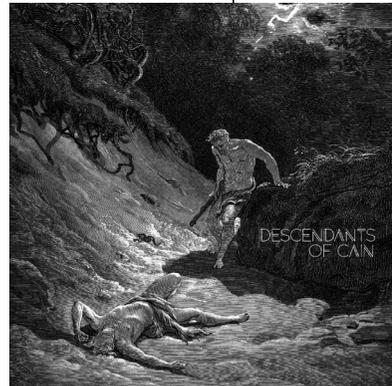
Kota the Friend – *Everything*

Traditionally, hip hop isn't known for being a very *nice* genre. Rappers often celebrate violence and survival rather than empathy and kindness. Kota the Friend is here to flip that notion on its head. On *Everything*, Kota raps peacefully over plunky guitars, soft horns and high hats, giving us a sonically light album that still carries some thematic weight and verges into the melancholic at different points. But, when we are here, at the end of *Everything*, I'm glad that Kota is the friend who is here for us.



Ka – *Descendants of Cain*

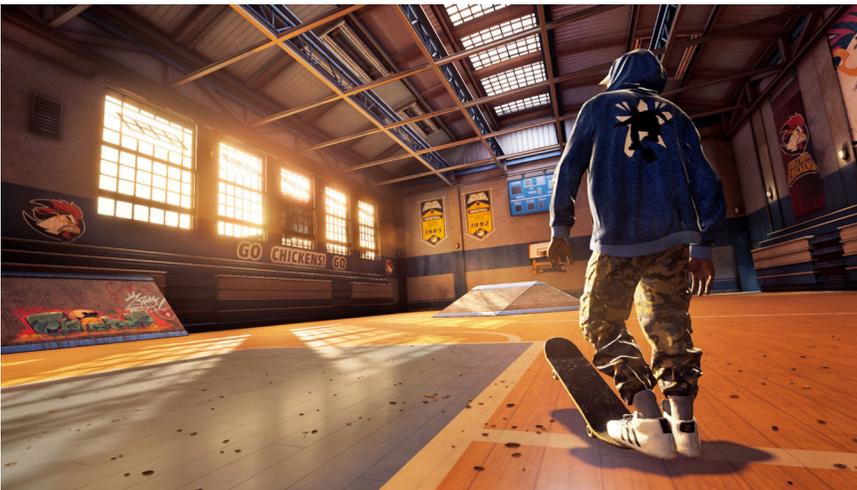
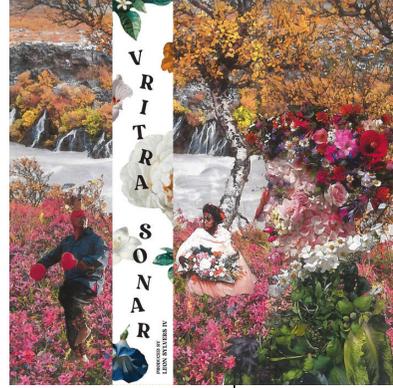
If you live in Brownsville, Brooklyn, you might recognize Kaseem Ryan as a fixture of your local firehouse, where he works full-time as a fire captain. But since 2008, Ryan has also been moonlighting as the rapper Ka and releasing music on his own record label, Iron Works. On his newest release, *Descendants of Cain*, Ka reflects on the black experience in America (and worldwide to a degree) through the biblical story of Cain. Ka's weaves



samples from bible stories throughout, framing his typical style: minimalist, hushed and low-key, but lyrically intricate. Ka doesn't seem to be breaking new ground with this record, but he still dropped a heater.

Vritra – *Sonar*

For some reason, Vritra was never really on my radar back when Odd Future was churning out projects in 2010, but based on *Sonar*, I feel like I've been missing out. Jazzy, surreal beats provide the backdrop for Vritra's eclectic flows and thoughtful lyrics that question the value of economic and cultural success. By the end of the album, he seems to settle on personal validation: "love yourself today/I mean it's hard but it's possible." With that in mind, I'm going to go work on appreciating myself by grinding around Venice Beach. 🕒



This month I'm starting this column with some honesty. No jazzy intro. No corny joke about Jollof wars or any of that.

When I got invited to write this column I thought – great! I've got a place where I don't have to write about the various interlocking ways society is actively trying to kill me every day. This could be a breath of fresh air, some respite from the constant feeling that selling trauma back to the systems that inflicted it was the only thing I could offer.

And it's true! I could write about practically anything right now, there's no gun to my head, no script, no teleprompter and I still can't avoid it.

I can't stop thinking about how Jacob Blake was shot in the back seven times. How excuse after excuse was made for the people who shot him whilst he lay paralyzed and handcuffed to his bed. How any "justice" within the current systems will be incomplete. How incidents like this are a feature not a bug.

And I'm thinking about how the Windrush Generation remain uncompensated. How Grenfell burned and nothing changed. How if/when I am killed, they'll have to figure out how to squash my name into a hashtag that will fit on grifter's shirt.

The worst thing is I could write this any month of the year. Just a quick "Find and Replace." Dates, names, places, they're practically interchangeable. Who would even notice?

I want you to understand that I could lie to you in this column and pretend that I'm okay. In future I will. I'll tell you that small lie of omission I tell every time I don't give you this preamble. But for once I am offering you an honesty and vulnerability I rarely give myself.

I'm telling you that I could barely bring myself to do this. That I stared at a blank screen waiting for more to appear through the vague grey haze. I tried to research, read, do all the things I was excited for a few weeks ago, and I just couldn't.

Maybe that's a failure. Toni Morrison said "The very serious function of racism is distraction." So by getting caught up in it I'm losing. Adding one more point to the overwhelming lead that white supremacy has in this rigged game.

Or maybe it's a success. Maybe writing these words out is self-care. Turning the vague and emotional into something tangible. Taking a cue from Baldwin because "Not everything that is faced can be changed, but nothing can be changed until it is faced." So I'm facing this pain by making it productive. Or maybe that's just the capitalism brain worms speaking again.

So in this haze of feeling, I'm splitting the difference. I'm still giving you one of the pieces I originally intended – on *The Burial of Koyo*. Not for you but for me, because I have to believe that there is room for Black existence beyond anger and grief. That we can imagine, that we can dream. Otherwise, what is the point of it all?

Or maybe that's another lie, laundered through the words of the dead. I guess we'll never know.



Finding the Poetry in The Burial of Koyo

The *Burial of Koyo* tells the story of a little Ghanaian girl from a remote village who tries to rescue her father after he goes missing. When you watch this play out on screen, it would be very easy to describe the style as poetic. But what does that actually mean?

Make five seven five,
In the lens of a camera,
That is poetry

Or maybe:

Leave ,
To let your fill
the with their minds.

Or it's straightforward. Ebbs and flows. Time becomes putty in the hands of a master, a living rhythm on the silver screen.

So when I talk about the poetry here I want to be specific. The closest comparison in any specific form would be a ballad, or maybe a broader narrative spoken-word piece – but even that's reductive and limitingly Western. The more accurate comparison would be the tales of the oral cultures of pre-colonial "Ghana" being presented on screen. Fables passed from generation to generation, explaining the world that we know and the forces that lurk in the "the real in-between."



As with most poetry, you have your striking images. The most powerful of these is the Crow. A seemingly malevolent force, ruler of the realm in-between, they lurk around every corner, waiting to take the sacred dove. Here they are represented by someone in an imposing (and incredibly cool) plague doctor-esque costume. Whether it's a blurring of the lens, the stunning colored smoke which surrounds them, or lighting in silhouette, the Crow is never allowed to feel fully present or tangible. There's always a degree to which they're something abstract and beyond our perception. A force, or maybe even an image – but not a worldly being.

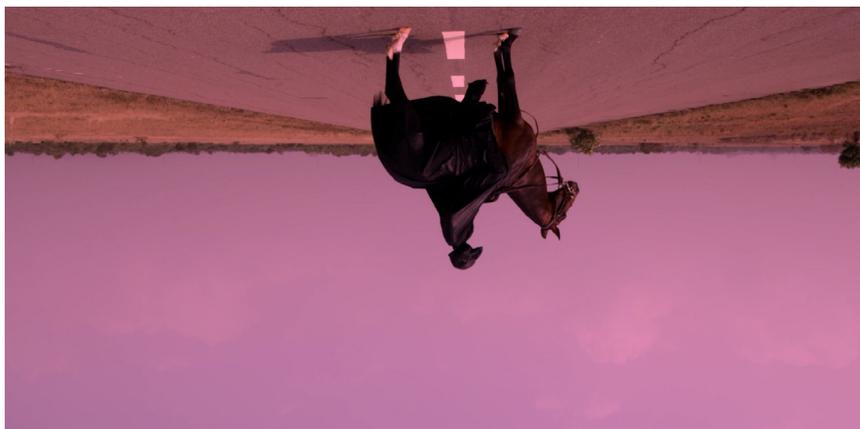
There's also the water. Ripe with animistic energy it surrounds the village where our protagonist resides. Michael Fernandez's camerawork makes this water stunning in the daytime and the moonlight, feeling almost endless. More than just a body of water, it's a quasi-mythical barrier which tries (and ultimately fails) to protect its residents from external forces like the neo-colonialism that slowly encroaches in just beyond the water's edge.

However, what moves this from poetry in the general sense, to the specific poetry of oral cultures lies in its sense of fracture. We're never presented with

any sort of singular objective narrative; instead, we get an assembling of glued together fragments from our narrator's memory. Dreams, overheard conversations and childhood imagination carry the same weight as direct experience and are inseparable from it. This isn't the story written down by a chronicler, it's the tales of days gone by that you hear on a grandparent's lap, complete with all the gaps and paradoxes. Crucially, much like the ever-shifting oral tales it replicates, the film doesn't see this fracture as a place of loss, but as a place of creation and collaboration between past and present. The embrace of this allows for impressionistic breaks from reality. There's a real instability created in the camera suddenly becoming handheld and shaky, or the frame being flipped upside down. The break from reality also enables glorious uses of color, like the uses of purple throughout that drip with magical beauty.

Part of what makes this particularly notable is the context of the films which surround it. *The Burial of Kojó* is situated within a new wave of African film that seeks to establish itself as a legitimate force on the world stage rather than just fodder for memes. This includes films like *Rafiki*, *Lionheart* and *The Wedding Party*, which have much cleaner productions than their predecessors and are generally more legible to a wider audience. Whilst many of these films are great, there is a tendency to take "better" to mean "more Western," so a lot of this new wave ends up hewing closer to mainstream American cinema in a way that I find kind of frustrating. *The Burial of Kojó* is a complete departure from that, forging its own path by embracing the fragments of the past to create something better.

In a sense that's all we can do as Black people living in a post-colonial world, take the fragments that weren't erased and craft an identity out of them. What *The Burial of Kojó* shows is whilst we can mourn the point of fracture, it's an opportunity for creation if we take that leap and dare to dream. 🍷





Niche Interests

There's a fic out there where Wei Wuxian and Lan Wangji, the cultivator couple from ancient China that feature prominently in the hit Chinese drama *The Untamed* are trauma surgeons. It's good. Between sleepless nights and shifts that don't end Wei drinks coffee mixed with hot chocolate and "saltines, to cut the taste of dust." "There's a lot of unexplained medical terminology sorry," the writer warns in the tags. The fiction gets into the gritty details, a lot of blood yes, descriptions of traumatic surgery, of course, but also a breakdown of the hours worked and lost. The way that life has been completely warped into a block around the hospital. It is a lived experience. At the end, it's no surprise when the author mentions a specific detail about their own hospital that they work in, an oddity pieced out when they did further research.

There's an adage in writing, a bit of craft advice so old that not only have there been significant works written on it, there have been significant works written rebutting it. *Write what you know*. Sometimes, in fiction, you write about your experience so vividly, so precisely, that it could not have come from anyone but you. In fanfiction circles this is the Extremely Specific AU, one where the reader can tell that the author has spent some time living in the world that they're writing about.

What you find here are works that intersect with reality in interesting ways. KPop fandom fics where instead of being in a band, the members of BTS are instead lawyers working in the foster care system, with deep details on the failings and triumphs therein. Orchestra alternative universes that know more

than the fact that there are different chairs, but also the types of movements and which pieces would be more difficult for which instruments. A *Teen Wolf* story where Stiles is a member of the Deaf community and has some visual impairments, and the story goes into details of what that specifically means and what those impairments actually are and how they impact his life in a substantial way rather than just saying “he’s deaf and blind.” These works are a step further than your traditional AU because they go past even the level of just “you did your research” and into, “there’s so much information here you couldn’t have known without being steeped into this on a cultural/educational level.”

Derivative works are frequently about turning the extraordinary into the mundane, about recontextualizing the things that we love into the lives that we lead and the Extremely Specific AU is an excellent example of that. This is the life of the author, the experiences they have. These are the ways that they live. They have taken these fictional characters and fit them into their lives, found them homes in the spaces where they live. There’s a beautiful passion to it, to seeing the way these two (usually) disparate things interact. To see the interplay therein. 🍷





There's No Youth Anymore

I have never been of the rebellious type, but there is one anecdote I always recall fondly. Back when I was a fourteen-year-old high schooler, I was dating an eighteen year old woman. She was my first formal partner and my mother's first set of horror stories. The relationship was met with disapproval from both my parents, but I endured either way. The problem is that I started lying, in a very sloppy way, to make that happen.

In this particular story, her best friends, a couple that already in their 20s, invited us to a gig in a bar that was around two hours away from my home. The plan was for all four of us to meet up at my ex's place, grab a bus and then take a train all the way to its final station. The boyfriend was the bassist and singer of the band, so I didn't want to miss it. But there was no scenario in which my mother was going to grant me permission.

I had been in the relationship for the most part of that year already, and there had been many clashes between my mother and I. I was clear about her age from day one, but my honesty put everything into risk from the beginning, so I had to improvise. I'd often go and meet her after class, telling my mom I was studying at a friend's place or some other weak excuse. It worked fine for a while, but there was always a risk. A risk that was met with hesitation, followed by a gut feeling to give the decision a second thought.

By then we had already fought a couple times, but she was slowly regaining her confidence, so she agreed on letting me stay at a friend's place for the night. Or at least that's what I had told her. She thought I was on a sleep-over

five blocks from my home – instead, I was on a train with the person I wasn't supposed to meet, travelling fifteen miles away. Again, I was sloppy.

The night went well. We had a couple beers, watched the bands live and then slowly made our return late into the night. I was hesitant about whether or not to just return home directly, but I had to go back to my ex's place. Not only my backpack was there, but my phone as well. I had only realized this when we were already on the train and it haunted me throughout the entire night, wondering if I had missed a message or a call. For those couple hours, I tried my best to ignore the outside world and just enjoy the moment.



Needless to say I was grounded for several weeks after that, a prospect I had foreseen when I picked up my phone and saw my notification bar filled with missed calls and dozens of voice messages. Turns out that my mom had offered to send over ice cream to my friend's home as a thank you gesture to his parents, but was surprised when I didn't reply back. In the morning, she went to knock on the door and asked if anything had happened. They had no idea of what she was talking about.

Despite the awful moment, and the similarly bittersweet memories that followed in the next couple months, this is an anecdote I always go back to. It was the only period of my life where I actually felt capable of doing anything and proud of being a pain in the ass for the first time. It was a raw and inspiring feeling that was perpetually in conflict with the boy I always had been. But part of me loved that. Despite only being 23 years old now, I have never been able to experience this again.

Deadly Class is a comic book series that started back in 2014, written by Rick Remender and illustrated by Wes Craig, as well as a handful of other artists. It tells the story of Marcus Lopez Arguello, a young orphan who is enrolled into a secret assassin's school, where he learns the craft of killing and the moral codes that come with the profession. But it's also a tale about falling in love with dangerous people, breaking rules and getting into fights until sunrise.

As fictional as the premise is, Remender tells readers in the afterword of the first volume that most of his inspirations come from real life experiences, being a downtown Phoenix teenager in the mid 1980s, around the time when

the punk and skate scenes from Los Angeles had blended in the underground culture there. *Deadly Class* takes place in San Francisco, but the interpretations remain tied to his years growing up around goths, rockabillies and stoners. Hanging out in the back of the gym, smoking weed in between classes. But living in this era also involved relentless violence in the streets on a daily basis.

“This story takes place in a recognizable world,” he says. “There’s no magic. No spaceships. No one can fly or shoot eye beams. It’s a coming of age story about broken kids expected to deal with a violent world. It’s the 80s. No cell phones or email. And many of these stories are based on true events. I’ve never tried anything quite like this before. And I’ve never had so much fun making a comic.”



I already delved into the struggles and obstacles that came with turning my hobby into a job in my previous column, talking about my decision to write for a living. But I didn’t have the chance to talk about how much work has intertwined my daily life, to the point where everything I do usually involves it.

I’m not afraid to admit that I work best when I’m under pressure. A lot of my work has begun and been delivered on the same day as the deadline. The problem is that working freelance doesn’t guarantee a paycheck at the end of the month, so you’re always pushed into taking more than you can handle, just so you know there will still be work once you’re done with the current commission. Don’t get me wrong, it’s always a privilege to be able to do this, considering how highly competitive the field is and the few opportunities available out there. It just comes down to the fact that I don’t know how to treat it as a job that goes against having a schedule, but desperately requires one regardless.

Two of the trips I had last year were work related and I did an awful job at taking care of myself, barely getting any sleep, skipping several meals and taking on much more than I should have. The other two were vacations from the get-go, but I wasn’t able to detach myself from work. I wrote, I edited, I met deadlines, instead of spending that time paying attention to what my friends were saying. But this goes even far back. My first ever trip with friends, which was a two weeks long escapade to the coast just outside the city, involved several afternoons in a cyber café, covering news shifts for a couple Argentine pesos per month. All the while my friends were at the beach, asking me to

come and join them. After a few days they just stopped insisting, because they knew there was no way of convincing me. I have borrowed friends' laptops a dozen times to finish articles ever since, as I apologized to my editor for being late when it really wasn't the case.

Looking at Gmail is a constant. I sleep with my phone under my pillow and whenever I wake up in the middle of the night, I take a quick look to see if an editor located on a different time zone replied to my emails. This isn't a revelation or anything, I am conscious of everything I have mentioned. It's a topic I often bring up in therapy, as conversations often start with "this is everything I did in the past week" and end with "this is everything that's left to do this week." I constantly think about how to improve it, but with work comes responsibility. Editors are usually more than understanding when I ask for an extra day, especially this year, but I often do so when I know I'm juggling something else that has to be done first.

All of this affects my lifestyle. I enjoy going out on the weekends, but it mostly happened because my friends invited me first. I turned them down several times when I was rushing a piece, often on a Friday night or during the weekends. I began to understand the importance of procrastinating, even if just for one night in the week. But the habit of looking at my phone expecting a Gmail notification and thinking about the day after always creeped inside my head.

Freelancing is and will always be a voice in your head that can't be shut down, telling you that you're wasting time when you try to relax and that you're not doing enough when you're literally juggling several deadlines at a time. I often look around and see my peers going through similar experiences, and it sucks. But that's the job. The problem comes with not knowing where to pull the brake even if it's just for a few minutes. Quarantine has made this effort almost non-existent, and suddenly spending 10 to 14 hours on the PC became the norm. There's periods where I try to clock off at a certain time. But if I'm working on a big project, then I know it's gonna happen again. I just accept it.

It hurts to look back at a memory when my friends were hanging out, doing literally anything else, while I was sitting in a corner trying to hit a word count and my mind cried for 30 minutes off the computer. But what hurts the more is that I feel I've been missing out on key moments of my life, and there's no way to recover them.

When I see the folks from *Deadly Class*, I see the high school and young adult years I wish I could have experienced to some degree. I wish I could have



caught a ride to the middle of nowhere, to make a whole lot of shitty decisions, more often. As painful as it was back then, it was a formative experience. It showed me that there's so much more out there waiting for me, and that sometimes you have to get out of your comfort zone to get to them.

2020 is the year in which I dyed my hair for the first time. The year where I spent months trying to cure my two recently added piercings that would get infected at least once per month. I don't know what awaits me after quarantine is over and I'm able to go out into the world again. But I know who I want to be and the places I want to go, and how much of myself I need to change in order to accomplish this.

There's a moment in the comic when Marcus finds himself in a mosh pit, acting surprised they were a thing anymore. His friend Saya invites him to join her, but he refuses. "Not really interested in getting beat up by a bunch of strangers trying to sell how aggressive they are." She sees this differently, describing it as a pure expression of their enthusiasm and joy for the music. But it's the last line of the conversation that stuck up with me. "Quit being so fucking judgmental of everything and you might actually have some fun for a change. Contrary to what you seem to think, life is supposed to be enjoyed."

Deadly Class is often the only escape from my current reality. Changing my course in life now would be silly and irresponsible – I love my job, and I don't see myself changing careers anytime soon. We're all trapped in our work from home environments either way, and at this rate it's not gonna change anytime soon. But I'm also someone in his 20s who has chosen to put his work first during many key moments of my life, and didn't get to enjoy them fully.

The thought of leaving everything behind and never looking back is scary. It's a risk met with hesitation, followed by a gut feeling to give the decision a second thought. And that's what makes it so liberating. 🍷



The London Pop Scene

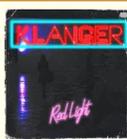
- Ra-Ra Buffalo
- The Rialtos
- Klanger
- Clarisse Montag
- Casta Nyet
- WaterColours
- Little Red Marx
- Easy Tiger
- Dava Pavlava



Dreamy guitar textures and abstract lyrics. Become unlikely fixtures of mainstream radio in the early '90s and still maintain a passionate fanbase in Belgium. A reunion has been mooted for the mayor of Antwerp's birthday.

Click the band name on the cassette to play their music track.









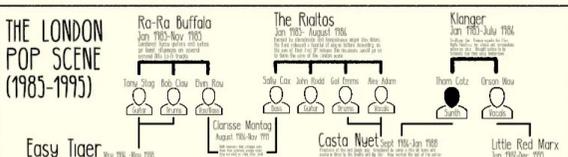
Notes and reference

- Memoir of Gary McLaw Director of Exodus Records
- Interview with Alex Adam: Melody Maker June 1983
- Klanger Note to Venues - All or Nothing tour 1984
- Clarisse Montag Press Quotes 1987 - Life is Piss Tour
- Letter to Mike Jauce (The Smiths) 1987
- Internal Memo - Exodus records 1984
- Autobiography of Orson Way 1987
- Tom Caltz Interview - Bassist

Now the surviving members find themselves not only in the throws of a love affair with the mainstream but also paired up with arguably the most talented singer on the scene.

The result is Stormy Teacups: a collection of up to the minute, stare at your shoes and mumble into your mic jams that are threatening to engulf indie rock as we know it. Gone is the jangle of the Smiths. The Cure. Echo and

THE LONDON POP SCENE (1985-1995)



Looking Back While Moving On

Nothing about *Family* is real, except for the nostalgia. The songs aren't real. They were written for the game. The found family that populates its cast never existed, and 91.5 Sussex FM, the radio station that provides the soundtrack for the game's hour or so of gameplay, is completely made up. You probably wouldn't realize that, though, if you'd played *Family* without reading this or the comments on [its itch.io page](https://www.itch.io).

Family is a game of logic puzzles. It invites players to complete a musical family tree using clues gathered from a radio interview with one of the bands' members, by flicking through the music of the bands themselves and from foraging for information among extracts from memoirs, a band's rider and record label memos. You don't need a microscope to see the DNA of *Return of the Obra Dinn*.

The game is inspired by the London indie rock scene of the late 1980s - inspired by the music but probably more so by experiences and bands that once were - but the key to its success isn't the long lost past. I don't care about this kind of music, these non-people and their never-stories. The key is where *Family* situates its player: in modernity, as listeners to a local radio retrospective and readers of the scraps of text that supposedly remain.

The backward-looking British local radio feel. The Space Raiders and Egg and Cress sandwich on the rider. The types of egos that you might have met through a mutual at uni (if you were unlucky). The specificity of the player's situation makes *Family's* abundant nostalgia a phenomenon that can

be parsed and understood by anyone, including those who don't treasure the music the same way the game's creator Tim Sheinman obviously does. It promotes empathy and allows the emotional framework behind *Family* to be transported onto other reference points for nostalgia. In my case, *Smashing Pumpkins*, *Buffy*, *Duckula*, *Robocop*.

At first, I felt like the detective mechanics – the main hold-over from *Obra Dinn* – were an awkward fit for the theme, the same kind of clash of story and action that makes me wince any time I stumble on a hidden object game. The more time passes since I finished *Family*, the more I think those mechanics are the game's master stroke and the main reason it succeeds in creating an authentic-feeling past where other games with similar aims might not. *Family* is a game about piecing together identities and stories from fragments of sound and text. As evocative and crisscrossing as those fragments might be, they remain just debris, offering only a partial view of reality, even when the piecing together is done. The less complete the picture is, the more authentic it feels: the fragments become more than the sum of their parts in a way that that cliché rarely merits.

Looking backwards also lends *Family*'s nostalgia the benefit of a dose of reflection. Sure it has the bittersweet quality that infuses a lot of exercises like it – gesturing at the inevitability of time's passing, of loss, of the impossibility of recapturing something gone (that ultimately never existed in the first place). But the game escapes from the sentimentality that often accompanies such bittersweetness by alluding to the darkness as well as the light beneath the music, to addiction, personal and interpersonal chaos. Perhaps the saddest stories are those that are left open, the names who figure big in *Family*'s earliest mysteries but, intentionally or simply due to the fact of their puzzle having been completed, fade away, leaving players to wonder if those rockers got lost in addiction, are still covering *Oasis* songs in a Camden pub every other Friday night or gave it all up to work in IT.

Family lives for nostalgia, but it's not saying that things used to be better in the good old days. It's just saying that it misses those old days, both the good and the frequently bad. The game's in a comfortable place, still loving that old life, recognizing all its flaws. That's something that I think it has in common with the best modern nostalgia pieces, even those with very different tones, aims and narratives. *Stranger Things*, *She-Ra and the Princesses of Power*, *Super Meat Boy*, *Gone Home*, *Broforce*. They demonstrate a way to do nostalgia that strikes the right balance: faithful without closing their eyes, looking back while still moving on, building worlds on top of and out of the past rather than simply re-creating what was there before. 🍷



During this plague year, *The Witcher 3: Wild Hunt* has been providing me with many marvelous hours of escapism. I've already written about wanting to escape from quarantine by [stepping into a pastoral painting](#) or by [traveling to a mysterious island of seers](#). This past June, I literally escaped from New York by moving to Virginia (I packed up my Brooklyn apartment in 48 hours, feeling rather pleasantly detached from reality all the while). Moving from New York to Virginia also meant moving from living with three roommates and one cat to living entirely alone.

Back to that in a minute.

Based on my interests – witch business, high fantasy, protagonists with cool scars – you'd think I would have absorbed every Witcher-related narrative long ago. But I never finished *The Witcher 2: Assassins of Kings* (it could barely run on the computer I had in 2011) and only read *The Last Wish* a few months ago.

I don't know why it took me so long to get here, but now I am fully absorbed in all elements of Geralt (the titular Witcher)'s, life, and ready to write about it.

Since I'm writing about my ideal friends here, the obvious character choice for my column would be Yennefer: she only wears black and white (goth), has questionable morals (that's not *not* goth), and is an extremely powerful sorceress (GOTH). Like, I am obviously infatuated with her, but writing about her almost seems . . . too obvious.

So I'm going to write about the character we can all agree is *actually* the best character in the Witcher franchise: Roach, Geralt's horse. We all agree, right?

[The internet agrees](#). Even Henry Cavill, who plays Geralt in the Netflix series, [loves Roach](#). [Here are some memes](#).

Now, I understand that Roach isn't actually just *one* horse – Geralt names all of his horses “Roach,” and he prefers mares. I am referring to my equine companion in *The Witcher 3* – although my convictions about Roach's benevolence apply to every Roach I've encountered in the franchise.

Like Yennefer, Roach is an incredibly powerful woman. She rescues Geralt constantly and has the unexplained ability to teleport from anywhere to anywhere. Roach is the most dependable sidekick I've ever encountered in a game. When Geralt whistles, Roach shows up seconds later.

Now that I live alone in my human life – without even a cat, let alone a horse – you can imagine I've been getting pretty weird during quarantine. I tend to game while wearing a days-old dress, wrapped in a cocoon of velvet blankets, drinking cold brew from the drive-through café that provides me with a brief moment of safely distanced human interaction. Naturally, I talk to myself at home – but more specifically, I talk to Roach. Yes, *Geralt* talks to Roach in the game (“That's it, Roach!”), but I mean that *I*, in my fleshy prison, also talk to Roach.

Whenever the horse appears on screen, I exclaim “*Roooooach!*” from within my weird cocoon, and I feel less alone. Sometimes I ask Roach how she got there (to the top of a mountain, or to the middle of an island). Roach hasn't responded (yet), but I feel she understands. Then we gallop off towards the nearest town, where I socialize with NPCs, go to taverns and ask barkeeps quest-irrelevant questions. I do a lot of things in Novigrad or Velen that I can't do in real life at the moment. I take on every minor side quest (except Gwent-related ones – I will never learn to play Gwent, on principle) because I'm not ready for the game to end.

Sometimes, I find myself in out-of-the-way locations, unable to fast travel and stranded without a sign post in sight. But then I call Roach, and she comes trotting into my peripheral vision through a forest or a herd of people (have I mentioned that a lot of NPCs *cough* in this game? It's very unnerving).

I hop onto Roach's saddle, and we ride away from the monsters (I'm too tired to fight), away from the taverns (I'm over it) and extremely far away from the coughing NPCs. It doesn't matter where I am, Roach always shows up for me. She's the stable companion I need right now. 🐾



Dear Isabelle,
Animal Crossing fans are a little confused about your role in *New Horizons*. With many of your old duties given to Tom Nook and not much for you to announce at the start of the day, some of them lament that you aren't the same Isabelle from *New Leaf*.

"Why doesn't she have anything to say during announcements? All she talks about are her hobbies," they complain.

"She worked so hard in *New Leaf*! Now, all she does is nap and sniff flowers. What happened to the hard-working Isabelle we know and love?" they question.

But, I want you to know that I appreciate your commitment to self-care. Now you understand that you need more than one hour of sleep every night. You remember to stop and notice the little things, like the smell of the flowers on your desk or the view outside of the Resident Services building.

Your worth isn't tied to your work, and you know that now. You relish your favorite crossword puzzles and remind us all when it's "Friday Eve" to keep us encouraged on Thursdays. And every now and then, you remind us not to overdo it.

So, I'd like to thank you. Thank you for reminding me to stop and smell the flowers from time to time. Thank you for telling me to take care of myself when I feel like I'm not working enough.

Most importantly, thank you for reminding us all that our worth isn't the sum of how useful we are to others.

Melissa 🐕



The World's Worst Multi-User Dungeon

It's common to hear Twitter users unlovingly [call the service a "hellsite."](#) Spend enough time on the social network (if you're fortunate or wise enough to have not subjected yourself to it already), and you'll quickly begin to see what they mean. While it's both entertaining and useful for getting real-time news, it's also mind-melting and anxiety-inducing, with the power to obliterate your attention span and sense of inner peace with equal efficiency. Logging into the app feels like being trapped in a negative feedback loop, lured in by quick dopamine hits and an ever-present fear of missing out.

[With more than 330 million users](#), using Twitter often feels like stepping into the world's worst yet most successful [multi-user dungeon \(MUD\)](#). If that feels like a stretch, consider how the site is structured and how users interact with it; you type in some text, people react, and then your engagement stats (likes, replies, retweets) and follower count either go up or down. You converse with a mix of characters comprised of other real people and bot accounts to talk about nearly any niche interest a person might have. Depending on who you are and what you say, you might end up getting in a fight.

For those who might be unfamiliar, MUDs are text-based multiplayer games where users type in commands to explore fantasy worlds with other players while solving puzzles. Sometimes you might make friends playing the game and sometimes you encounter enemies you have to vanquish in order to progress. Depending on what you choose to say and do, your stats go up

or down. Sounds enough like Twitter to my ears, and I have a theory that understanding the similarities between the two just might help explain how Twitter can feel both essential and soul-sucking at the same time.

Try to stick with me here. I promise this is going somewhere.

When you first visit [Twitter's login page](#), you're invited to "follow your interests," "hear what people are talking about" and "join the conversation." It sounds like it's an open-ended platform where one can explore tons of different topics at will, not unlike starting up any kind of RPG where you can roam freely and talk to different folks you find. In reality, the discourse within any single community often revolves around one or two things per day. If you'd rather not shout into the void by yourself, you'll have to contribute something to whatever conversation is trending that day; while it might seem like you have freedom of movement, you're really being led down a narrow path.



Much of this conversation starts with [Twitter's Trending Topics feature](#), which surfaces popular themes and hashtags next to your main timeline. Those topics might be important, like social and political wrongdoing that needs to be exposed. Other times they're comparatively petty. Either way, they appear [easy to game by people acting in bad faith or for nefarious purposes](#), making it that much more difficult to shield yourself from the kinds of misinformation that runs rampant on the platform.

Joining the conversation either way is often an invitation for threats and abuse from trolls. The site's design actively encourages dog-piling that creates a toxic atmosphere that can make using the site deeply dangerous, especially for members of marginalized communities and people without much offline

social support. Your mental health is the cost of admission and there are no win conditions. However, what gets said and done on the site can and does have real-world consequences.

Within any given community built around a niche interest on the site, you'll run into real people who want to share the same passions you do. While you might make connections with interesting people you enjoy conversing with, you'll find just as many bots and anonymous accounts with handles like @REALGAMERGUY69420 hurling abuse, spouting off about conspiracy theories or poisoning the well around political discussion. These are your enemies, and their only goal is to make your Twitter existence as aggravating (and potentially dangerous) as possible.

Your best defenses against these trolls are the Block and Mute buttons. In severe cases, you might report them to Twitter, but it's a dice roll whether moderators will do anything (as a case in point, calls to ban literal Nazi's have been falling on deaf ears for years). Different groups of people might band together to either attack or defend other groups of people. Sounds a lot like forming a party in a role-playing game.

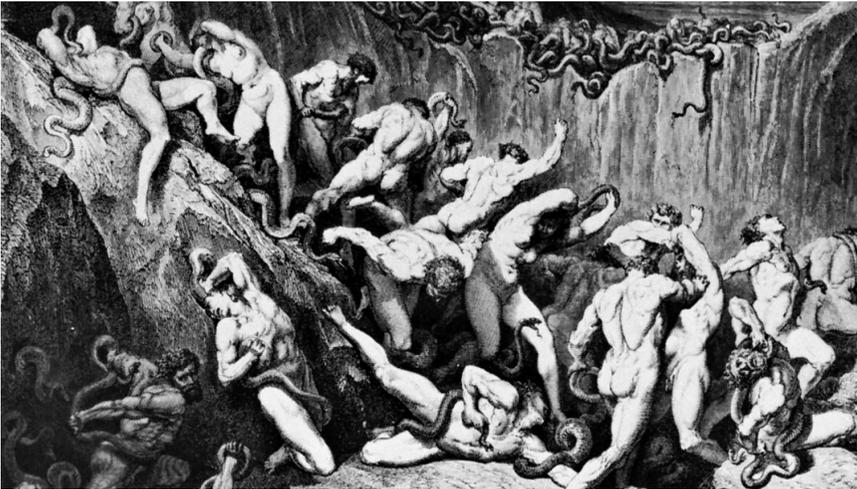
Since users can choose who to follow, who to befriend, and who to listen to on the platform, it's easy to customize your experience to your own goals and interests. The downside to this is creates self-reinforcing echo chambers where opposing viewpoints never enter your sphere unless they're so insane that someone shares it into your timeline to mock it (which is basically a means of initiating combat). People will then pile on until a skirmish breaks out between a mix of humans, [bots](#) and [humans with anonymous accounts who may as well be bots](#). There are almost never any winners.

Making matters worse is Twitter's status as a news platform. One of the best parts about using the service is its ability to break news in real time, and even if you don't have an account, you probably consume tweets somehow; major news stories often hit the web first as tweets, where they're shared by users, surfaced in search engine results, embedded in articles and screenshotted on TV. For content creators and media professionals, being on the site is almost



compulsory, and perhaps no one values it more than journalists for its ability to surface information and connect with sources.

It doesn't take much imagination to see what's wrong here. The media needs Twitter for traffic and influence, but the [platform – by design – warps perception](#); looking at your timeline can feel like looking at the truth through a series of fun house mirrors where reality looks faintly familiar but loses its shape and definition. It's like looking at a fantasy world based loosely on the one we live in where everyone's looking for which way to go. It can have the effect of making issues seem bigger or smaller than they really are, or that given opinions or positions are more prevalent than they actually are.



On top of this, thanks to Twitter's linear design and the fact that text doesn't come with a volume knob, the meaningful and the mundane get mashed together into one place, making it difficult to parse signal from noise without losing your mind. This hinders much of the site's actual utility (getting real-time news updates, discussing current events and finding other people to engage with around those topics). Without much editorial curation or guidance, what's left is an informational Wild West where what's important and what's a distraction and what's real and what's fake can sometimes look too similar to tell apart to an untrained eye (and watching otherwise rational and intelligent people unknowingly do battle with bots is a distressingly common occurrence on the site).

This entire experience sucks even on a good day, so why doesn't everyone comparing the site to eternal damnation leave? First, as previously stated, a lot of people can't quit because of their jobs require it. Plus, for all its faults, it can be an amazing tool for connecting with other people and staying in touch with topics you care about. RSS feeds can curate news with less noise

and Reddit offers more topical diversity, but Twitter offers something unique that no other single service can easily replace. And it's not necessarily all bad. Despite its considerable downsides, [Twitter has helped make some amazing things happen](#) and it's hard to imagine a world without it.

That can leave people stuck in an awkward spot where they don't want to lose the value it provides but don't want to deal with the toll it takes on their mental well-being. When people do claim they're going to delete their account, only a handful ever successfully escape without coming back later. This can make other people on the site feel like self-aware NPCs that acknowledge they're stuck in a nightmarish game world where they don't want to leave their friends behind, and that's exactly as depressing as it sounds.

Feeling like you're being gamed against your own will, self-interest and the people around you probably isn't anyone's idea of fun, and arguably that's what's at the core of why using the site feels anxiety-inducing and emotionally draining. That's without getting into [how dangerous being on the service can potentially be](#), particularly for anyone who isn't straight, white and male. Getting rid of the service entirely doesn't seem like an answer and, to their credit, [Twitter has taken some steps to curb abuse](#). Those efforts still leave us with some uncomfortable questions about the site, like, "Why am I on here," "how much more can I take" and "how can this story possibly end well?"

The answers to those queries aren't as clear as they should be; one thing that's for certain is that change will have to come sooner or later. The alternative may be a harsh reckoning for a service with more influence than it knows how to wield and a customer base that may be unwilling to make itself miserable forever. We need Twitter to be more than a poorly regulated communication service with what feels like some rudimentary RPG elements grafted onto it. Whether we'll get it remains to be seen. 🍷





Neighborhood Must-Watch

What were you doing on the night of May 31, 2016? Me? I was at home. It was a Tuesday. I'd seen a car accident outside my office building on West End Ave. earlier that evening. I remember because I snapped a picture of the tow truck carting off the crunched-up taxicab as I headed for the subway back to Queens. I didn't know at the time that this event represented a bit of foreshadowing, or that I'd have reason to look it up more than four years later.

On the night of May 31, 2016, I came home from work. I took off my shoes in hallway. I kissed my wife hello. I ate dinner. I put my then-10-month-old son to bed. Then, while I sat snug and safe in my living room, approximately seven million people across the country tuned into CBS to watch a fatal shoot-out in my very own neighborhood — a blaze of deadly gunfire that not only circled my house within a quarter-mile radius but, at one fateful point, took its victims right past my house, down my quiet residential block just off Astoria Park.

I heard nothing. I saw nothing. Admittedly, had I been standing on my front porch, I still wouldn't have glimpsed the gray, bullet-ridden sedan as it drove by. I was never in any danger of being struck by stray gunfire. I could have walked into the middle of the street outside my house, in fact, and jumped in place while shouting and waving my arms, and even then I wouldn't have seen or been seen by the passengers inside the vehicle — only one of whom was busy dying at the time.

That's because inside the car were Amy Acker and Michael Emerson — Root and Harold — and the gunfight — from Season 5, Episode 10 of *Person of Interest* — wasn't real and wasn't live. I was unaware of its existence until a few days ago, when I finished binge-watching the Jonathan Nolan series I, against conventional wisdom, argued was better than *Westworld* in last month's Unwinnable.

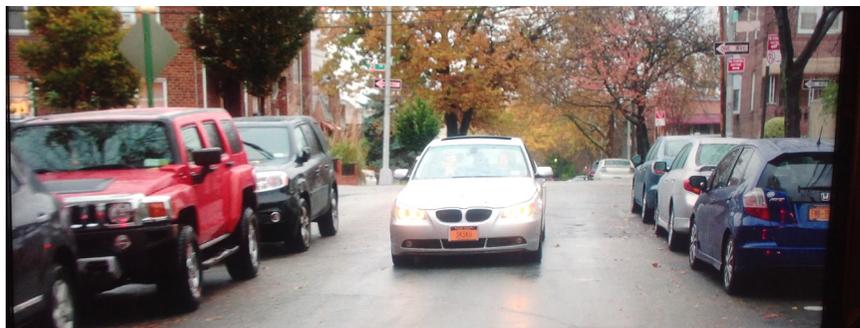
As you might imagine, I was transfixed by the scene, picking out details – many of them obvious continuity “mistakes” if you know the area and are looking close enough for repeated backgrounds through the driver’s-side window. Although they used one particular stretch of street a short walk from my house a few times before – and I all but assumed picturesque Astoria Park would play a role, too, which it ultimately did – I never thought I’d see what I saw just after the sniper on Shore Blvd. turned to leave his rooftop. I had to freeze-frame it just to be sure, but there it was: my little road-less-taken side-street, lined with some of the same parked cars I could go outside and look at right now as I type this. In fact, I managed to convince my begrudging wife to help me loosely recreate the shot with our two children riding in one of their toy vehicles. At least a couple of the cars are in both images.

I live in New York City, where, at least until COVID, film crews are practically ubiquitous. I used to live a block over from the Constanza house and I pass by places photographed a thousand times a day. None of this should impress me. But until this moment I never had a show I loved hit, well, this close to home.

Naturally, I had to find out exactly when it was filmed. How did I miss it? I had seen plenty of filming around town before, passing period vehicles parked on the street or stumbling upon fake crime scenes set up in the park. But we only moved into our current place that past November. The shot from the show? Clearly taken in the fall. This was going to be a close call. I scoured the Internet and, wouldn’t you know it, I found a six-second cellphone video taken by a fan during the taping – which occurred on Nov. 2, 2015 . . . about three weeks before we arrived.

Disappointing? Maybe. But I like to think it means I experienced a rare brand of television paradox: I was both there and not there during a gunfight that both did and did not tear through my quiet slice of Astoria.

Quiet, that is, until the next show – who knows, maybe even *Westworld* – chooses to turn down my apparently quite photogenic, though typically totally ignored, little side-street. 🇺





Tragedy Erased

Hidden in one of the many nooks of Hollownest is a persistent little bug named Myla, who chips and chips away at a crystal vein buried within the nearby wall. She sings a creepy ditty to herself as she swings her tiny pickaxe:

“Bury my mother, pale and slight, bury my father, eyes shut tight! Bury my sisters, two by two, and then when you’re done, let’s bury me too!”

Like many of the bugs of *Hollow Knight*, Myla stands rooted to the site of her eventual demise. It’s only fitting then, that she sings her own eulogy too. But she does so cheerfully, and is friendly to you when you first meet her. She’s steadfastly optimistic that something worthwhile, something irresistibly compelling lies buried beneath her feet. When you come across Myla in later encounters, some of that friendliness is gone, the single-minded focus on mining replaces the softer contours of her personality. Eventually, even that disappears, and she becomes, like so many of Hollownest’s denizens, another mindless husk, hollowed out by the infection that eats invisibly away at the minds of the bugs who remain here. She keeps on digging, though. The task which was once a cherished passion, has now been reduced to mindless compulsion, she digs without reason or motivation. In Myla’s empty swings, reflections of your own, often aimless, pokes and stabs at the deep and twisted spaces of Hollownest can be glimpsed.

In the inverse of Myla, who transforms from a fully formed character into an empty-eyed husk, your knight was designed from the start to be a creature devoid of will, and only develops an identity after exploring and methodically mapping out every last corner of Hollownest. *Hollow Knight* expects you to

find joy in the incessant wandering, too, to happily engage with the seemingly Sisyphean task of conquering its long-abandoned ruins; to poke at cracks, to pop open the moldy shells of long dead bugs, to exchange blows with mindless creatures stuck in their wind-up choreographies. To learn their stories, and gain one of your own, in turn.



As your knight explores, they uncover countless examples of a world repeating its last moments, without cause or understanding: the hidden and forgotten past trailing behind an unchanging present. There's the Arena of Fools, an ancient dusty pit where warriors fight under the unseeing gaze of a long dead ruler. Even without the apparatus of power to guide it, the Arena continues to operate, a site for fools to find violent glory, if not any external sense of purpose or meaning. There's the City of Tears, with its ghostly buildings hidden in the fog, full of infected nobles, hoarding treasures no one wants. Water rains down from above, and few in the city remember when it began, nor are they aware of the massive lake which is its source. Elsewhere, the Mantis tribe sits on their thrones, maintaining a permanent martial readiness and defending Hollownest against the monstrous hordes surging out from nearby Deepnest, honoring their ages old agreement with Hollownest's king, even though he is long dead and only lives in memory.

Everywhere you travel in *Hollow Knight*, you encounter scenes of loss and emptiness. It is a ruined world, whose crumbling silhouette suggests the ghostly absence of a greater empire. Only the empire's brittle shell remains to be chipped away at. Like Myla's crystal vein, it beckons, with promises of treasure and adventure and death and the abyss' unyielding embrace. You don't know, at first, why you're digging deeper into this dusty ruin, and perhaps you never will. But you are driven, somehow, to continue, to drop down perilous

shafts, to smash through walls and floors and crack open doors, until you are faced, eventually, with the cavernous emptiness within.

A character you run into frequently is Zote, a diminutive little fighter, with a brusque attitude and an oversized ego. After you defeat him handily in the Arena of Fools, he returns to the village of Dirtmouth where he regales the innocent young Bretta with false tales of his bravery and your knight's treacherousness. Using the Dream Nail, which allows you to dive into the dreams of other bugs, you can enter Bretta's fantasy, spun from Zote's outsized braggadocio. Within the dream, you fight successively more difficult and impressive incarnations of Zote, as he appears to Bretta's imagination. Once you've defeated enough of them however, the shades fall from Bretta's eyes, the facade disintegrates and she finally sees him for the pitiful creature that he is. She departs Dirtmouth and Hollownest, headed out on her own adventure, perhaps to build a more honest and authentic dream; something with substance, with a future. Nothing at all like the empty, long-dead world she leaves behind (along with an oblivious, babbling Zote).



One of Hollow Knight's more memorable characters is Quirrell. Quirrell is a warrior who once served under Monomon, one of Hollownest's dreamers, the trio of powerful beings who agree to spend an eternity restraining Hollownest's burgeoning infection. Quirrell originally left Hollownest behind and much of his own memories with it, but when Monomon, seeing the infection escaping its bounds, calls him back to dismantle her protections, he returns. Like the knight, Quirrel has little understanding of his true purpose. He wonders at the sight of Hollownest, without his memories, seeing it once again, as if for the first time. Despite his confusion, he succeeds in helping the knight gain access to Monomon, cocooned within her dream. His role fulfilled, helping the

knight dismantle Hollownest's moldering remains so that a new future might be built, he appears, one final time, on the shores of the massive Blue Lake which drips down into the City of Tears far below. He is grateful he was able to return to Hollownest and witness its glory, ruined and abandoned as it now is. To Quirrel, it is still beautiful: "All tragedy erased. I see only wonders..."

By visiting Hollownest's remains, picking through its crevices and cobwebbed corners, your knight comes face to face with the many fragments of that tragedy, and proceeds to pierce them all with their tiny nail. Infection and violence spill out, the old oppressive systems lashing out and defending themselves. But your knight presses on, for no other reason than for the glory of the fight, of nail against claw, of abyss and light striking out together in mindless fury, breaking apart the stone walls around it, ripping apart the chains and the rigging holding Hollownest's surviving vestiges in place.

And when you've pushed through, punctured the hard chitin walls, all that is left is to sit with the empty, if peaceful, nothingness which waits on the other side. Like the king's lifeless corpse, sitting stiff on his throne, all the challenges you face are merely a facade, to be shoved thoughtlessly aside. When you come across it, you can sit on that throne, and reflect for a spell on what it may once have represented, before the dream which contains it vanishes for good and your knight must push on and dig in another direction. 🍷





With Friends Like These: A Wasteland Verse of TrickyPixie83

The sun burns hot, the sand grates my skin. I'm fried
Two suns, in truth
One eclipsed into a crown of fire hanging overhead
or a flame-lashed eye blindly staring down
I'm fried.

We trek across dunes to sun-bleached villages
The men inside all powder-white muscle and red meat
Scythes of bone for arms
I get the drop on one in his kitchen
Trigger-finger freeze
Something too domestic
He slashes; I shoot
He's down and I bandage my bleed.

LoneWolf7862's voice crackles in my ear like a radio,
"Got 'eeeeeeeeeeem!"
"I should've looked through the window first," I reply
"To the windoooooooooww, to the wall!!!"

saintoffools is battling a berzerker in the square,
“I’m telling you these guys aren’t even touching me,
they’re not touching me at all!”

I pause to sort my inventory
Slip rings of power on and off my fingers
Seems silly I can wear only two
I hang back just to catch my breath.

LoneWolf7862 returns from scouting ahead,
“I’ve found The Way.”



It’s not the way, only a random Gigerian room
A button to press (ill-advised) at one end
I move forward to start this damned fight and
LoneWolf7862 puts a bullet in my back.

“Aw, come on,” I groan
“Sowwy! Just testing this gun.”
He drops a mender’s aura to make nice
saintoffools laughs.

I press the thing and watch the doors close
Run on scaffolds
Explode prong-footed beasts into radioactive clouds
“They can’t hurt me either, we’re I N V I N C I B L E,” LoneWolf7862 howls
Who’s “we?” I think
I try to run again, irradiated, and fail.

saintoffools doesn’t want to waste immortality
Throws himself at anointed men-machines
Takes on hordes of clattering, lurking fiends
I go down and wait for a comrade to hold a dragon’s heart above my neck
Kneeling on all fours like I might be sick.

Victory is ours
The prize a rifle of sickening light
Replicated, one, two, three
“Ooh shiny,” saintoffools mutters
Fires a constant beam at LoneWolf7862
LoneWolf7862 returns the favor; chrome walls glow gold
Their health remains red, robust.

I lose myself a moment
Train my own beam at LoneWolf7862
saintoffools turns a quarter to me
Lets loose a beam barrage
Me, scream-laughing,
“I take damage, I take damage!”
Strength and stamina draining to dregs
saintoffools, scream-laughing,
“I just wanted to make a pretty triangle!”
LoneWolf7862 just scream-laughing.

I limp through fog,
Geiger crackles reminding me to stay slow
Drink heavy water
Press my own dragon heart to my chest
We carry on
One resurrected mortal, two demigods
Seeking out The Way. 🏰





Weird Autumn

Autumn is, in one of its many associations, the beginning of the school year. The US tradition of long summer breaks, traced back to an agricultural economy, necessitates this rhythm, I suppose, but even in higher ed, where semesters and quarters are self-contained, traditions centered around the preeminent autumn sport football dictate we begin with the fall term. This is to say, in the US, fall is understood as a time of departure: to the field, the school, the stadium. It's a time of finding our way.

“To be orientated is,” as Sara Ahmed describes in *Queer Phenomenology*, “to be turned towards those objects ‘that help us to find our way.’” She continues: “these are the objects we recognize, so that when we face them we know which way we are facing.” If departing from the home necessitates a disorientation, then we can reorient ourselves with homing devices. Homes are, as she describes, “effects of the histories of arrival.” The arrival of others, who we consider others and how we arrive at our own home are all consequences of orientation. Which is to say: how we arrive matters. So, what does it mean to have arrived at [the ending](#)?

At the end of everything, hold onto anything.

* * *

In *Night in the Woods*, the autumn as departure is used to convey just how out of place Mae Borowski is upon returning to live with her parents. She arrives in Possum Springs, a once idyllic Appalachian mining town, in the night.

Semesters themselves suggest that the year is divided in two, ignoring most of the summer. My uni itself has three semesters which are not called trimesters because of etymology or tradition or whatever. The summer semester was divided into two halved sections, which further confounds language.

The otherness, maybe even reluctance, of the cat girl is immediately felt as leftward movement, backwards in time, towards the town. As she travels back, the reasons for Mae's arrival remain at once unclear and deceptively honest. What she knows at the time she seems to admit to. She just doesn't understand what happened to her.

Mae seeks a return to some semblance of normalcy that happens to look like her senior year of high school. However, she's regarded as affluent and out of touch for having gone to college and, while she's still a bit of a punk, she's not empathetic enough to relate to her financially independent friends. Errant Signal summarizes the tension succinctly: "Mae's struggle to understand why she can't go back to the way things were is both the struggle to grow as a person and a struggle to come to the grips [sic] with the socioeconomics of Possum Springs."



The dying town functions as a parallel to Mae while commenting on conservative responses to late capitalism. The closure of the mine, which had once sustained local prosperity, followed by years of factory closures and the inevitable supermarket have left the town, or rather the people of the town, at a bleak, meaningless ending. The social systemic causation of the town's misfortunes is misunderstood (like Mae's depression) by the literal cult that attempts to revive an elder god in the name of economic revival. It's a stunning portrait of capitalist realism.

Mae's disorientation is what reminds me of this autumn. If orientation is "how it is that we come to find our way in a world that acquires 'new shapes,'" then the alienation of late capitalism is experienced as a dissociative episode where the familiar landmarks and faces around Mae become "just shapes." Her dissociation prevents her from finding meaning in her surroundings and in the present until she resolves by the end of the game to *hold onto anything*.

But Mae's resolution is delimited by her place and perspective. To borrow again from Ahmed: "orientations involve different ways of registering the proximity of objects and others. Orientations shape not only how we inhabit space, but how we apprehend this world of shared inhabitance." *NitW* could then be about the process of reorienting ourselves when lost without a homing device. As she reaches out for anything, she finds in her proximity friends, family, relationships.

This isn't the only answer; we might just want to *die anywhere else*. We could embrace the loss of autumn, grow familiar with and within the lost and feel our way forward. This will take us somewhere else, or to the same place from another perspective.

* * *

I've dreaded returning to my own homeplace. In the disorientation of college, coming out and radicalizing, I've lost sight of the homing beacons that once shaped me in this direction. Unlike Possum Springs, this town I now write in isn't facing economic ruin (neither from a cosmic god of late capitalism nor even from the coronavirus), there aren't enough zealots to form a cult of any belief and the season, as I've written before, is too hot and green. Also, it's a suburb.



My discomfort in the suburbs and all it represents isn't anything new. Defiance Ohio's vociferous "Oh Susquehanna!" surmises my discontentment: "All I wanted [was] to be able to walk to the store, now I don't live there but there's too many stores, some apartments and a Sunoco." Their prophetically titled 2006 LP *The Great Depression* illuminates the many other contradictions

Which way we turn may reveal different worlds. Over time, the direction we turn – the direction we are turned – shapes our lifeworld. Therefore, Ahmed claims, (the surface of) bodies acquire the shape of the direction they turn.

of both the suburbs and post 9/11 America that shaped the adolescence of my generation. As the “kids who populate these cul-de-sacs,” Mae and I were too young to have a political awareness of the systemic forces shaping our lives.

Still, their effects were known. The disorientation of Mae’s dissociation is echoed in the observation that “every trace of life it seems confined within a frame, the faces move from day to day, but the strips all look the same.” The conventionality of suburbs, their oblique (dis)placement upon the environments beneath them, purposefully lack a homing device. Whiteness, heterosexuality and aspirations of wealth are all that can find their place.

While I think *NitW* has an optimistic, if not practical, conclusion, I can’t find it in my own home. I can’t stay in this physical manifestation of neoliberalism, nor do I want to admit that all I can do during the dying spasms of late capitalism is hold on. And maybe that’s what happened to Weird Autumn, the figure that departs before Mae’s return. In her eponymous song, Bea sings “I only knew her a week before she went away.” Autumn’s house, we’re told, stays empty. She was gone one day, and *weird it remains*. 🍂





Architectural Improvisation

When it comes to architecture, the process of design involves assuming that people are going to use a building for a particular purpose. Architects have to assume that factories will be used for manufacturing, houses will be used for living and stores will be used for selling things. Architects aren't always correct in their assumptions, though. Buildings are often used in unexpected ways.

People are constantly reshaping the world around them. When they reshape structures, they do so through a process that you might call architectural improvisation. This can mean rearranging the furniture in a room, but it can also mean completely remodeling a building. The probability of significant alteration increases with time. Changed through various types of restoration and renovation, buildings tend to be reworked whenever they start showing signs of the wear and tear which necessarily comes with age. They're often repurposed at this point. Factories are frequently converted into condominiums. Houses are sometimes turned into hotels. Stores often become offices. This kind of thing is so common that architects even have a special name for it. They call this adaptive reuse. As you might expect, this term describes how buildings are adapted and reused for what amounts to an unintended purpose. Adaptive reuse takes the form of architectural improvisation. While it might on the one hand involve changing a bedroom into a living room, this could on the other hand involve changing a palace into a museum.

There are quite a few examples of adaptive reuse through architectural improvisation in *Metro Exodus*. These can be found throughout the game world, but you'll come across the best ones in the Moscow, Volga and Caspian Sea regions.



You'll come across a great example of adaptive reuse almost right after starting the game. The first couple of minutes are spent fighting mutants in the train tunnels, but you'll soon find yourself in a subway station called Exhibition in the region known as Moscow. Fleeing the nuclear fallout on the surface, hundreds of people are supposed to have taken up residence in Exhibition, so it's more of an underground city than a subway station. The residents have adapted the place to suit their present circumstances. You don't get to see a lot of Exhibition in the game, but the areas which you're able to explore reflect these adaptations. The hospital seems to have been some kind of storage room before the current residents were forced underground by the fallout. This part of Exhibition is just a really big room with some beds and a couple of curtain walls. The doctor has found enough space in one of the corners for a desk and some shelves. The hospital can only be entered through a single door, so I doubt that it would be ideal if there were an emergency, but this former storage room seems to get the job done.

Take some time to explore the region of the game world called the Volga and you'll find another great example of adaptive reuse. Searching for a safe place where he won't have to worry about getting attacked by mutants, an engineer by the name of Krest has taken up residence in the cabin of an abandoned crane. In the same way as Exhibition, the structure has been adapted to suit the needs of its new resident. These adaptations are easy to spot. Pulling out most of its mechanical components, Krest has converted what used to be a

crane into a rather cozy apartment. Space is at a premium, but the crane has a kitchen, bedroom, bathroom and even a small workshop. You'd never guess that it could still be used for its intended purpose, but Krest has kept some of the machinery intact, so the arm can be raised to restrict access or lowered for easy entry. Since the cabin is pretty high off the ground, you can see why this would be a desirable feature. Krest can walk up the arm whenever he wants to cook a meal, go to sleep, take a shower or clean a weapon.



The best example of adaptive reuse in my opinion is found in the Caspian Sea region. You'll get to explore this region towards the end of the game. Setting out in search of a sniper, you'll soon come across an isolated lighthouse next to an oozing oil field. The structure emerges from the dunes of the surrounding desert like a mountain in a sea of sand. When she gets around to lowering the elevator which allows you to access the lighthouse, you'll figure out that it belongs to the subject of your search. The sniper calls herself Giul. Searching for shelter from bandits, Giul seems to have turned this lighthouse into a nice hideout by replacing most of its mechanical components with creature comforts like mats, pillows and blinds. In the same way as the crane, the lighthouse has places for cooking, sleeping and bathing. Since there isn't a lot of space in the structure, you might be surprised to learn there's even some room which is available for storage. This feature is more important than it probably seems. Bandits are supposed to be hot on her heels, so Giul goes weeks without ever leaving her lighthouse.

There are signs of adaptive reuse through architectural improvisation all over the game world in *Metro Exodus*. I think the structures in the Moscow, Volga and Caspian Sea regions are the best examples, but you might have slightly different feelings on the matter. In any case, there's one question at

this point which remains to be answered. What exactly do these examples of adaptive reuse through architectural improvisation contribute to the game?

This question isn't an easy one to answer because it has so many different angles and aspects. However, these examples of adaptive reuse through architectural improvisation do a lot to establish what the game world in *Metro Exodus* amounts to as a place. Suggesting that people have managed to survive in the Moscow, Volga and Caspian Sea regions for long enough to make the buildings in them suit their present circumstances, they add a layer of depth and complexity to the level design which otherwise wouldn't be there. They make the game world in *Metro Exodus* feel as though it's filled with real people. In this way, these examples of adaptive reuse through architectural improvisation also help to support the story by making the game world seem like it has a history. People are supposed to have been living in the Moscow, Volga and Caspian Sea regions for a pretty long stretch of time. They have definitely made their mark. 🏠





Alone in Duskers

It was about four years ago – in May of 2016 – when this intriguing looking indie game popped up out of nowhere and pretty much compelled me to play it based on the premise alone. A sort of strategic, survival, retro sci-fi game where the only way you can interact with the world is through indirect control of a series of robotic drones or interface with a spaceship's operating system via DOS-like commands? Sign me up! Right now! But here's the thing: even though I was on board from the start thanks to my love of weird and niche games, I wasn't prepared for just how much *Duskers* would grab hold of me.

It doesn't waste any time painting an extremely bleak picture. For all you know, you might be the last surviving human in the universe, and it's up to you to try and figure out what happened by exploring derelict spaceships while also salvaging supplies and fuel to keep your own ship running. It doesn't take long for things to get creepy as within a few stops it becomes apparent that while there don't seem to be any humans around, there's definitely *something* lurking in the abandoned corridors. Sometimes several somethings. And as you'd expect they aren't friendly.

The catch to all this is that you can't physically do any work yourself – you have to send out a small team of drones to do it all for you. While you *can* assume direct control of one drone at a time, it's usually faster (or in some cases essential) to use the built in command prompt to issue and execute basic orders to multiple drones at once. The interface also extends into the derelicts

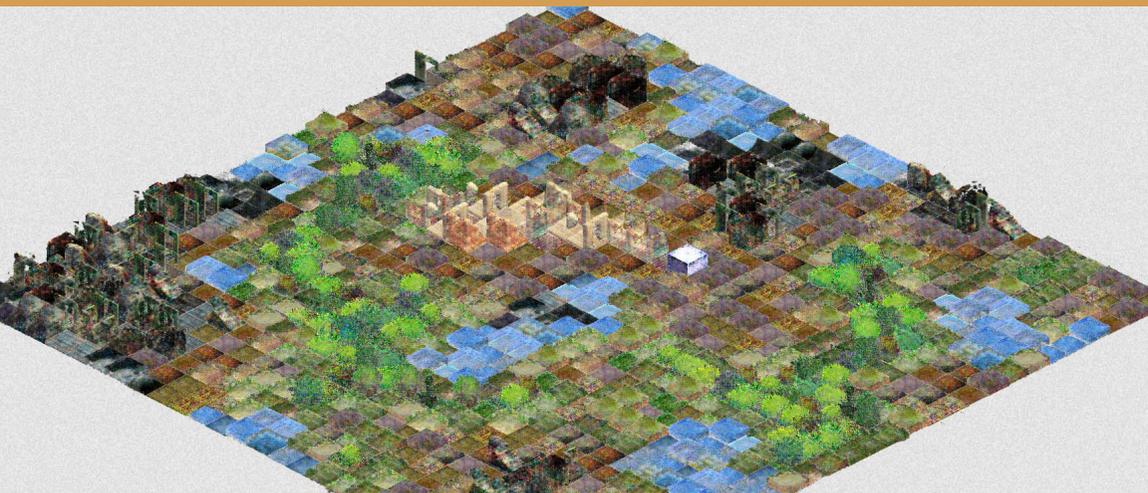
themselves, with you having to manually type in commands to open and close doors, tell drones to interface with objects, and so on.

Where things start to get roguelike is in the salvaging and inevitable failure. Your ship needs fuel to keep operating, and if you run out you're done. If you lose all of your drones you're done, too. Heck if you lose more than one drone you're probably screwed but a comeback is theoretically possible. And make no mistake, losing a drone *hurts*. Not only will you have lost a significant portion of your work force, and likely have to abandon whatever tools they have installed (which will also have been salvaged from other drones), but the universe is so desolate and lonely that these little glorified roombas start to feel like your only friends. With each loss your entire world gets that much smaller.

Both the visuals and the audio go even further to drive home that feeling of loneliness and isolation. You only ever see things through a sort of retro sci-fi computer display. Each ship you explore is seen as a sort of real time schematic, which only reveals new rooms when your drones enter them. Interference or damage (or just shoddy wiring that acts up randomly) can temporarily remove a drone's ability to "see" and your feed will cut out. Hostile creatures are displayed as vaguely organic shapes highlighted in red, but there's so little definition you can only imagine what they really look like.

That audio though. Wow. For as much as I love the look and feel of *Duskers* it wouldn't be half as effective without sound. Rather than include a somber score or complex sound effects, everything is presented as though you're hearing things through multiple bulkheads. There's no music, because why would there be? Instead, all you can hear is the occasional muted creak of the hull, doors sliding open or slamming closed in the distance, whatever basic audio your drones' outdated electronics might pick up and the occasional alarm when something like a meteor shower passes through.

I spent an absurd amount of time playing *Duskers* after it came out, and the only reason I stopped was because I abandoned Steam, but the tinny echoes of abandoned spacecraft and feeling of dread every time I had to open a door have stuck with me ever since. I can't say its the type of game I'd play to "relax," but it was always compelling. 🍵



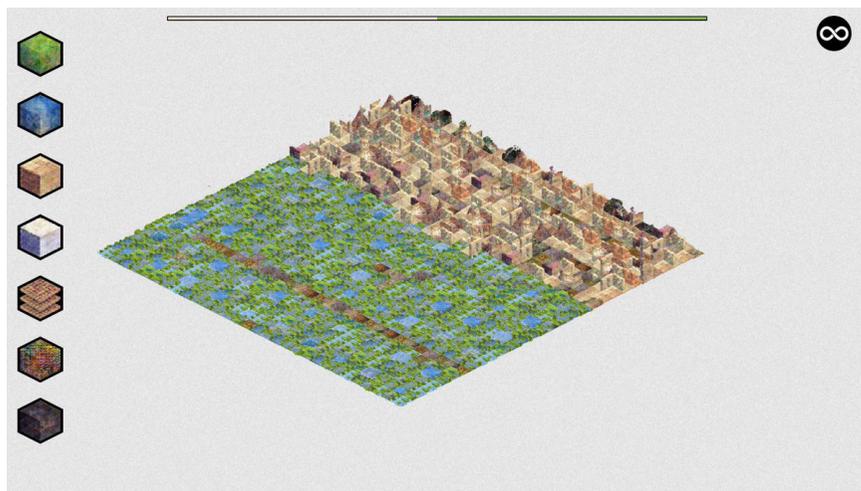
Patterns in the Ivy

According to its [release notes](#), *Lichenia* is “about creating human habitats amidst climate chaos. It involves reshaping the natural and built environment, reclaiming dead cities and growing sustainable ones.” In particular, developer Paolo Pedercini (as Molleindustria, creator of titles like *Democratic Socialism Simulator*, which Ben Sailer wrote a [great exploration](#) of in June) wanted to address the “blank slate” trope of the city-building genre, which presents players with entirely new, untouched maps on which to begin their new civilization. These templates don’t reflect the messier history of human social development, which has typically involved building off of – and thanks to – what’s come before. And they certainly don’t reflect the realities of climate change, which will inform and complicate all of the building of the future.

Lichenia doesn’t have a real ending, so its length is undefined, but its scope is modest. Its game map is small, and it only offers the player a handful of actions. It’s playable entirely within a [web browser](#). But its sharp focus allows it to directly challenge assumptions about economic development and environmental stewardship just by upsetting a few conventions of a popular game genre.

In *Lichenia*, the player’s actions don’t always have predictable outcomes. Especially at first, the player isn’t even fully aware of what changes they’re implementing when they click something – the game doesn’t provide any labels or explanations for the actions that are available. Instead, the player has to just start trying things out. Buttons on the side seem to create new waterways, grow new vegetation, or construct roads or buildings, but they don’t always do

so according to plan. Sometimes a new building unit will spread rapidly across a swath of the map and overtake green space instead of staying in one spot. An attempt at rehabilitating a region with new water sources might sputter when that water goes nowhere at all. As the world reforms in response to what choices get made, the player can start to build up a tentative understanding of the dynamics at work.



The game's narration seems to adapt to the choices the player makes, which can help signal the effects of their actions. "Were we just building more ruins?", the voiceover might ask if the player builds too aggressively, maybe prompting them to consider the other tools available. But it never feels totally settled. Unexpected extreme weather events can undo progress in an instant ("Earth was still troubled – no amount of care could stop its vicious feedbacks"). Pushing development or terraforming just a bit too far in one direction or another can lead to surprising (and damaging) unintended consequences.

This makes for a perspective on planning that highlights the complexity of the social and economic dynamics involved, despite the simplicity of the game itself. It upsets long-held standards of the city-building genre. The ideal of the efficient, tightly managed, gleaming city of the future that blanketed the marketing materials of the *SimCity* series is totally unknown here.

The game challenges the conventions of the city-building genre by removing all of the numbers and data and detail management that typically direct the player's attention. This world can't be quantified and then explained as a set of inputs and outputs that, in varying combinations, lead to a predictable range of outcomes. The reality illustrated here is more dynamic, and less easily expressible in an itemized list. *Lichenia's* approach feels especially potent for a game about ecological change and the climate crisis.

But *Lichenia*'s perspective on development also offers an implicit challenge to proposals that want to address ecological crises through greener economic growth. Although the goals of these initiatives might be admirable, they still often view nature as having a distinct economic utility. Land, water, minerals – all of these are ultimately resources to be used to ensure the continued expansion of a particular economic way of life. It's still a question of inputs and outputs, but these programs hope to better balance these things and wreak less environmental havoc in the process.

Lichenia suggests that this view of the relationship between economy and environment misunderstands it fundamentally. The two can't be cleanly separated out from each other, and they influence and impact each other in ways that can't be reflected on a balance sheet. There's a more [holistic approach to understanding ecology](#) at work here. And that approach acknowledges that holding these things in better balance requires continuous work and attention. It's easy to overlook the decay starting to spread in parts of your city you've left unattended for just a bit too long. Soon enough, you can find your ecosystem losing the equilibrium you've worked to maintain, represented on-screen by a bar that fills with either green or beige, depending on the area's ecological health.

Lichenia is ultimately about the potential for rehabilitation and rebirth. Its vision of this planet's future is not a hopeless one. But it doesn't take anything for granted. Depending on the player's progress, the narration might mention three possible paths forward: work to heal lands beyond this one plot, try to achieve "homeostatic equilibrium" in this one spot, or, instead, "evoke the destructive power of the elders."

At a certain point, the game makes that destructive power available to the player. It's never defined, but it's easy to see it as a stand-in for nuclear warfare. When used, it levels a portion of the game world and rots the soil underneath, obliterating that area's ability to regrow for a time. This derails the game. It makes the player's own efforts at regenerating the world much more difficult.

But it also simplifies everything. From a gameplay perspective, nuking the entire game world makes all of those unpredictable dynamics mentioned earlier much more manageable. The challenges encountered in working to rebuild soon evaporate. In a more conventional gaming analysis, this might actually be seen as a kind of win state. There's nothing left to do afterward. A strange steady state is reached where nothing changes much anymore. The player has done everything still available to them with the mechanics provided. Nothing survives, of course. But maybe helping society avoid preventable catastrophe wasn't everybody's goal in the first place. 🍷

How did you get into illustration?

When I was 17 and getting ready to graduate from high school – I went to a local arts magnet high – I told myself I was going to be an illustrator. I didn't know what that meant until maybe two or three years later, when I got into art school. I didn't really know that illustration was a profession that required as much problem-solving expertise as it did technical knowledge until I took classes from Sterling Hundley, an illustrator who taught in my program who was so good, he was named one of the best illustrators since the “birth” of the profession. He broke down to me what's required to be a commercial artist. Working post-grad would teach me how to make sure my work fit where I wanted to see it.

TL;DR: I always loved the field, but didn't know what illustration was until I learned everything that went behind the person in front of the canvas.

What's your process like?

Have you ever seen a video of a brick in a washing machine? It's basically that: I compile my references, read my brief, make a canvas with the appropriate scale, then kinda just dump as many sketches and notes on a canvas until it doesn't look ugly anymore. Most of my pieces take a night, tops, because the longer I spend with a piece, the more I hate the physical action of working on it.

One thing I enjoy about your work is that it always feels not only like it is about to move, but that it is going to move in ways I don't expect. Is that something you are conscious of or play with?

I think I've always been attracted to motion. I can remember as early as middle school, during a portfolio review at the arts magnet high I mentioned earlier, that the judges were impressed by how I drew bodies. They were long, slinky figures that whirled around each other. They weren't good drawings by any means, but I think they were my first instances of me recording broad, sweeping motions. I love to move. I was a fidgety, anxious teen and I think drawing was one of the few things I could do with my body that didn't immediately annoy everyone around me. I dunno! I'm still figuring it all out.

I particularly love the bicycle illustration – what’s the story behind it?

So it was my illustration final in my senior year of college, and I was two hours out from class. I spent the two weeks I had on the assignment stumped, because I couldn’t come up with anything that fit the prompt, which was “the benefits of collaboration.” I don’t know what possessed me, but I cranked out the first idea – a bike that could only function if three people were on it. When I was done, I thought it was a flop, to be honest! When my professor said that it was my best work at the time, I was puzzled to the point of asking him why it was good. He explained that the energy and raw movement was a big move into my strengths, and that that piece became the synthesis of my problem-solving and technique. I’m still kinda chasing that piece to this day.

You mentioned to me earlier that you’re in a moment of transition with your work. Where were you and where do you see yourself going?

I’m in my flop era lol.

Where I’m at now with my work is total frustration. I can’t look back on many pieces with kind eyes because I made most of my work under the stress of deadlines, or during other particularly hard parts of my life. I have so rarely had the chance to make art that I liked, that I’ve been trying to rebuild my process from the ground up.

I think for the next who-knows-how-long, I’ll be hitting the books. I’m learning how to paint too – not just coloring inside the lines, but actually painting. I think by shocking myself into a new process, I’ll be closer to finding that sense of motion I’ve trained myself to suppress.

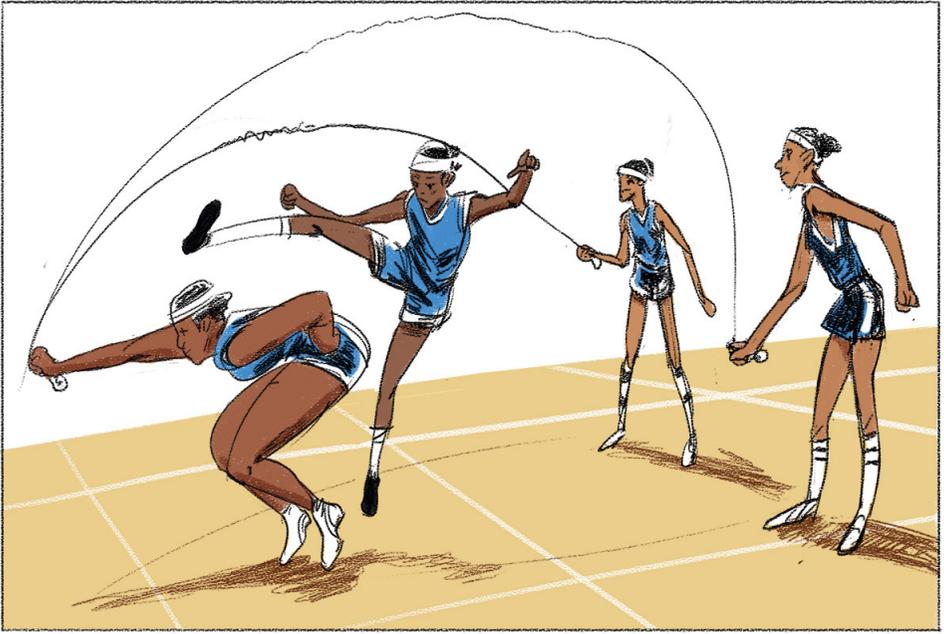
What do you hope folks take away from your art?

That my work is thoughtful and conceptually exciting, but more importantly, that it’s nimble.

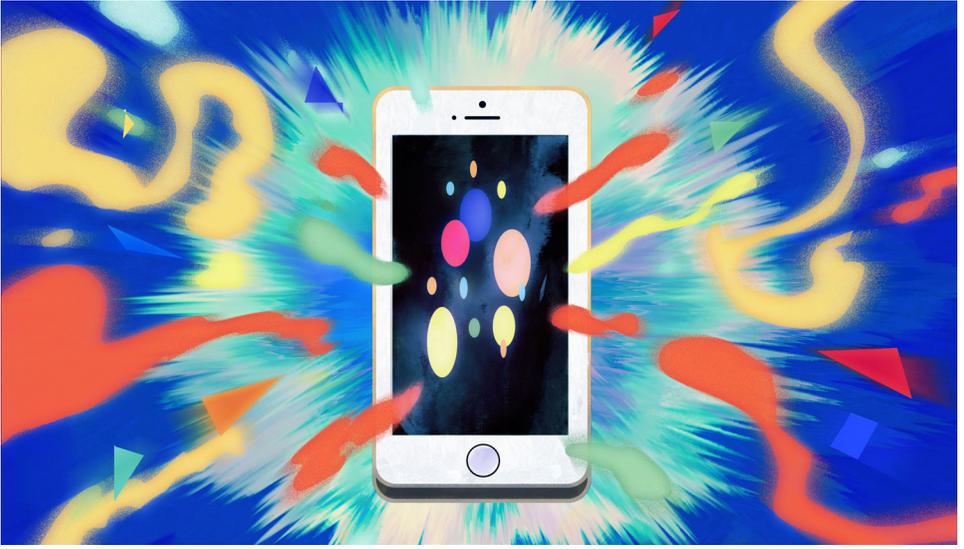
* * *

See more of Chris’ work on [Twitter](#), [Instagram](#) and their [official site](#). 













WATCHING MYSELF DIE

By Phillip Russell

On Blackness in *The Last of Us*



It's 2013. I'm sitting in my dorm room with the lights off, transfixed on a television screen illuminating my brown skin in a white glow. Somewhere, states away, Barack Obama is president and the thought of that fills me with warmth. I feel represented. A Black man in the whitest house. I am playing Naughty Dog's most recent release, *The Last of Us*, and Joel and Ellie just met Sam and Henry. I see myself in these two Black men. I want to play *as* these Black men, but since I can't, and because Joel and Ellie's adventure relies on following them for a little while, I keep plugging along in my play session because I need to see where they end up. When Henry turns into an infected and Sam kills him before taking his own life, it does not feel surprising, it feels inevitable. Despite those sentiments, I can't help but feel happy to be seen on the big screen.

As I approach the final moments of the game, I watch Joel kill Marlene in an act of retribution against the Fireflies. It's shocking, a cruel end for a character we barely see outside of her role of book-ending Ellie's adventure. There is plenty of debate over Joel's actions in the game, rumblings of whether they were justified or not. I'm not interested in that. I'm lingering on that final moment with Marlene, wondering why they keep killing us. Despite those feelings, I loved the game. I raved about it to my friends. I played it again. I yearned to know what would happen next for Ellie and Joel.

The year prior to the release of *The Last of Us*, Trayvon Martin was murdered by



George Zimmerman. While the insatiable appetite for Black death in America was nothing new to me by this point in my life, Trayvon's murder flipped my world upside down. The concrete reality of what happened to him – being stalked and murdered for walking home with a bag of Skittles at night – felt like an experience I could have had in various permutations throughout my life.

In 2014, *The Last of Us: Remastered* released on the PlayStation 4 and I played through it and the “Left Behind” DLC on “Grounded” difficulty. There's so much to love in this DLC, the relationship between Riley and Ellie feels heartfelt and well-written. The nonlinear temporality of the narrative was new for the series, and the introduction of fights that mixed humans and the infected was striking. When Ellie and Riley both get bit by an Infected, I knew what was coming. Riley had to die in order for Ellie's to realize she was immune to the virus.

That same year in real life, Eric Garner, Michael Brown, Tamir Rice, Ken-



dra James and many more Black people had been or were soon to be murdered. Sending shockwaves around the country, largely to white people, about the immensity of injustice and terrorism Black people face daily. While watching television, or scrolling through my social feeds, or listening to the radio, or playing videogames, I recoiled at the constant reminders of Black death in America.

My body, which once felt safe suddenly felt marked for death as I navigated the world outside.

* * *

In the months leading up to *The Last of Us: Part II*'s release, I felt conflicted. The trailers and gameplay demonstrations floored me in their spectacle, but then I'd read an [interview](#) with Neil Druckmann and felt worried that the game wouldn't be able to deliver on its lofty themes. Nevertheless, as the months ticked by I succumbed to the immensity of hype and

marketing the game had, and I'd be lying if I said I wasn't also invested in wanting to know what Ellie was up to. I bought it on release day.

I take control of Ellie in *Part II* just as she gets up to go out for patrol with a new character named Jesse. In her dark apartment, Ellie sluggishly walks around collecting gear scattered around her room. It's clear that a painstaking amount of attention was put into making this environment feel "lived-in," and it works. Atop one of her shelves, tucked slightly off to the side, is a familiar looking robot. It's the same toy that Ellie gave Sam in *The Last of Us* shortly before he turns. You can't interact with the robot, there's no optional aside to listen to (something that has become a standard in Naughty Dog games), it's just there for the player to notice or not. The robot is a specter nodding to the player, asking us: remember Sam?

Seeing the robot took me out of the experience, it raised a plethora of ques-

tions about what happened moments after Henry killed himself in *The Last of Us*. So, Ellie took the robot back after her new friends were killed? Why? This is all suggestive of the robot acting as a memento for Ellie, but if we're being honest, she wasn't with Sam and Henry for very long. The placing of the robot in *Part II* points to representational writing, but it's clear that not much thought was put into the implications of Ellie still having the robot or how the Black characters she's interacted with up to this point can act as more than just signifiers.

I navigate Ellie through Jackson, it's a thriving settlement with a diverse community filled with mixed family compositions that *do* reflect a lot of what our world looks like today. But there's talk among the town folks about Ellie and Dina kissing at the dance, and an old white man who's homophobic outburst

help color the struggles that Ellie and Dina face in a town like this. Race, however, is never commented upon in this section or in the game franchise at large. It's hard for me to fathom a universe like *The Last of Us* that starts in 2013 and leads into 2039 where Americans aren't still very outwardly grappling with the sharp teeth that racism has sunk into the flesh of this land. It's hard for me to imagine, but easy for me to see how white writer's overlook this – race in AAA games seems to always be seen as a bit of a non-starter. But if there is this level of homophobia within Jackson, I can't believe that race isn't also a contentious topic as well. The stakes of these various positionalities on display feel like just that: things to be looked at and commented upon – window shopping – without ever dealing with the concrete realities of what they imply.

To live in the world of *The Last of Us* is more than an indicator of resistance, it's an exception to the rule, especially if you're Black. *Every* named Black character in the entire franchises is killed to progress plot or character motivations. Riley, Marlene, Sam, Henry, Nora, Issac. They all die to further develop the lives of the white protagonists this series centers around. I'm not saying these characters are poorly written, but I am saying that more thought needs to be put into how Black characters are incorporated into these worlds. While I see my Black skin on full display within the growing cast of *The Last of Us* canon, it is a saddening realization that I'll only be interact-



ing with them in future media through the grave.

The Last of Us Part II released in 2020 amid a national conversation about racism, inequality, anti-Blackness and Black death in America. It's was impossible for me to play through the game without thinking about George Floyd and Breonna Taylor, to name just two on the endlessly growing list of Black folks who've been murdered by the hands of white people in this country. To return home from a Black Lives Matter protest in Seattle only to be forced to play as Ellie as she beats a Black woman to death with a metal pipe in a future Seattle via quick-time event isn't sobering, it's infuriating.

Fan favorite side characters like Bill had complex narrative segments designed around his positionality in the world. His character was further developed through in-game collectibles that shed a light on the isolation of navigating this harsh world as a gay man who's lost his partner. Conversely, Sam has *no* backstory besides the immediate moments prior to Ellie and Joel finding him. Henry's sole background information is that

he remembers the smell of barbecue (really?). Audio recordings of Marlene exist in the first game, but they are only there to develop our understanding of her decision regarding Ellie's operation. Riley has the most backstory, but it primarily is revealed through a limited run comic series. And Nora and Isaac both have few known character details besides those that pertain to Ellie and Abby's quests for revenge. Yussef Cole's [piece](#) on the middle class white gaze at play in *Part II* helped me realize who the "us" in the title refers to.

Diversity without proactive action isn't inclusion, it's objectification.

Part of the power of fiction is its ability to grapple with our past and present while also imagining an otherwise. Black people have been doing this work for centuries as we wade through a world that systemically works against and murders us every day. I don't need Black characters in your game if our lived experiences aren't being acknowledged. And what is representation but an empty vessel when we fail to fill the interiors with life? 🍷





**FOUR BRIEF
DISSECTIONS OF
CULTIST SIMULATOR
AND PLANESCAPE:
TORMENT**

A Sketch

By Violet Adele Bloch

CW: Discussion of abuse, fictional death, and fictional violence.

I.

Planescape: Torment – or just *Torment* – is an RPG by Black Isle. It's old, it controls like a DVD menu, it was created (in part) by someone alleged to be a serial abuser, and, for the past 21 years, it's been held up as one of the crowning achievements of narrative design.

When you start a new game (a *New Life*, as the menu calls it), *Torment* throws you into the role of a man with no name, who wakes up, half-naked, on a stone slab in a mortuary. You have no memory, no possessions, and no idea where to begin. Your body is gray like a corpse, unfamiliar, crisscrossed with tattoos and scar tissue. The only other character in the room is a floating skull named Morte. He speaks with a Queens accent (for some reason) and he wants to help you.

He reads a cryptic tattoo off your back – it mentions a journal – and, together, you set off into the dungeonpunk city of Sigil to find out who – or what – you might have been before you lost your memory.

Famously, there's one caveat.

You're unable to die.

If you get stabbed in an alleyway, you'll get carried back to the mortuary. If you fall in combat, your friends will drag your corpse to safety so it can stand back up. If you snap your own neck for a bet, you'll be awake in a few minutes to collect your winnings.

But instead of reveling in it, you'll see it like a curse. You weren't given life, you had your mortality stolen. You're unwhole, in a way that makes death spit you out.

And, in so many words, that's the center of *Torment's* story: it's an ontological mystery crossed with a suicide attempt. You're trying to figure out who and what you are, but it's all so you can die like everyone else.



II.

According to most critics, *Torment's* combat design is awful. I actually don't agree – if you're a wonk for the quirks in the *AD&D 2e* rule set and the ones in BioWare's Infinity Engine, the combat can be pretty enjoyable. It helps to pull the system apart like a speedrunner, but to still contextualize every action taken within the fiction. Eating a fistful of intelligence-boosting charms made from [taxidermied cranium rats](#) in order to talk someone out of stabbing you is very weird, yes, but it fits.

While I like it as an extension of the roleplay, though, *Torment's* combat is almost entirely vestigial. I'd argue that the actual game of *Torment* only has two verbs: *ask*, and *answer*.

You might ask something, or an NPC might pose a question to you. For every answer you give or receive, you'll learn something. Something about the world, something about a character, or something about yourself.

The catch is this: nothing you learn is ever complete. And that, more than anything, is what defines *Torment*: it lies to you.

Which isn't to say it's opaque or frustrating. The game's playfulness lives in the rhythmic push-pull of its dialogue. Its fiction is built on arguments, flirtations and half-truths, and it thrives on small exchanges of power.

As someone who's intimately familiar with *Torment*, it disappoints me but doesn't shock me that [the game's lead writer Chris Avellone is allegedly a prolific industry predator](#). The game's spark is, in a sense, predatory. For lack of a better term, it's seductive — confusing, engulfing and comforting, in a way that's eerily familiar to me as a victim of abuse.



III.

Gamification of abuse is a real phenomenon.

I think *Cultist Simulator* is the platonic example of this — [I've touched heavily on it before](#). Even lacking the context of [the abuse allegations against creator Alexis Kennedy](#), the game is markedly sinister. As the name suggests, all of *Cultist*'s paths to victory rely on the player seducing and manipulating vulnerable people, and discarding or killing them once they exhaust their usefulness.

That said, that's only true if you play the game *as intended*, which I never do if I'm not writing about it. Left to their own devices, my *Cultist* characters are authors and painters who drink at strange clubs, who frequent seldom-visited bookshops, and who die young, without ascending and without killing anyone. The named NPCs are too interesting, too unique — I'd rather have them sit for my portraits.

It's frustrating to me that *Cultist* is so narrow in its emotional range, and its ways of seeing and interacting with its London. It's also very telling that Alexis Kennedy built a world filled with mystery and strange loveliness, but assumed I'd want only to break its inhabitants and ascend out of it as efficiently as possible.

Knowing what I know about him (and what I know of my own past abuse), I can't help thinking that Alexis Kennedy sees our industry the same way.

Still, some of us prefer to paint.

IV.

Torment does and doesn't offer the same leeway in terms of player expression. It's unlike *Cultist Simulator* in that, by default, the player is *Torment's* victim. It's a disempowerment fantasy. And *Torment* sells this to us by being (in its way) viscerally satisfying, if not outright beautiful – if *Cultist* reads like a story a narcissist would tell about themselves, a gangster movie with a rise but not a fall, then *Torment* is the same narrative, framed and completed as a tragedy.

But the tragedy itself falls on the player. The author only sets it out.

I didn't know it at first, but I've always reclaimed pieces of *Torment* under that mantra. The city, the Sensates, the question and the succubus with a lethal kiss who loves a man that can't die can all *belong* to me, after my own varying in-

terpretations. There's a sense in which I couldn't *not* claim them, because I've used them so broadly in defining my style as a writer, and, to an extent, the core of my post-transition identity.

It's strange that a work by an allegedly predatory white man, one that speaks the languages of control and abuse so fluently as to be poetic, would be a thing to help me create myself as a queer woman.

Like many trans people, and like many queers, I might define myself as being *made* by abuse, in many more ways than only this. But in saying that, I feel I'm compromising to a narrative. I'd rather say that I've *made* myself, *out of* abuse, and that I continue to do so – that harm inflicted on me can become *mine*, and that the power it used to hold over me can belong to me also. 🍷



A dark, atmospheric illustration of a futuristic city at night. The scene is dominated by dark, angular buildings with glowing orange and yellow lights from windows and vents. In the upper left, a large, pale blue moon hangs in the sky. A character in blue and silver armor stands in the foreground, holding a glowing blue orb in their right hand and a sword in their left. The character has long dark hair and a determined expression. The overall mood is mysterious and action-oriented.

THE WORLD IS YOURS

By Stu Horvath



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

Videogames and tabletop roleplaying games (TTRPGs) are close cousins, being, well, games, and also having entered the popular consciousness at the same time in the mid-70s.

Designers of TTRPGs recognized the potential for bringing their style of games to computers early on. Most TTRPGs of the 70s and 80s, like *Dungeons & Dragons*, were rooted in a long tradition of tabletop wargaming that favored detailed mathematical rules for simulating real world actions – things like movement over rough terrain, weapon speed, encumbrance and on and on. There are number tables for everything and they are all inter-related, which presents a level of complexity that is alienating to newcomers. Computers, specializing as they do in math, were immediately recognized as a way to potentially off-load those complicated calculations. And, even back in the late 70s, D&D co-creator Gary Gygax saw the alluring promise of TTRPGs played in real time with 3D graphics. Videogames like *Akalabeth: World of Doom*, *Zork* and *Rogue* hinted at a tantalizing future.

What computers couldn't offer back in the old days was freedom. TTRPGs are played in the theater of the mind, where literally anything can happen, where cleverness and ridiculousness are equally rewarding, impacting the fictional world in surprising ways. A computer simply can't match the flexibility and capriciousness of a group of human minds. Early videogames that modeled TTRPG systems were linear and pre-scripted. While the visuals of games like *Dragon Age* and *The Witcher* are stunning, the same is mostly still true of their narratives, with the illusion of choice and consequence created by limited branching narratives.

That might be about to change with *Project Witchstone* from Montreal studio Spearhead Games.

Spearhead was founded in 2012 with a desire to make games that experimented with different, established game styles while providing

an environment that nurtures those working within it. “The day after we agreed to start, our brains exploded with excitement and we still did not realize the scope of what we were about to embark on,” says co-founder Atul Mehra. “Then it occurred us that we did not have a single clue how to run a studio, raise capital, build a team, do project management, deal with the legal, PR, marketing voodoo people and do all those fun things that it actually takes to start a studio.”



Eight years and four shipped games later, though, Spearhead is going strong. Two of their previous games, *Stories: The Path of Destinies* and *Omensight*, tested the limitations of branching narratives. With *Project Witchstone*, the idea is to see what happens to a game narrative if every player action matters. On the surface, the game will be fairly familiar to anyone who has ever played one of the many Dungeons & Dragons videogames, but in playing it, something magical will be revealed. “*Project Witchstone* is an RPG where everything is driven by the consequences of a player’s actions,” says game designer Philip Tam. “The player’s story unfolds differently depending on how they approach situations and conflicts including who they befriend, who they influence into doing things and who they kill. The state of the world can be modified according to the player’s whim.”

This approach amounts to an attempt to bring videogames closer to the dynamic found in TTRPGs between a game master (GM) – who manages the story and the world – and the players – who act as the story’s protagonists. In *Project Witchstone*, the game itself acts at the GM, choosing and customizing scenarios based on everything that

has happened before, modifying dialogue choices, NPC reactions and the landscape itself to suit. Go on a murder spree, peasants will flee you, guards will try to arrest you and, most importantly, everyone will *remember*.

“We’re building on what *Fallout* (1997) and *Divinity: Original Sin 2* did in terms of freedom, exploration, sandbox and presentation and bringing innovation to the storytelling aspect,” says Tam. “We feel that going beyond the pre-scripted and predetermined narrative of those games will get us closer to the true organic, reactive and creative roleplaying aspect of tabletop RPGs.”



The game that keeps coming to my mind, though, is *Crusader Kings II*. A grand strategy game, it became famous for producing wildly enjoyable emergent narratives within the game. Players input actions with their character, a medieval ruler, and the game reacts to those inputs based on a number of statistical factors – thus, you can declare war on a neighboring kingdom but piss off your general in doing so, because his Strategy stat is higher than yours. Because, like that general, those game reactions are often tied to other characters, it creates the illusion of adaptive narrative, with murder plots, betrayals and no shortage of turnabouts. But, as designed, *Crusader Kings II* has no scripted narrative at all. These events occur, but it is the player that is unconsciously fashioning them into riveting melodramas. Until now, it was the closest I’ve come to the feeling of narrative uncertainty you get from a tabletop RPG in a videogame.

“There is definitely some shared DNA between *Crusader Kings* and *Project Witchstone*, most notably how the AI-controlled characters act

based on their traits and how scripted events ask the player to make decisions,” says Tam. “But in emergent narrative games, there isn’t a story written by the developers. In *Crusader Kings II*, the Chronicle lists all the major events but does not provide the reasons why an event happened, how the player was involved, how specific people felt about it and what ripple effects it caused.”

In *Project Witchstone*, the quests and questlines *are* scripted and the AI Game Master adapts them around player actions, which can close them off entirely or radically change them. The AI Gamemaster’s main goal is to record every player input in the playthrough. Using that data, it can then scan a number of potential pre-scripted outcomes for any situation and pick the one that fits best with the current conditions and build up the rest of the trappings – characters, locations, demeanor and such – to suit.



“We’re pushing for that feeling of a game master running a tabletop game for the player,” says Tam. “For example, the AI Game Master can make a character intercept the player to avenge a dead relative. So here, it knows that a character that the player killed has a relative, waits for a moment when it is safe to attack the player, then makes that relative confront the player. Whether the player fights back or talks their way out of the conflict, the player’s decision and the scenario’s outcome are recorded and will be used as conditions for a future consequence. Using a system that keeps track of player inputs, we can output corresponding consequences, big and small. Whether it’s an NPC deciding to jump into a fight to help the player or a faction

sending assassins to kill the player, nothing is predetermined and everything happens *because* of what the player did.”

And it isn't just direct actions that are recorded. Wear a silly hat, people in the game world will react accordingly. Do the same sort of thing over and over again, and your reputation will precede you – agents of mayhem beware. There are few guardrails in *Project Witchstone* by design. “The game encourages players to mess around as they want,” says Tam.

“We're hard at work creating a big bank of different potential quests for the AI Game Master to pick given the proper conditions. There are also a lot of related authored dialogue line variants for the different character traits.

“We hope players will enjoy experiencing all the ways the game reacts to their roleplay style and how their own story evolves. We'll support everything we can. From being a murderous villain, to a righteous knight or a scheming thief. We can't wait to hear about how different each player's playthroughs are!”

* * *

You can add *Project Witchstone* to your [Steam wish list](#), join the [mailing list](#), check out the [official site](#) or [follow along on Twitter](#) to learn more. 🗣️



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Illustrations

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