

# UNWINNABLE MONTHLY

*Volume 7, Issue 11 - November 2020*



**YAKUZA and the KOAN • COFFEE TALK • SOLAR ASH**

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*Monthly*

133



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#### CONTRIBUTORS



Just like the cover of the November Exploits, this month's cover, by Johan Nohr, isn't tied to a specific story, but rather to the collective vibe at Unwinnable in this moment in time. Who doesn't feel like molten evil is running out of their mouths at this point in 2020, honestly?

Our main feature sees George Umbarger finding Zen in the *Yakuza* series of videogames. Our second feature, by Katiee McKinstry, chases relaxing atmosphere and caffeinated beverages in *Coffee Talk*. Meanwhile, Sara Clemens takes the controls of Revving the Engine this month and learns about Heart Machine's forthcoming *Solar Ash*.

As ever, Noah Springer leads off the columns with a batch of noteworthy hip hop albums. Harry Rabinowitz recommends *The Promise*, a graphic novel continuation of *Avatar: The Last Airbender*. Oluwatayo Adewole takes a look at the Brazilian film *Bacurau*. Amanda Hudgins examines the importance of subject matter tags in fanfic communities.

Diego Nicolás Argüello learns a bit about *Tetris* (and relationships). Declan Taggart wrestles with *Hanano Puzzle*. Deirdre Coyle witnesses the forest come to life. Melissa King pens a note of appreciation to the Fire Keeper. Ben Sailer gets ready for the winter from hell. Matt Marrone resists paying for a free-to-play game . . . for now.

Yussef Cole appreciates the crowded wasteland of *Fallout 76*. Autumn Wright gets cosmic. Justin Reeve checks out the architecture in *Breath of the Wild*. Rob Rich embraces endings. Adam Boffa, meanwhile, is surprised by an unexpected sequel. Finally, I chat with Michael Hsiung about his extremely relaxed wizards.

We'll see you back here in a couple weeks, with the December issue of Exploits, in which we reveal the best of everything from the last ten years.

Stu Horvath  
Kearny, New Jersey  
November 15, 2020



**L**ike most of you (I assume) I'm feeling incredibly burned out by the last couple weeks . . . or is it months – time has lost all meaning. Anyway, this election was a trainwreck to my sleep, my alcohol budget and my productivity. I don't think clicking refresh in my browser over and over again really did anything, but the repetitive motion was therapeutic. The bright side was that when I wasn't refreshing results, I could listen to some awesome new albums that could distract me, if only momentarily.

## Clipping – *Visions of Bodies Being Burned*

*Visions of Bodies Being Burned* is my favorite Clipping release since they dropped *CLPPNG* back in 2014. This goes hard and heavy throughout and Daveed is on point with the lyricism. The beats are fire and the bass drops too deep on tracks like “Say the Name” and “Enlacing.” It makes sense that they released it on October 30th, because they are really leaning into the horrorcore aesthetic for a lot of the tracks. All around, this is a banger with a point, but make sure you don't blow your ears out.



## Sa-Roc – *The Sharecropper's Daughter*

Rhymesayers is always a good record label to keep an eye on, and their decision to pick up Sa-Roc for their roster paid off with her new album, *The Sharecropper's Daughter*. Sa-Roc's confident flow tells of blackness and

womanhood. She tackles generational trauma and the continuing oppression of white, patriarchal supremacy, but stays positive throughout the fifteen tracks. Breakbeats line her backdrop and some strong features from (among others) Blackthought and Saul Williams round out a stellar debut on Rhymesayers. In the end, Sa-Roc sums up the album best with the line: “If my black fist and my womb irks you, here’s the world’s smallest violin.”



### Open Mike Eagle – *Anime, Trauma and Divorce*

The founder of art rap is back with another album that digs into his personal history. *Anime, Trauma and Divorce* sums up a lot of the album’s content, but in coordination with the rest of Open Mike Eagle’s oeuvre, this album feels even more personal than normal; this is Eagle coping with massive disruptions across his life, both from socio-political and personal problems. Outside of the content, Mike brings his peerless flow, brilliant (comedic) insights and stellar production to his new project (as always). If you haven’t gotten into his work yet, this might be a good place to start.



### Reason – *New Beginnings*

I always find it strange to find out that a rapper is releasing a “debut” album when I feel like I’ve been listening to them for a long time, but here we are again. Even though I’ve heard him rap since at least 2016, *New Beginnings* is Reason’s official debut album on Top Dawg Entertainment. With the backup of some TDE regulars (including ScHoolboy Q, Ab-Soul, Isaiah Rashad,), Reason shows why he was chosen for the notoriously picky label. He is a confident vocalist and lyricist with a good ear for beats. It’s clear that he is a great addition to this already god-tier label.



### bbno\$ x lentra – *Good Luck Have Fun*

I only learned about bbno\$ (baby no money) through his album earlier this year with Yung Gravy, but he’s quickly

become one of my favorite producers. So, when *Good Luck Have Fun* came out, I was excited, but then a little let down that his friend, lentra, was producing most of the album. Turns out, lentra picks up in the exact vein bbno\$ swings in: poppy, bassy, swingy beats that get my shoulders shaking. Lyrically, bbno\$ rides the beats with talent and, while there's nothing too deep about the lyrics, who cares when the beats bang like this, giving straight positive vibes to counteract the the rest of this fucking miserable year.



\* \* \*

Amazingly, between writing the beginning of the article and the end, I stopped having to refresh my browser. Election results came in, and well, I'm not super excited with the results, they're as good as we could have hoped for. What a relief! Now just back to doom-scrolling Twitter like normal. Wait - \*clicks refresh\* 🔄



## Avatar Forever

**A** *Avatar: The Last Airbender*, a Nickelodeon cartoon from the mid 2000s, is among Netflix's top 10 most-watched shows. [It has been for months now.](#)

I'm sure the fact that there is a global pandemic and folks are trapped inside is helping *The Last Airbender* out. But if you think it's popularity is solely due to its fantastical, escapist elements, you're dead wrong.

*The Last Airbender* is an excellent show. It is easily one of the best animated series ever. Its themes of war, genocide, imperialism, totalitarianism, social justice, redemption and growth are all extremely well done. It's incredibly well written, and one of its characters ([Zuko](#)) has perhaps my favorite TV character arc *ever*.

So, when I picked up *Avatar: The Last Airbender - The Promise*, the graphic novel continuation of the series, the bar was set astronomically high.

(Major spoilers for *The Last Airbender* and minor spoilers for *The Promise* follow.)

Luckily, Team Avatar is in good hands with writer Gene Luen Yang (*All American Chinese*, *Superman Smashes the Klan*, *Dragon Hoops*), artist duo Gurihiru (*Unbelievable*

HARRY RECOMMENDS:  
*Avatar: The Last Airbender*  
– *The Promise*

Written by Gene Luen Yang. Art by Gurihiru.

Created by Bryan Konietzko and Michael Dante DiMartino.

GENRE: Action Adventure, Fantasy

RATING: Middle Grade, (Violence, Themes)

INFO: Published by Dark Horse Books. 232pp.

AVAILABLE AT: [BookShop](#), [IndieBound](#), [Your Local Comics Store](#)

*We earn an affiliate commission from purchases made through Bookshop.*

*Anything earned goes back to our writers.*

Gwenpool, *Superman Smashes the Klan*), and guidance from *Avatar* creators Bryan Konietzko and Michael Dante DiMartino. *The Promise* delivers on the series' characters, writing, themes and tone, while exploring a familiar but fresh story that's sure to please any fan of the show.

*The Promise* takes place one year after the events of *The Last Airbender*. Avatar Aang and newly minted Fire Lord Zuko are working together to usher in a new era of peace, and rectify the damage done by the 100 year war. The duo face a complex problem by the name of Yu Dao, the first, and oldest, fire nation colony located within the earth kingdom. Aang believes the colonists should be reallocated back to their "home" in the fire nation. Zuko agrees, at first. But after his own citizens label him a coward and a traitor, Zuko starts having second thoughts. Filled with pressure, doubt and many sleepless nights, Zuko goes to his imprisoned father for advice on ruling his people. As Aang and Zuko grow further apart, the world seems set on another collision course: this time between Fire Lord Zuko, Earth King Kuei, Avatar Aang and the people of Yu Dao.

*The Promise* draws much of its strength from this setup. In *The Last Airbender*, the gang was faced with complex issues around justice, peace, government and power. But in most cases, there was one right answer: two sides should share resources, violence is wrong, brainwashing your citizens, regardless of the reasons, is bad. In

*The Promise*, the answer to the central conflict is not so simple. Yang, having written many all-ages comics with themes around racism, war, governance and the like, is particularly adept at writing these types of conflicts.

Aang, influenced by his past lives, carries with him a very traditional world view. In Aang's mind, the world is four harmonious, separate nations, where fire benders live in the fire nation, earth kingdom citizens in the earth kingdom, etc.. And while that *has* been the way of the world in the past, forcing the colonists of Yu Dao, many of which were born and raised there, to move to a "home" they have never been to seems wrong. This problem is exemplified in some of the new characters, particularly Kori, an earthbender, Yu Dao native, and child of mixed-origin parents. With Aang's own feelings about the fire



nation and occupying territory tied up in the *genocide of his people* (yeah, remember that?), he struggles to find the right path forward in a way that is gripping, heartfelt and touching.

Meanwhile, Zuko's struggle to rule his people is just as complex and engaging. Something I didn't expect from *The Promise* was a greater understanding of Zuko's father Ozai. But the scenes between Zuko and his father provide some of the most tense and dramatic moments of the entire book. I expected Ozai's philosophy of totalitarianism to be horrible (which it very much is), but I didn't expect it to resonate with real world events so obviously, and so painfully.

The rest of the gang, while not as prominent as Aang and Zuko, feel exactly like their show counterparts, with solid writing by Yang that showcases an in-depth understanding of *Avatar's* main crew. Katara is still the thoughtful, protective, fierce water bending master we know and love. Sokka is still a hilarious mastermind. Toph is still brash and independent. While some of their scenes, particularly Toph running a metalbending academy, can seem disconnected from the main conflict, they were always a joy to read

The artwork, drawn, illustrated and inked by Gurihiru (the publishing name for the team/duo Chifuyu Sasaki and Naoko Kawano), manages to evoke the style of the show with quality character expressions, posing and fidelity. I was sceptical of how bending would be translated to the page, as it, along with much of the martial arts in the series,

is based in fluid motion. While the artwork does not focus on fluid, multi-panel movement, Gurihiru still nail the look, feel and impact of bending. Their bold character outlines, eye-grabbing posing, and spot-on colorwork are entertaining and cartoon-y. And the artwork stays consistently excellent, maintaining outstanding quality all the way through to the last page.

Overall, *The Promise* is a stellar continuation of *The Last Airbender*, going far above what I expected. A back-cover quote from Comic Attack reads, "a read of it feel[s] like you're still watching the show." I couldn't agree more. 🍵





Welcome to this month's stop on our world tour! Take a break from post-election stress, sip your Cachaça and let's dive right in. (Mild Spoilers for *Bacurau*)

Taking place a few years into the future, *Bacurau* follows a remote village in North Brazil as they come under attack from a malicious outside force.

A core tenant of this film is its sense of community. Bacurau (the eponymous village) is a mishmash of different people, from young to old, queer and heterosexual, across various ethnic heritages. It feels like a microcosm of the plethora of heritages and identities that make up Brazil's population. The writers/directors Juliano Dornelles and Kleber Mendonça Filho give you time to take in the place and its people, from the school to the church, to their funeral traditions. The camera lingers and makes you feel all of the idiosyncrasies, organically learning through background details like the wreck of a police car riddled with bullet holes. You also learn about the past of this place and its people in the myths and whispers told through grainy YouTube videos, digital wanted posters and overexcited children.

Dornelles and Filho give you a rough idea of how Bacurau functions on the day-to-day, sharing resources depending on people's need and resolving conflict without law enforcement (or any equivalent). The small society formed here is a pretty good model for what a communalist politic actually looks like in practice – even though those specific politics are never explicitly mentioned. This is a community which is mostly self-governing and self-reliant but doesn't completely isolate itself. People can come and go as they please. They have leaders (in the broadest sense), but those figures don't have hard

power to force anyone to do something they don't want to do. That horizontal power structure feels like it's reflected in the filmmaking itself, because while Teresa (Bárbara Cohen) is clearly meant to be our perspective character in the opening, this very quickly becomes an ensemble piece with everyone playing their part (both as characters and performers). There are clear elements which distinguish this from the ideas of "community" that get cynically employed by conservatives. As I've mentioned before, the village is incredibly diverse and while there are evidently blood ties, there isn't a fixation on "the nuclear family" as a socio-economic unit. Community and family, as established in this film, are loving fluid things that you choose and fight for.



As is probably clear, this set of values puts them directly in conflict with the powers-that-be. Capitalism can't thrive when people are more focused on looking after their neighbor than competing with them. While a community such as Bacurau represents an ideological threat to any capitalist government, its important to put this in the context of Jair Bolsonaro's presidency. This is a man known for spouting violent misogyny and homophobia, he has also allowed and encouraged deforestation in the Amazon – often in the interests of multinational corporations and at the expense of small communities like the one this film focuses on, or various indigenous groups which don't fit so easily into capitalist society. This international collaboration is reflected in *Bacurau*, attacks on the village come from a combination of local government and a group composed entirely of white people from the global North. Through analogy this film is able to capture the way that groups which challenge the status quo immediately come under attack from these neo-colonial forces. It's also impossible to separate the attacks on communalist politic from queer acceptance and gender parity because all of these structural issues are

intrinsically linked. When you allow for the existence of the subversive force of queerness (and other forms of aberrance), the status quo cannot hold. As Angela Davis put it: “I don’t think we would be where we are today – encouraging ever larger numbers of people to think within an abolitionist frame – had not the trans community taught us that it is possible to effectively challenge that which is considered the very foundation of our sense of normalcy.”

The key thing is that the people of Bacurau don’t just take this lying down. They fight back. This doesn’t come out of some sort of latent militaristic instinct or thirst for violence, in fact, they all have to take a psychoactive drug to even be able to cope with the prospect of killing people. Instead, the desire to fight comes from a place of love for people around them, for their home, for their community. I think that is what is crucial to learn here. If we want a better world there will be resistance. The system we live in with all its interlocking oppressions cannot abide by the existence of anything that cannot be consumed and colonized. So we have to be prepared to fight for what we want.

If there’s anything this year has shown us, it’s that the people around us matter. It won’t be a politician, or your favorite celebrity, or president that will save you from consequences of systems that they benefit from. Even the ones who genuinely want to help you are rarely in the position to do so. The people you can rely on will be your quiet neighbor, that busker who always makes you laugh, the sex worker who gives you a beaming smile in the dead of night, the loud kids that appear out of nowhere and seem to never run out of energy. As you watch the village’s funeral procession in *Bacurau* you feel that power brimming beneath the surface. It’s in every footstep. Every note of their song. A solemnity, a unity and a promise. A promise to the dead and the living to keep fighting, to hold onto each other and never let go. 🇺





## Tagging

Tagging fics is both a conversation and a function in fanfiction.

Francesca Coppa, one of the founders of Archive of Our Own told [SYFY WIRE](#) that the tagging system at AO3 was a “curated folksonomy” and “the best library tagging system in the world,” and this isn’t false modesty. User generated and maintained by volunteer tag-wrangers, AO3’s tagging system is a complex web of everything from helpful trigger warnings to word salads.

Big tags in fandom are things like “fluff” or “hurt/comfort” or “angst.” Even things like “[hanahaki](#)” are likely to have a decent amount of traction in the community. But the best tags on AO3 are the ones that usually are hyper-specific, either tied to a single community or even to a single fic. (Take the “[no beta we die like...](#)” where each fandom with a character that dies early on adds their specific character to the end of that equation).

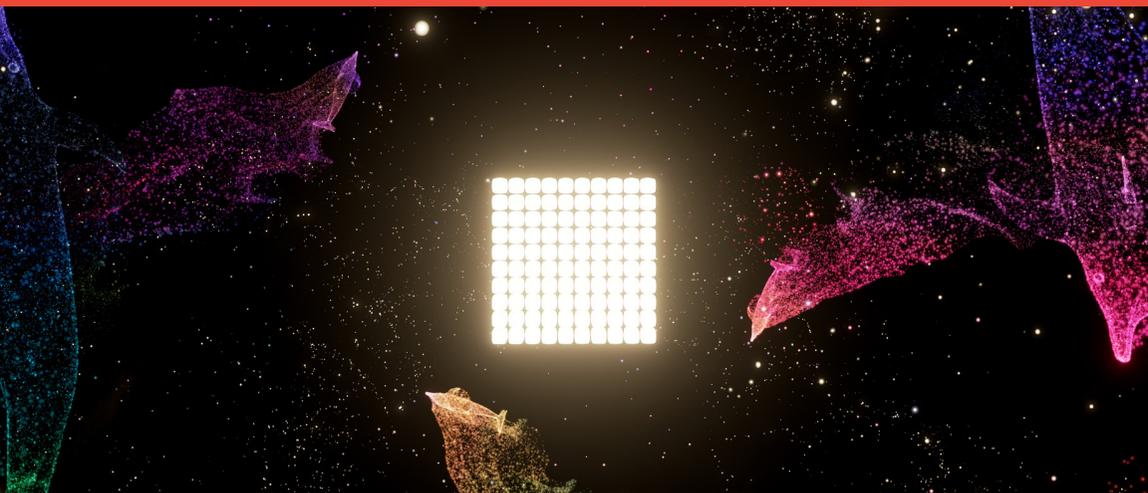
*The Queen’s Gambit*, the Netflix show that, as of this writing, has only been out for a month, has 49 works on AO3 and one really exceptional tag; “for personal reasons i’m not really going to get in the headspace of a russian man,” which has only been used once. When tags aren’t frequently used on AO3, they’re flagged as “additional tags” and don’t really show up in the system proper. “This tag has not been marked common and can’t be filtered on (yet),” is what AO3 will say. But every now and then, a tag will eclipse its humble beginnings and expand.

For the Charles Xavier/Erik Lehnsherr pairing, these almost conversational tags are so large that they have their own tropes attached to them and they are searchable. Two of the more popular ones are “Erik is Crushing Harder than a 12-Year-Old Girl” (which AO3 simplifies to “Erik has a Crush”) and “Charles Xavier has a PhD in Adorable;” which have 575 and 1092 works, respectively.

Or honestly like any of the tags on a lot of the works for the band The Mechanisms, whose tags include things like “when u pull ur bf out of a sun but like no homo,” “The toy soldier is happy to be a soldier again,” “also there are more relationships i haven’t tagged because they came up as myth and not mechs,” “Lyfrassir Isn’t Cis And I Will Die On This Grave,” and “everyone is much softer and also less motivated to end the world.” I did not hunt for these, this is literally off of the first six works I found for The Mechanisms on Archive of Our Own. It seems like a very conversational fandom.

These tags tend to roll together as though the author is almost talking to themselves, but also to you the reader as a kind of stream of consciousness. They are sort of informational, but only if you’re already in the know, and so they function as a sort of in-joke, a referential touchstone for someone who is already seeking the contents inside. 🇺🇸





## Learning Tetris

In March 2019, I made an impulsive purchase. I couldn't put it into words back then, but it was around the time where I was feeling that something was amiss in my relationship. We had been together for over two years by then and, for a long while, everything had been great. But there were a couple key moments that started to distance us. Time would pass and, slowly, we always went back to where we once were.

2019 was somewhat different. It was also the year I started learning *Tetris*.

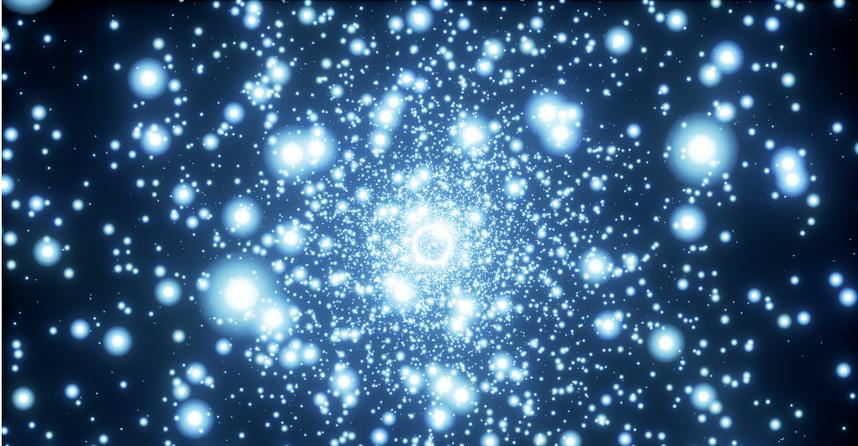
It wasn't my first time playing it, but I had neglected it throughout my life. I guess I never saw the appeal – I'm not really a fan of puzzle games, nor did anyone tell me to give it a try during my childhood. It just seemed . . . fine. In 2018, however, everyone was talking about how great *Tetris Effect* was. The classic foundation was there, but the experience was completely different, creating a sensory realm around the tetrominoes. These blocks now invited you to swim with dolphins, to visit new places around the world, all the while a soothing soundtrack set the scene, and a subtle story, around each moment.

We'd had our favorite games throughout the years. Some withstood the passing of time better than others. But I felt like she and I were missing a new experience to hold on to. That was my reasoning anyway. It was unlikely that the game would go on a sale anytime soon, but it didn't matter. I saw it for \$40 on the PlayStation Store, ignored my hesitation due to the steep price and purchased it. At least for the following weekend, we now had something new to look forward to. I had successfully borrowed some time.

"No . . . that's not how you, just . . . what are you doing?!"

“I don’t get this.”

One of my first lessons was realizing that *Tetris* isn’t as simple as it seems. The whole point is to arrange these falling cubes in the clearest manner possible to avoid creating unwanted gaps. When gaps inevitably appear in your grid, you have to improvise on the fly to try and keep your structure as far from the top as possible. But this can go sideways in a matter of seconds. You can make a wrong move in the first few rows and create a massive blank space, or mess up in the middle and be left with no options to turn back and fix it.

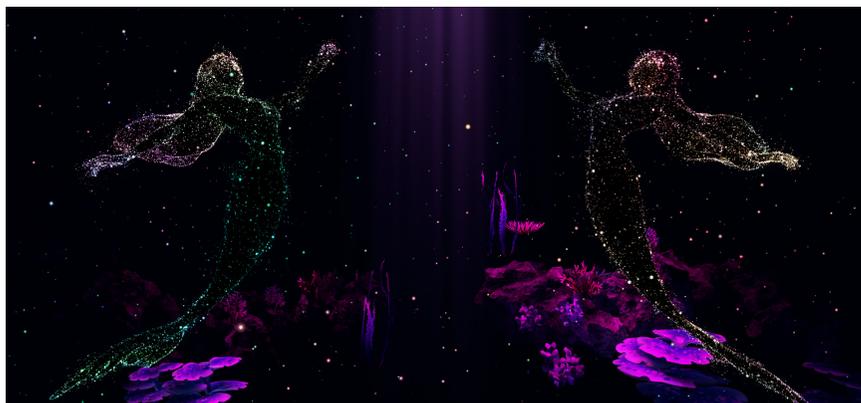


“It’s easy,” she would often say. “Be one with the cubes.”

The years between my first relationship and this one had been lonely, to say the least. I had [grown accustomed to that routine](#) and, one day, it slipped out of my hands. Despite how bad it had turned towards the end, the healing process after made me realize I missed being with someone. I had a couple other love interests in the following years that didn’t lead anywhere. After finishing highschool, it all remained the same for a long while – but I was partly guilty of that, avoiding certain situations because I was afraid of getting hurt and lied to again. The same happened when I denied an invitation to grab a cup of tea from this person I had met while working in a local publication, despite the fact that I knew, deep down, that I had feelings for her, in the worst possible way. We continued to talk, and a second chance for a date arose some time after. I’m still thankful for that.

During those first few months everything went well. I began to soften again as we both became more comfortable with each other. We found lots of things in common, and simply had a good time – to the point where we didn’t have any arguments whatsoever. Her siblings would often joke about it, but were mostly surprised that we hadn’t had any differences, telling us it was something natural. Something that is supposed to happen.

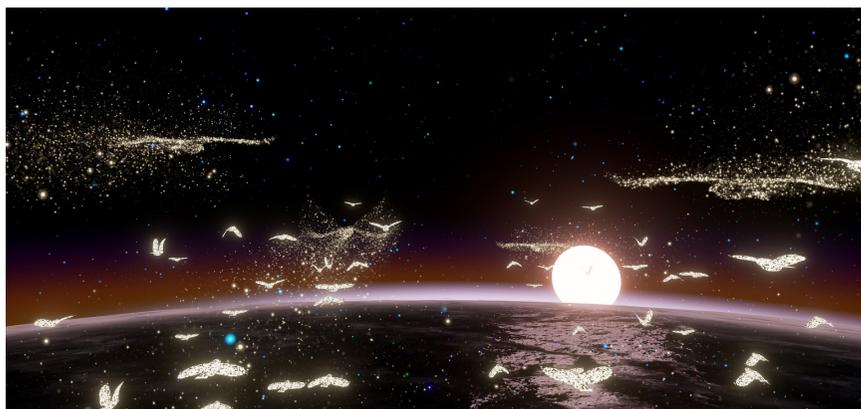
This changed when she went on a trip to Europe with friends. Our last date before it had been odd – it had been only recently that I started visiting her house and I had the feeling that her family didn't like me much. I'm not sure if it was due to the age difference (I was 19, she was 25) or the fact that I felt so out of place that I would barely speak during gatherings. This time, I helped her to pick up some final items and we had lunch. I would usually order a beer, but I decided to skip it that day, which surprised her. Her family was going to gather at the house to set up the Christmas tree, as she was spending the holidays overseas, but the plan didn't quite include me, so we parted ways early in the day. I wanted to go, of course, and I later found out I was invited to tag along, even if it wasn't specifically stated. But, perhaps involuntarily, I marked my distance.



This followed during the trip. My loss of confidence, and the insecurity that quickly led to jealousy, made this first distance between us incredibly hard. I'd worry if I didn't hear from her for long periods of time, or overthink every message and audio clip, while she was only enjoying herself with long time friends on a trip she'd been excited for ever since it became a tangible plan. She had even left me a gift – a box filled with letters and activities for each day until her return, so I wouldn't miss her that much. But I let the worst part of myself win, creating a gap for the years to come.

It became a cycle. We would have a big talk where I apologized, she would say it's okay, I would reply that it's not and that I wanted to change, after which a period of distance set in. This meant a week or two without seeing each other, but over time these periods turned longer. I didn't see it as clearly as I do now, but I could notice the weight of these moments lingering in our relationship. She gave me more chances than anyone else would have in her place, but I knew these repeating patterns had to change. With every one of these periods that followed, I started to fear that one day I wouldn't be so fortunate.

I kept borrowing time. I treasured the moments when we were back on our feet and blamed myself constantly during the in-betweens. But most of our last year together was spent playing *Tetris Effect*, trying to make as much progress as possible during my visits, passing the controller whenever one of us lost. I slowly got better at it, but the game never stopped challenging us. The fire levels in particular always invited an “oh no” in unison, since these would often change speed all of the sudden and become intense towards the end as we sat there waiting for that fucking long tetromino to appear. Overcoming these obstacles was always gratifying and the next level rewarded our efforts with a moment of respite. A brief period of time where everything seemed as great as it once used to be.



This went on until we reached the final level. We probably restarted it hundreds of times in the span of weeks. At one point we would just move to a different game and return every now and then to give it another try, but it couldn't be done. Compared to the previous ones, this one has a hefty goal, as it asks for 90 lines when you can usually get to do 36 or so, depending on the difficulty. The last few were under an incredibly high speed, too. And yet it was a joy to witness, with its bright colors, the imagery that references past moments of the journey you just went through, and the mesmerizing lyrics in the background.

“Come follow me  
I'll show you this side of the world  
The places that you've never seen  
Come follow me”

Something I reflected on, as I kept on practicing *Tetris Effect* on my own at home, is that we had been ignoring Zen Mode completely. This feature presents

the ability to stop time to try and get rid of as many lines as possible without having to worry about what's to come. The more lines you can make during this period of time, which lasts a couple seconds, the bigger the bonus score will be. But the downside is that these lines don't count towards your goal. You just buy some time and increase your score, but you eventually snap out of it.

I realized that we were playing to win. We just wanted to finish it, no matter how long it took us, even if my slow learning process would often drag us down. Being stuck in the last level for so long was frustrating, but perhaps there was a reason why we couldn't beat it. I don't think it was the lack of skill or luck. Something else was amiss. We were stuck right there, 90 lines away from the goal, 90 lines away from the end. And we couldn't take that final step together.

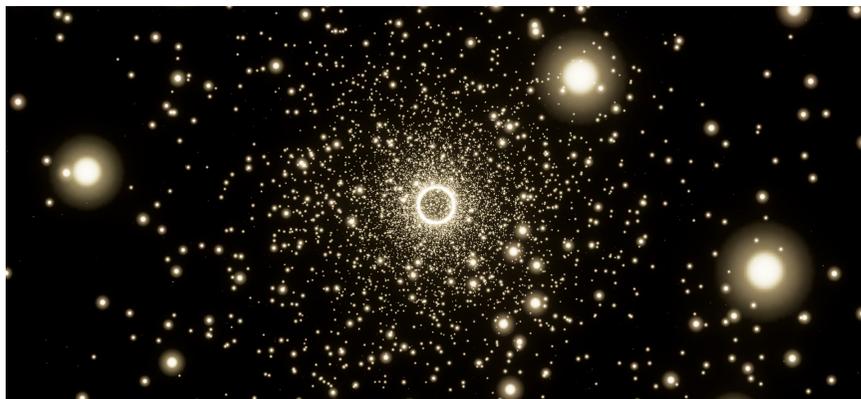


Looking back, I had known this stillness all too well. I put up with it in silence – there was a lot we just didn't talk about, but should have, even if it had led to the sorely needed arguments that we had neglected. As much as I enjoyed the “perfect” months before her trip, I couldn't shake that feeling of loneliness that had been with me for so long, even with a partner on my side.

Every time we parted ways I would return sad, wishing we could have done something else after the movies, or dinner, or whatever. We would see each other once a week, which to me felt like ages. I only got to see the person I loved four times a month, 48 times a year. Whenever we had dinner during the week, I always tried to make the most out of our brief meetings. There were a couple times that broke the norm, of course, but it was mostly like this. The fact that intimacy wasn't in our plans also wore me down, in ways I was never able to articulate. I often yearned for a trip to the coast, a day-long picnic, or even just to be in her room with the door closed and the lights turned off for a while, but these never happened. As much as arguments are expected

in a relationship, I wanted more freedom. I wanted more time with her. And I always thought those moments would finally come at some point – I only had to try and not mess things up to avoid having another period of distance between the two. But I always failed.

I started going to therapy in mid 2019, and a couple months later I was able to mention some of these things to her. But it was late by then. Time had finally caught up to us and, understandably, I didn't get another chance. The fact that we didn't kiss during our last date gave me a bad sign from the beginning – I'm sure she had made the decision way before arriving at our usual Starbucks. For the first time, I couldn't understand why our last talk had led to an argument, in which I mentioned that I always wondered why we never had that picnic, as corny as it sounded, as well as other things that I was happy about from my time in therapy. As slow as my progress was, I was proud of it, and intended to stick to it. But I didn't understand how late I was until I answered her question.



“Are you doing this for me, or for you?”

“For us.”

“It has to be for you...”

It's been over a year since that talk. I'm still going to therapy, and have allowed myself to process and heal over it some time ago. I even opened myself to new relationships, to the point of expressing my feelings to somebody new. I've been single, however, and I can't say I'm a fan of dating apps. Even less so during quarantine. But I continue to work on myself, and to reflect on things that have passed. I never quite had the opportunity to just hang out during my adult life and be free to do whatever, and it's something I look forward to when all of this is over. But in one way or another I will always remember those years.

I continued playing *Tetris Effect*, too, but I also got stuck on the last level. For a long while, I didn't want to see the end if it weren't with her. I believe that we

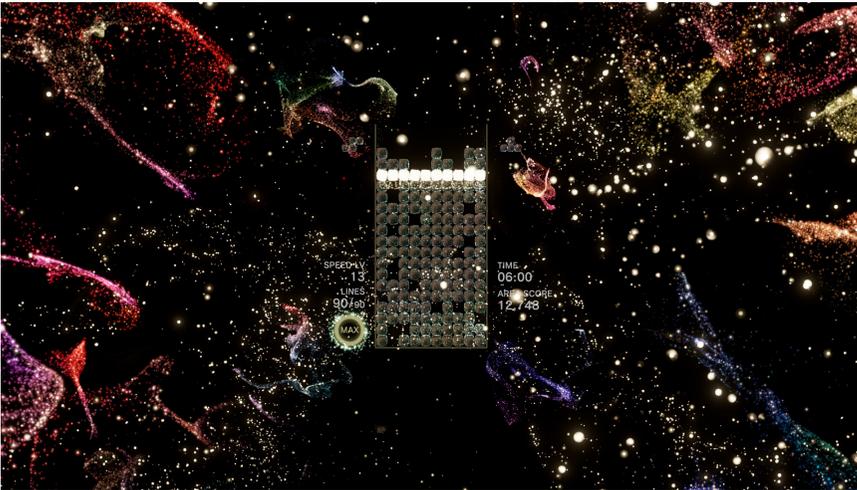
owed that to ourselves. But I eventually went back to it.

Turns out that the more you play Adventure Mode, the more experience you gain, which leads to certain categories for your profile after meeting a required milestones. Despite the dozens of hours I had put into it, mine was still “Apprentice,” but that was okay. I knew that despite all my progress, I still had a long way to go. But I had to give it a try. I had neglected myself from closure long enough. The only thing left to do was to fill in the gaps, to coexist with the distance of the grid to get to those 90 lines.

This time, however, I started using Zen Mode. Even if just for a brief moment, I had control of the situation. I could stop to see everything that had gone wrong. I realized what a fool I had been for believing that my progress during these moments didn’t matter, and that I could just borrow time to get to the end.

“Come follow me  
I’ll show you this side of the world  
The places that you’ve never seen  
Come follow me”

On December 31, 2019, I heard the lyrics once more.



And I finally made it. 🏆



## Fight or Flummoxed

So I've forgotten almost everything I learned in GCSE Biology class, but I think what happens is something like this: the next level loads, I inspect my possible moves and my brain is squeezed through a Victorian clothes mangle, wringing out all the warm, juicy adrenaline and noradrenaline that had built up over the last level and leaving behind a soggy, shivering jumble of tissue. Level 30 of *Hanano Puzzle* (available free from [here](#)) looks simple but, for all I know, could actually be impossible.

On my screen is a set of colored blocks. I can only move them left or right. When they touch flowers of the same color, they grow, flowering themselves. When all my blocks have flowered, the level is complete. Woof. Move onto Level 31. Except I can't see any damn way that all of my blocks can reach a flower unless the game's got a jump button it's forgotten to tell me about.

I heard a mantra recently I liked. I'm not big on mantras or mottoes or even people giving me advice, but this one seemed useful: don't think about why you might fail; focus on how you're going to succeed.

On Level 30, I'm trying but I can't see any way that success is possible. The flowers might as well be small, pixelly images of the developer's middle finger raised right at me. I start to click anyway, shifting the blocks around, exploring the options that I have, rearranging the board to see if a new configuration of pieces stimulates a flash of insight, a new idea, an accidental fix. Maybe there's a method I haven't discovered yet for raising a block up in the air, a chain of moves with an unexpected consequence, a piece that can squeeze into a gap to be used later.

Something internal happens. Blood surges towards dormant parts of the left hemisphere of my brain, and they swell up like tomatoes brined to the point of bursting in growth hormones. My heart rate builds. My bladder relaxes. My mouth dries up. Adrenaline, noradrenaline and dopamine drip out of the adrenal glands that sit on top of my kidneys, gross, leaky little alien heads on top of gross little alien babies.

My fumbling experiments go nowhere. Bollocks. I waste a minute or so mashing my keyboard and mouse, hunting for that secret jump button, before I quit *Hanano Puzzle* in disgust. Disgust at myself. At the game and Qrostar, its devious, lying, broken-game-making makers. At my football team, who have been under-performing for the last ten years or so and are the source of a nagging malaise that undermines anything in my life I might call an accomplishment. Just at the whole economic basis of society, really. When you get right down to it, it's not great, is it? Power accreting to the wealthy. Wealth to the powerful. Is anything going to change? Probably not. Stupid game. Stupid capitalism.



I return to *Hanano Puzzle* inside fifteen minutes.

Qrostar comes from the developers of *Jelly No Puzzle*, another free puzzle game and one that has a strong claim to the title of greatest puzzle game of all time. *Hanano Puzzle* was made a couple of years before *Jelly No Puzzle*, and it shows. The puzzles are not as elegant or as well realized, and the graphics lack the same level of polish. At its best, though, *Hanano Puzzle* has the same impact as its successor: the same quiet thrill of the analytic process, the warmth of a moment of understanding, the mental blitz of a puzzle yet to be solved. Reputation has it that the already released *Hanano Puzzle 2* is even better.

I try a few of the old moves again. Then I try something different and an adrenal medulla's worth of adrenaline is vomited into my bloodstream.

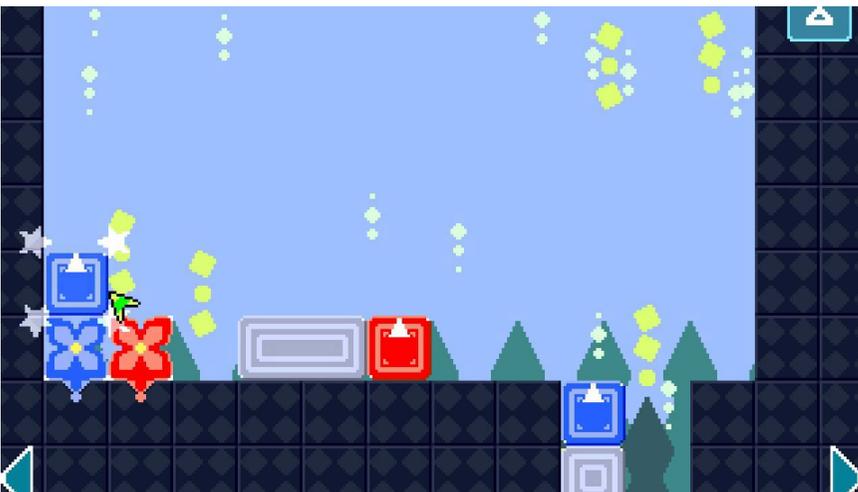
In last month's *Unwinnable Monthly*, Orrin Grey concluded about dungeon crawl board games that "[t]he fantasy is that problems have simple solutions." I've never played any of those games, but I can imagine the draw. Everyday life is complex problems, complicated by other people, virus transmission, logistical hassles, situations everyone wishes weren't so unfortunate but just are. Even in a good year, there might be five solutions to a problem but none of them might be perfect or so much as half-way attractive.

Level 30 in *Hanano* has one solution. One set of moves that is right and will see me reaching all those middle-finger blocks. It's a series of moves obscured by logic as much as a product of it, and right now, in Level 30, it's a series that doesn't seem to exist and might as well be a lie or a practical joke at my expense.

But when I find that solution . . .

The right hemisphere of my brain will light up. If you scanned my head with an fMRI machine, it'd be flashing so much that fireflies a mile away would be alert, horny and coming my way. Adrenaline and cortisol will be hosing around my body, pushing my heart rate up to unhealthy levels, dilating my pupils, trembling my knees, shooting a mix of water, lactic acid and urea out of my sweat glands. As if I was throwing myself down a rocky slope on a bike or sliding across a slick football pitch to get the studs of my right boot on the ball or wobbling to my feet on a surfboard that's exploding forwards in front of a breaking wave.

Then the new level will load and the Victorian mangle will be back at my brain and that sensation will be gone, demanding to be recaptured once more. 🍷





It's like the forest itself come to life," says the narrator of *Heart of the Woods*. She's seeing, for the first time, a giant, horned Forest Spirit roaming the woods outside a remote German village. "[It's] like a whole mass of trees just uprooted themselves from the ground to form something that can't possibly exist." The narrator was a skeptic, and now she's seeing the supernatural firsthand. She's shocked.

But I can't imagine why.

It may come as no surprise to you that I like creatures with cool horns. You know who has cool horns? [Spyro the Dragon](#). [Arokh from Drakan](#). [Rowan from Seers Isle](#). Cernunnos, the "[Gaelic god of beasts and wild places](#)." And *Heart of the Woods'* extremely chill Forest Spirit: "Two immense horns pierce the sky, looking like lightning bolts permanently imprinted against the clouds," our skeptical narrator reports.

The premise of *Heart of the Woods*, Studio Élan's 2019 visual novel, is that a popular paranormal vlogger and her editor go to the isolated village of Eysenfeld to investigate a lead from one of their fans. On arrival, they find a lot of suspicious townspeople who'll give them no intel, and a rather nice – if somewhat suspicious – fan who claims her cat can talk. The heroines spend the first chunk of the narrative without any evidence that their trip was worthwhile – until, of course, they find themselves in the middle of a woodland snowstorm, and see a giant tree walking past.

Back to Cernunnos. Obviously – yes, *obviously* – the Forest Spirit makes me think of Cernunnos, one aspect of the Horned God from Celtic mythology. He is "[the lord of wild things](#)," usually portrayed as a bearded man with horns,

often accompanied by a stag, or by a full gathering of woodland animals. He is a protector, a fertility god, a god of creation.

The Forest Spirit in *Heart of the Woods* has no human face, but it does have horns, and it does lord over the beasts and the wild places. Its presence “revitaliz[es] the air” around it. The spirit can grow or shrink at will; moss-covered limbs branch out from its trunk; two “eyes” glow from unfixed locations on its body.

As the story progresses, we learn that the people of Eysenfeld believe the Forest Spirit to be some kind of demon. They view it as a terrifying presence, and once offered it human sacrifices.

Cernunnos, too, may have been unfairly maligned. Whether or not they used the name “Cernunnos,” the Christian church warned parishioners of the witches’ Horned God. In *The God of the Witches*, Margaret Murray [tells us](#) that the Bishop of Coventry was “accused of doing homage to the Devil in the form of a sheep” in 1303. “[T]he cult of the Horned God was far from being dead,” Murray says. “This is one of the first British records in which the old God is called the Devil by the Christian writers of the Middle Ages.”

But when Eysenfeld’s Forest Spirit actually receives a human sacrifice – in this case, a character described by [Studio Élan’s official website](#) as a “really, really gay ghost” – the Forest Spirit saves her soul. It cannot save her body, but it allows her spirit to live in the woods, surrounded by lush landscapes, fairies and, eventually, some paranormal vloggers . . .

Far from being a demon, the Forest Spirit is a guardian. Not only can it save dying souls in its domain, it bears “the emotional weight of an entire ecosystem.” When the forest is harmed, the Forest Spirit is harmed.

I think a lot about the forest, and in certain, more isolated spots, I feel vibes emanating from the trees. In those moments, if I saw a tall, horned tree walking by, it wouldn’t strike me as unusual. I wouldn’t expect such an entity to let me ride on its shoulders like Tolkien’s Ents, to lead me to Cernunnos, or even to protect me like the Forest Spirit from *Heart of the Forest*. But whether it had the face of an Ent, the entourage of Cernunnos or the glowing eye of Eysenfeld’s Forest Spirit, I would be grateful to see the forest come to life. 🍷



**F**ire Keeper,

As you watch over Firelink Shrine, you carry the legacy of the Fire Keepers who came before you. With the gravity of humanity on their backs, they continued to guard the flame, watching, waiting for the new Age of Fire.

Every Fire Keeper carries her burdens. Duty is a heavy weight to bear, whether it's to your family, your lord or your country.

Throughout time, people have taken advantage of that burden through murder and abuse of power. Despite their contributions, Fire Keepers must serve others before anything else.

What fitting behavior for a world where the gods manipulate humans for their benefit. Cycle after cycle, humans work to keep the gods' grip on their freedom without them realizing. In exchange for scraps, humans maintain the cycle of Light and Dark.

How fitting that in a realm founded on deceit, you must face the most dishonesty of all with poise and grace.

But now, you see a new world – one full of darkness, yet also potential. Tiny flames dance in the distance, this time created by those who link the fire. With the vision of your predecessors, you hold the power of rebirth in your hands.

Will you continue to guard the flame? Will you return to as it always has been?

Or will you say, “no more,” and let the fire fade and kindle anew?

– Melissa 

## Videogames, Accessibility and the Winter From Hell

By the time you read this, the United States will (hopefully) have declared a winner in the most consequential presidential election in the nation's history. The PlayStation 5 and Xbox Series X/S will also be available on store shelves around the world, released days before this piece is published. Discussing both things in same breath feels absurd; one has significant ramifications for the future of democracy, and the other feels mostly meaningless in the face of fending off fascism during a global pandemic. While this isn't an original observation, the mental dissonance these thoughts create remains jarring.

Reconciling how to discuss the former in the shadow of the latter can feel equal parts confusing and exhausting. While the early days of every console generation generally price out most of the market, releasing \$500 luxury products with \$70 accessories when household budgets are shrinking as parts of the economy collapse looks like a rather extreme failure to read the room. Even if those price increases were inevitable and the launch plans for those consoles were put into place pre-pandemic, it's hard to avoid how weird it all feels. No shame if you can afford it, certainly, but it still feels weird.

Somewhere in the conversation around the relative inaccessibility of the newest consoles (whether because they're priced out of reach or labyrinthine pre-order schemes have made them impossible to purchase), though, I wonder if we're missing the fact that advances in digital platforms have made

videogames more accessible than ever before. And as we head into a winter that will be even more brutal and socially isolated than usual (especially for those of us in cold climates), with even the smallest joys tougher to come by, maybe that's something we shouldn't dismiss so easily.

Even if you're concerned about the decline in physical media, it's tough to argue that digitization hasn't expanded opportunities for more people to play. While digital storefronts and subscription services (Xbox Game Pass, PS Now, Apple Arcade, Amazon Luna . . . take your pick) have become easy to take for granted, what they offer would have once been tough to imagine. Affordable access to dozens (or hundreds) of games, all without leaving your home, probably sounds good to a lot of people right now. If you'd rather own your games, digital stores often run steep sales and discounts that make it easy to stock up without thinking too much about it.



That makes it easy to be a digital hoarder of sorts, and until I checked recently, I didn't realize that I have around 160 games associated with my PlayStation Network account. Around two dozen of these are physical titles, while most of the rest were digital impulse purchases bought on deep discounts, or free downloads courtesy of PlayStation Plus. For all the potential pitfalls presented by digital games, I never would amass a physical library this robust without even realizing it. From the time my family bought an NES in the late 1980s to the previous console generation, I maybe owned 160 titles *total*.

That's not including what's stuffed into my Switch's SD card, nor the NES and SNES that come with a \$20 per year Nintendo Online subscription either.

This isn't uncommon and it's not some sort of profound point, but that's also part of the point unto itself. We don't consider any of this novel or unusual anymore, and the preceding paragraphs probably sound a little bit banal. It's a good (and extremely first-world) problem to have, but it's also one worth stopping to consider more fully, and one that would have been even better back when I didn't have so much disposable income.

Back when I was in college in the mid-2000s without money to spend on full-price videogames, I relied on the used rack at GameStop to find whatever I could for under \$10 when I could spare a little cash. Some of my most beloved games of all time came from that era; *Persona 3: FES*, *Katamari Damacy* and *Burnout 3* made bearing brutal Midwest winters a little bit easier (especially during the times I couldn't afford a car). Not having those small joys would have turned tough times from challenging into crushing. Sometimes, those games were among precious few positive things I could hold onto.

If something like a modern subscription service had existed back then, that occasional \$10 videogame expenditure would have gone a hell of a lot further than waiting three years before playing any new games. The friends I did know with consoles might not have run up credit card debt to finance an expensive past time either. Videogames were cost-prohibitive for anyone stuck between paying their own bills, working low-wage jobs and trying to be even a little financially responsible. Getting by isn't exactly easier by any means, but the barrier to access this hobby is much lower.

Sometimes it seems as though videogames are among the last things I should be spending my time thinking about or writing about. We're living through terrifying times, and even in the wake of a (presumptive) Biden/Harris victory, America's socio-political malaise remains fraught. Dealing with a pandemic on top of months of sub-zero temperatures ensures that a lot of things will get worse before they get better. Producing a piece about videogames against such an unnerving backdrop feels frivolous.

Yet I also suspect this isn't true, and as we head into what will be a [dark and grueling winter](#), we need to appreciate whatever small joys we can, wherever we can find them. For many of us forced inside due to dangerous weather and almost certain lockdowns, that will mean playing more games as a means of escape. The near future will be harrowing even in a best-case scenario, but if there is a silver lining to be found, it's that those games will be more available to more people in need of something to make this time a little more livable. Maybe, in the end, there is nothing trivial about that at all. 🍷





## I'm Slowly Cracking Under the Weight of Tap Sports Baseball

**O**n Oct. 26, 1996, I was standing and cheering in the front row of the Loge section at the old Yankee Stadium as my favorite baseball team celebrated its first World Series title in 18 years.

I was 18 years old, and that last title came just months after I was born, so it was the first Fall Classic victory I could remember and the first I'd attended. I watched, laughing and yelling myself hoarse, as third baseman Wade Boggs took an impromptu ride around the House That Ruth Built on a police horse. When it comes to memories as a baseball fan, that ones hard to top.

Wade Boggs, now a Hall of Famer, had long been one of my favorite players, even back when he was an All-Star for the rival Red Sox. When he joined the Bronx Bombers, I was ecstatic.

Why am I telling you all this? I'm telling you all this because *Tap Sports Baseball 2020*, another game with in-app purchases I steadfastly refuse to spend money on, almost broke my resolve . . . because of Wade Boggs.

Like any successful game of its ilk, *Tap Sports Baseball* hooks you on the high of upgrading your character, or, in this case, your team. And you can do this quite well, completely for free. (Full disclosure: I paid a pittance to remove the ads.)

Of course if everyone played for free, *Tap Sports Baseball* would likely not exist, at least nothing like it does in its current form. The game entices you to spend your money in myriad ways, too many to go into for the sake of this column. And none of them have ever tempted me.

Until Wade Boggs came along.

You see, there are many ways to upgrade your team, but the primary building blocks, as you might surmise, are the players. You get the players by spending gold for draft picks or by pulling them out of mystery boxes, some given as gifts based on real-life occurrences in MLB games, others you can also buy with the gold you've accumulated through playing the game. My team has gotten pretty good. Do I have all my favorite players? No, of course not. But the guys I have are decent enough, and there's always the hope of adding more.

Which brings us to this year's World Series. During the Series, *Tap Sports Baseball* offered, for a very brief time, a special Fall Classic mystery box. The grand prize? Because he ended his career in Tampa Bay (one of the teams playing in the World Series), the grand prize, in only a fraction of the boxes, was Wade Boggs.

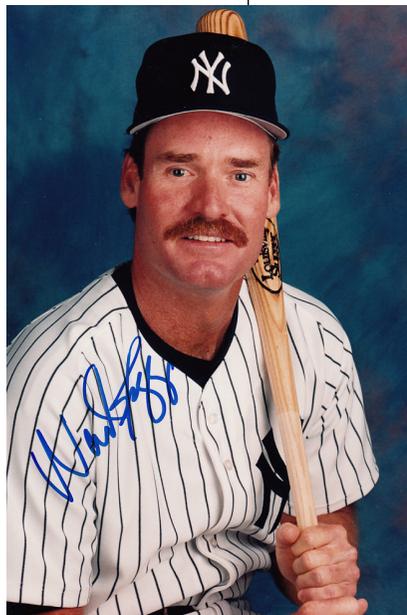
To their credit, *Tap Sports Baseball* doled out a bunch as free gifts. I opened all of them. No Wade Boggs. Oh well, I thought, what am I saving all this gold for anyway, why not buy a few more? No Boggs. Heck, I still have some gold left, lets do this! Still no Boggs. OK, I'm out of gold. But! The game gives you free gold if you watch ads. It takes forever to accumulate gold this way, but I figured I didn't actually have to watch the ads and could just play them while multitasking until I had enough for one last Fall Classic box.

A couple hours later, after clicking the ads, combined with some other winnings from playing the game, I had enough. I bought another box.

No Wade Boggs.

During this process, though, I had noticed a special in the games store. Twenty three Fall Classic boxes plus some other junk for \$19.99. That's not enough to guarantee pulling Boggs, to the best of my knowledge, but still . . . 23 whole boxes!

At one point, I told myself that if I exhausted every other option, I'd take the plunge, violating my No. 1 rule of mobile gaming. Now, I had exhausted every other option.



I went back to the store. I looked at the 23 boxes. I looked at the button that read \$19.99. I looked back at the 23 boxes.

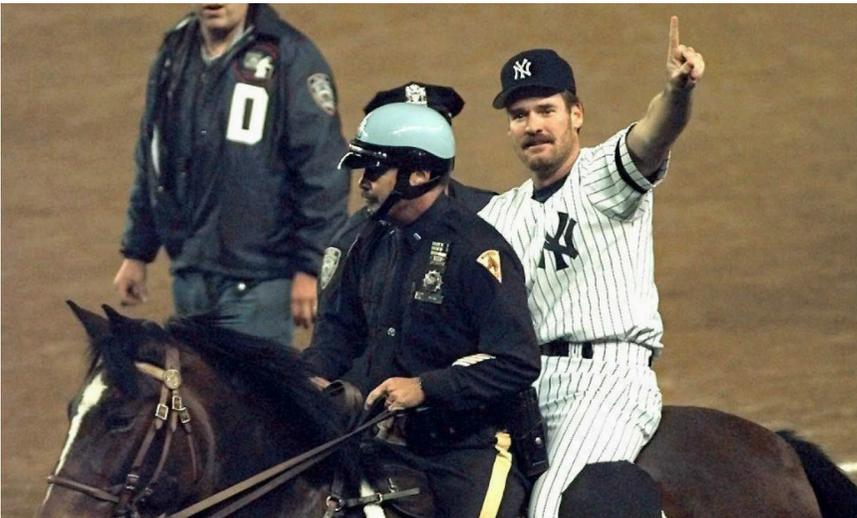
I didn't buy them. And I didn't get Boggs. After all, he's just a bunch of pixels, a name and a photo to go along with an otherwise pretty generic batter I can level up just about as well as any other top-level star.

Clearly, I made the right call. I should feel good about myself, if not exactly proud.

But I don't feel good about myself. I don't feel anywhere close to proud. I nearly spent 20 hard-earned bucks not only for something silly and intangible, but for something that would only encourage game developers to keep churning out even more silly and intangibly, yet oddly irresistible, morsels.

Now I live in fear that my favorite player of all time will show up in a mystery box. That I will come face to face with my childhood hero, Dave Winfield, and another button that reads \$19.99 (or worse!). And then, if he isn't in any of those 23 boxes, yet another button that reads \$19.99.

I didn't crack this time. But I almost did. And so now I know this: Its possible, I actually could. 🍷





## Crowded Apocalypse

For anyone who's played one of the first-person *Fallout* games, the series' latest installment (released, admittedly, in 2018), *Fallout 76*, feels immediately familiar, like riding a rusted, irradiated old bike. As in past games, you start 76 in your very own vault, where you can customize your character and briefly explore your cramped surroundings before cracking open the vault door and making your way outside into the mysterious wasteland stretching beyond. Here, though, 76 begins to differ. It doesn't take long after emerging from the vault's yawning entrance to stumble on random groups of high-level players stomping around the landscape in their bulky power armor, casually flicking away ghouls and raiders without so much as pausing in their stride.

Gone is the quiet, wide-open emptiness of *Fallouts* prior. Gone is the sensation of being one of the last few remaining survivors of an existentially disastrous event. No longer are you acting out the fantasy of the settler, the lone pioneer. At least in *Fallout 76*'s multiplayer "Adventure" mode, you are just the newest transplant to an already established and, by this point, crowded and gentrified neighborhood. Here, you rub shoulders with players in goofy costumes throwing up strange emotes and dance moves; here, you stumble on a player tracing the same mission steps as you and awkwardly attempting to use the same computer consoles to flip the same door switches, figuring out where exactly chivalry applies in a post-apocalyptic setting.

Deep dives into terminal lore-dumps (otherwise a *Fallout* staple) are interrupted by incoming nuke warnings, as nearby players fling their nuclear footballs wantonly around on inscrutable end game quests. Minutes spent setting up perfect ambushes for passing groups of enemy mobs are wasted as some anonymous level 200 player sprints through dropping grenades and mines and obliterating all in her wake. Far from a solitary, methodical grind, 76 is loud and messy; so full of so many things, everywhere.

Player camps dot 76's sprawling map. Some are indistinguishable from the game's built-in assortment of dilapidated architecture. A segment of players choose to outfit their cute little single-bedroom bungalows with matching furniture, arranging the chairs, benches and cabinets with care. Others erect monuments to their own avarice and seemingly endless free time and dedication. Once, walking between towns, I stumbled upon a massive church, with tall, white wood walls, and gun turrets placed atop its steeples. Inside, at the pulpit, a player dressed like the grim reaper played a theremin without looking up when I entered. His AI companion marched up, like one of J.F. Sebastian's dolls in *Blade Runner*, warning me to watch my step on her master's property. It was a little universe in a big one, or rather, a much larger universe, in an otherwise small one.



Far from incentivising me to play more of the game, in order to reach these runaway levels of stature and virtual success, seeing the grandiose accomplishments on display by high-level players feels intimidating and deflating. It recalls the emotional state of sitting at the bottom of Manhattan on the northbound I.R.T. subway line, knowing your stop is somewhere up in the two-hundreds. Sure, *eventually*, you'd get there, but the length of the journey is enough to make you feel exhausted before you've even begun.

In spite of their in-crowd status, *Fallout 76*'s elite group of longtime players are not as overtly aggressive or threatening as the prodigal sons and daughters of other multiplayer online franchises. You don't spend the introductory hours of the 76 getting ganked or harassed by bored teens with over-powered rifles that took hundreds of hours to earn. Instead, 76's end-game players mostly seem content to leave the noobs alone to take their tentative first steps into the wasteland unbothered.



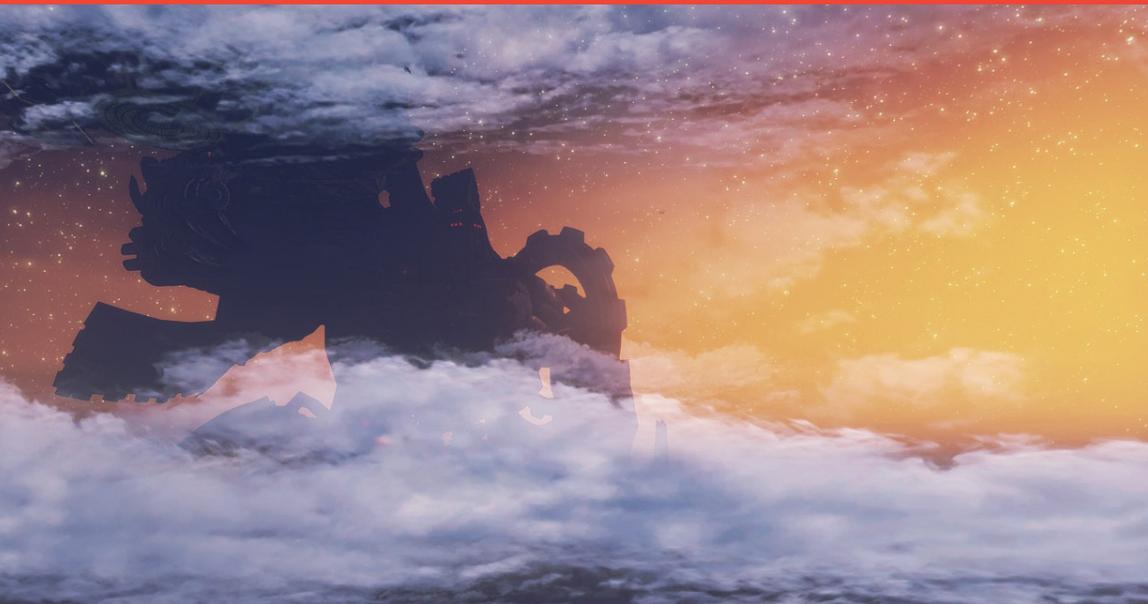
A notable exception to this even handed behavior happened when Bethesda released a new paid tier to the game called *Fallout 1st*. For \$12.99 a month players gained access to otherwise unavailable outfits, skins and furniture items in the game's world, along with the ability to create private servers where only they and their friends could play. Because this new gilded class could now walk around rocking unique emotes and limited-edition threads it was only a matter of time before their flashy lifestyles began attracting unwanted attention from disgruntled players. On [reddit](#), posts were soon published by unlucky *Fallout 1st* players who'd been set upon by groups wearing bear costumes. Others were shot at, sometimes even nuked.

These vigilantes may have been acting out of pure resentment but they were also unintentionally reinforcing the core thematic approach of a game like 76. One's first few steps into a wasteland as active and crowded as 76's *should* feel a bit overwhelming. Blasting out the vault gate with power armor keys in hand and heaps of bottle caps in the bank account means missing the experience of feeling small, meaningless and insignificant. It means missing the chance to skim along the surface of a deep and well-lived-in world, instead floating along as the unquestioned nucleus of a bunch of pre-loaded systems and events, the stiff and unremarkable norm of most games, previous *Fallouts* included.

The nominal *Fallout* experience, after all, has always been a singular one. The classic approach has always meant getting to be the lone wanderer, all alone with your loot piles and questlines. Seeing that experience casually replicated, with random parts and pieces swapped out for variety, with new outfits and customized faces grafted roughly on top, changes things irrevocably. Misguided bandaids like *Fallout 1st* are there to tamper some of the disappointment of being made to feel less special, in a world full of bigger and better “You”s.

As impure as this new overcrowded future may be, as tonally messy and physically strange, it’s also compelling in ways that *Fallout* has often failed to be of late. Wrapped in the familiar dirt and rust-colored aesthetics are new shining motes of creative individuality; showcasing new talent and personality, not merely total hours invested or extra money spent. Shortcuts miss the point, there’s no ultimate ending to rush to in this semi-alive world. We already bombed ourselves (and continue to do so), there’s nothing vital to save. Instead, there’s the shockingly beautiful autumnal valleys of West Virginia to traipse about, full of buggy hard-coded villains and big himbo energy power armored bros, there to squash the nasty bugs in your path and build strange monuments for you to explore. A vibrant wasteland, a sparkling new way to experience a dull old formula. 🍷





## Sagittarius

I suspect I will be writing about *Xenoblade Chronicles* for some time, and that I have written about *Xenoblade Chronicles* for some time. Since I played it this summer, I have struggled to articulate what it *is* as much as what it *does*. It's a lot: an epic JRPG adventure across two distinct worlds, an interrogation of the players relationship to non- and player characters, an allegory of the doctrine of monads,<sup>1</sup> a subversion of chosen-one narratives, speculative fiction, a nihilistic meditation on will.

And I like it a lot. The indelible traces that *Xenoblade* will leave upon my critical thought are great and unknowable, but it's only just now that I've added it to the ever-expanding list of proper nouns, non-Western names and theory that comprise my word processors' manually populated dictionary. Though we've written here, and I elsewhere, about ends and cycles and ends of cycles, I have forgone a great many names. Or, like Calvino's merchant, I have omitted the few and influential. This column's returning fascination with cycles and their ends is perhaps itself an exploration of *Xenoblade's* themes – every entry mapping discursive paths as each new utterance demands lexicographical revision.<sup>2</sup>

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1. [Monadology](#) is Gottfried Leibniz's metaphysical and theological argument for predetermination. In *Xenoblade Chronicles*, monads are called *ether*.

2. Jacob Geller expands on this relationship between writing and games in his [metacritical video essay](#).

These ideas – loss, ends, bodies, cycles – make up the autumnal sky as individual constellations of fiction, art, theory, criticism and so forth that connect to one another, somehow, shaping the topography of my sky and turning me this way or that.<sup>3</sup> Though far apart, each star appears to me on a plane close together. Though moving rapidly, they are, to me, static. Though what I see changes, it is not the sky that has shifted, but my perspective. No, it is my foundation that has turned me.<sup>4</sup>

Like the oldest navigational aids, I find these works function as homing devices. If it is my own constellation that forms my personal conception of an idea, then it is the few brightest stars and familiar asterisms that I return to when disoriented. Always a part of our navigation, but never the destination, it is in the dialectics of wandering that I feel among the stars in all their dimensions.

*And Polo said: "Every time I describe a city I am saying something about Venice."*

\* \* \*

Sagittarius is defined by its dualities: human and beast, healer and archer, sign and constellation. In one tradition, it guides the Argonauts as Chiron, son of Titans and mentor to Olympian heroes. Unless, as the Babylonian's named it, he is the Sumerian deity [Nergal](#).<sup>5</sup> Characterized by this fluidity as the third mutable sign, Sagittarius' salient trait is depicted by the arrow primed towards Antares. The archer's aim is true.

The mythological and astrological compound with Sagittarius' astronomical. I have to wonder if the constellation was found in the center of the Milky Way so much as located there. Its placement in the sky means it is made of much more than stars. Appearing to us as individual specs of light (if at all), each point is potentially comprised of clusters and nebulae, [extra-galactic globulars](#) and mysteries deserving of exclamation to match both their awe and obscurity.<sup>6</sup> It is not promised, but there is the possibility of something new, unknowable, something more than a tangential path down the trail. Something beyond the sky.

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3. Skies function in this metaphor as what Burke named [terministic screens](#). My friend Helen drew out this connection over the phone a couple of nights ago.

4. In the peripatetic tradition of Greek rhetoric, [topos](#) (literally "place") categorizes arguments, "delineating the relationships among ideas."

5. The Babylonian constellation is [depicted in boundary stones](#) as a winged centaur, bow primed, with an extra scorpion tale and additional panther head.

6. In August of 1977, Big Ear telescope astronomer Jerry Ehman would document an anomalous radio signal with an exclamatory annotation in the margins of his printout. The [Wow! signal](#) originated in the direction of Sagittarius.

And because of this placement, sunlight obscures the patch of sky that the centaur roams from mid-November through January.<sup>7</sup> The obstructive light reminds me of a sunset I watched on the Bionis' leg. Far beneath Sword Valley, Shulk and the party emerge from Tephra cave upon a small field. We look up at the machinic deity as night falls. Stars twinkle into view over the infinite ocean, and the Mechonis, dark as the sky, is but a silhouette. There is no conception of planets or space among the life of Bionis, but a star rises and sets somewhere over the horizon of calm waters. We will learn it is salty, and that there are fish.

*Perhaps, Kublai thought, the empire is nothing but a zodiac of the minds of phantasms.* 🏹

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7. This makes it my sun sign, too.





## Formal and Vernacular Architecture

**T**he game world in *Breath of the Wild* is filled with interesting architecture. Spend enough time in Hyrule and you'll come across a variety of different structures. Rammed earth is common in Gerudo Town. Rocks are piled up all over the place in Goron City. Stucco seems like the way to go in Hateno Village. Timber framing is apparently traditional in Kakariko Village. Thatching looks customary in Lurelin Village. Wooden posts are popular in Rito Village. Stone predominates in Zora's Domain. What makes the architecture in these parts of Hyrule so interesting? The answer is that each style is an expression of the society which produced it. The buildings are what you call vernacular architecture.

Take a walk in Tarrey Town and you'll see something completely different. You have to complete a quest before the place appears, but if you go through all of the right motions, you'll find a bunch of buildings made from what are basically prefabricated modules. While most of the buildings in Hyrule suit their surrounding landscapes, the structures in Tarrey Town stick out like sore thumbs. They're definitely an expression of something, but the buildings in Tarrey Town don't seem to be expressions of any particular society. This would be what you call formal architecture.

What exactly is the difference between formal and vernacular architecture? While the former is designed by a small number of people over a short period of time, the latter is designed by a large number of people over a long period

of time. You can always trace formal architecture back to a couple of architects that worked at a particular point in time. You really can't do this when it comes to vernacular architecture, though. This type of architecture is produced by an entire society over the course of several centuries. How about we take a look at some examples? The style known as Modernism can be traced back to Le Corbusier who presented his Plan Voisin at an architectural convention in 1925. What about traditional architecture in Japan? You just can't say for sure who designed the townhouses known as *machiya*. You can't say for sure when they first appeared, either. While formal architecture is designed by a particular person based on a bunch of assumptions about how buildings are going to be used, vernacular architecture is the product of an evolutionary process resulting in structures that are perfectly adapted to the needs of their actual users. You might say that formal architecture comes down from the top and vernacular architecture comes up from the bottom.

Let's take some time to talk about the formal and vernacular architecture in *Breath of the Wild*. The place is filled with the latter, but Hyrule has plenty of the former, too.



Gerudo Town is in the middle of a desert, so the architecture is all about how to beat the heat. The solution to this problem seems to have been open rooms with plenty of pillars to promote the flow of air. The best example would have to be the palace. Walk into the throne room and you'll soon see what I mean. This part of the palace is basically a hypostyle hall with a bunch of arches in the surrounding walls. The other structures in Gerudo Town consist of open rooms with raised windows or a clerestory. You'll come across awnings all over the place and even a couple of covered decks. The materials used to make these buildings look like they've been sourced from the surrounding landscape. You can see a little bit of stone on the palace, but



most of the buildings in Gerudo Town are made from rammed earth which is really just compacted soil or sand.

Similar to the structures in Gerudo Town, the buildings in Goron City are all about beating the heat, but this time in a slightly different sense. The place happens to be right beside an active volcano. Stroll through the streets of Goron City and you'll find a bunch of bridges crossing streams of hot lava. In terms of architecture, the problem in this particular case appears to have been finding materials capable of withstanding such intense temperatures. The solution seems to have been a reliance on metal and rock. The buildings which you'll come across in Goron City are basically just boulders that have been piled up all over the place. This resulted in structures that look a lot like domes. The doors and windows have apparently been reinforced with metal posts and beams. Walk into most of these structures and you might start to think that you're in some kind of cave.

The structures in Hateno Village on the other hand seem like they're meant to keep out the cold. Since this part of Hyrule is up in the mountains, Hateno Village is supposed to have some problems with snow. The gabled roofs appear to be aimed at preventing the stuff from accumulating in large quantities. They consist of wooden rafters covered with tile shingles. The cold climate would also explain the use of stone. The structures are mostly made from this material. Since they've been covered in stucco, you can't always see the stone, but some of the walls are bare at the base. The cold climate would also explain why most of the structures in Hateno Village have at least one chimney and a fireplace. The partition walls and window shutters also look like they're meant to maintain a warm temperature on the inside of these buildings.

Kakariko Village has exactly the same problem with humidity. Snow is the main cause of concern in Hateno Village, but the people in Kakariko

Villages seem a lot more worried about water. This part of Hyrule is definitely supposed to be wet. You'll find several marshes if you explore the surrounding landscape. When it comes to architecture, this would explain the raised floors and sagging eaves. The buildings in Kakariko Village can only be entered by staircases that lead to platforms which support the actual structures. Most of the roofs reach all the way down to these platforms. Similar to the structures in Gerudo Town, the materials used to make the buildings in Kakariko Village look like they've been locally sourced. Timber framing seems to be traditional in Kakariko Village. This involves filling the spaces between wooden posts and beams with a type of material called wattle and daub which is basically just a bunch of mud.

The structures in Lurelin Village look a little bit like the buildings in Kakariko Village. They have the same raised floors and sagging eaves. The reason for this has to do with the weather. These parts of Hyrule are supposed to get a lot more than their fair share of rain. The main difference between them is that Kakariko Village is up in the mountains where the climate is pretty cold. Lurelin Village on the other hand is down on the coast where the temperature is nice and warm. The result was apparently structures with bay windows and curtain doors. The lack of partition walls promotes the flow of air. Similar to Gerudo Town, you'll see a lot of awnings and covered decks if you take a walk around Lurelin Village. Thatched roofs keep out the rain. Since they're made from reeds and palms, you might expect these roofs to leak, but thatching is very effective at redirecting the rain. These materials are also easy to come across in coastal regions.

The architecture in Rito Village is really interesting. The structures in this particular part of Hyrule are supposed to have been made by a race of birds called the Rito. These people spend a lot of their time in the air, so the



buildings in Rito Village are basically just a bunch of landing pads on the sides of a stone spire. The floors are platforms on top of a truss. The walls consist of nothing more than a couple of posts. The roofs are cones with a clerestory. You're meant to fly from place to place, but some of the people in Rito Village don't have the ability, so most of the structures are connected by staircases. The only material which could be used to make the buildings in Rito Village would have to be wood on account of its lightness and strength. Since they live in an alpine region, the Rito have plenty of this particular material.



Similar to the buildings in Rito Village, the structures in Zora's Domain are supposed to have been made by people who don't live on land. They were built by a race of fish called the Zora. Since they spend most of their time swimming, the Zora just need somewhere to rest for a while, so the place is nothing more than pools of water atop a series of platforms. Similar to Gerudo Town, the best example of this would have to be the palace. Stroll through the surrounding arcades and you'll find fountains pretty much all over the place. The water flows into a big basin where the ruler apparently resides. In terms of architecture, the problem in Zora's Domain seems to have been finding materials that were strong enough to support the platforms without rusting or rotting on account of all the water. The solution was definitely stone.

Tarrey Town isn't like the other parts of Hyrule. The structures are painted to match their surrounding landscape, but everything else about the buildings makes them stick out like sore thumbs. They're made from what are supposed to be prefabricated modules. While the surrounding landscape is filled with rolling hills and flat plains, the buildings in Tarrey Town are really just clusters of cubes. These are definitely artificial structures. You can see this when it comes to form, but the materials make them seem artificial, too. They're made from wooden planks held together with metal fittings. The windows

look like they're meant to be made from glass. Since the place happens to be in the middle of a prairie, these materials don't seem like they could have been locally sourced. You'll come across a couple of trees, but this highland region is sparsely forested. The trees in this part of Hyrule don't seem to be of an appropriate species, either. They're mostly birch as opposed to maple or cedar.

Hyrule is filled with examples of formal and vernacular architecture. *Breath of the Wild* doesn't just depict these different types of architecture, though. The game has something to say about them.

Formal architecture is designed based on a bunch of assumptions about how buildings are going to be used. Vernacular architecture on the other hand is the product of an evolutionary process which results in structures being adapted to the needs of their actual users. While you can often identify design oversights with formal architecture, you can't really do this when it comes to vernacular architecture. Since they're products of an evolutionary process, these buildings are perfectly suited to the people who inhabit them. They're tailored to the surrounding landscape. How about we return to the opposition between Modernism and traditional architecture in Japan as an example? Modernism was spread all around the planet after Le Corbusier presented his Plan Voisin in 1925. The problem is that large rooms with concrete floors and glass walls aren't easy to keep warm in cold climates. They aren't easy to keep cool in warm climates, either. The result is a reliance on heating and air conditioning. Traditional architecture in Japan on the other hand is just right for the local conditions. You could say the same thing about certain aspects of the design. Modernism and traditional architecture in Japan are both fond of open courtyards. The trick is that people tend to walk straight across these. The former provides no real solution to this problem. The latter turned the courtyard into a garden with a series of cobblestone paths.

The trend has definitely been towards formal architecture over the course of the last several centuries. Vernacular architecture has largely disappeared in the developed parts of the planet like Japan. I think the game world in *Breath of the Wild* is basically a lamentation over the loss of this vernacular architecture. The game seems to be saying that a lesson of some kind can be learned from studying traditional styles. In my opinion, this mostly has to do with looking at the surrounding landscape to understand how structures can be designed to suit local conditions. The same could be said for the habits of their actual users. People found solutions to their problems in the past. Why should these be ignored in the present? 🍵



## It's Okay To Let Stuff End

**H**oly crap there are a lot of really good TV shows out there, right? Unfortunately there are also a lot of really good shows that ended up being not really good when, due to studio mandates or popularity-based greed (also due to studio mandates), they end up being forced to drag on way past their intended and/or optimal metaphorical shelf dates. And that really fucking sucks, honestly. Because here's the thing: with very few exceptions it's much better to let a story with a planned beginning, middle and end run its course. And to be clear, I'm talking about shows being *good*, not necessarily *successful* (because there's a lot of crap that's still popular even though it's crap).

To acknowledge some exceptions first, just to get them out of the way, there are indeed some shows that can more or less continue in perpetuity without much trouble so long as the writers can keep things interesting. *Doctor Who* in particular comes to mind since it's pretty much designed to run forever by its very structure (that of a time/space traveling nigh-immortal alien who "regenerates" every so often so the show can pretty much always bring in new actors and visit any locations one can imagine without things feeling out of place). Though to be fair a *lot* of other BBC television benefits greatly from usually having a set number of seasons.

*Futurama* didn't last forever, despite my hopes, but could also work for an extended period of time what with the Planet Express crew being able to visit new planets whenever the plot called for it. Also it was set 1000 years in the future (really more like several hundred trillion years if you want to get final season technical about it). But my point is the show has to account for either no ending or a fuck-ton of seasons in its plot and structure if it wants to avoid becoming a turd that overstays its welcome.

So when I talk about shows overstaying their welcome, well, remember *Lost*? Remember how it was a huge deal when it first aired, and then it kinda started to get weird and shitty? Yeah, that's because the show was intended to run for five seasons, but it was so ungodly popular that the network wanted a sixth season. So the production had to scramble to stretch some plot elements and mysteries out even longer, as well as (I'd assume) come up with some filler just to make it to the end. Not that this is a huge secret at this point but just imagine how much better it could have been if it was allowed to just, like, end. Also there's *The Simpsons*, which has been a dull mess ever since "The Computer Wore Menace Shoes" (season 12, episode six). What's funny is as I was looking up the exact episode title I was thinking "Oh, season 12, so it wasn't crap for as long as I thought" but *this episode aired almost 20 years ago*. And this is to say nothing of the weird reactionary shit show America's former favorite family has become over the past several (but more recent) years.

I do understand a soulless TV corporation's desire to keep milking their cash cows despite the creators' intentions, because businesses gotta business, but there are so many shows that have clearly benefited from being allowed to run their course. To pull from the well I've been pulling from a lot lately, there's *Avatar: The Last Airbender*. I also think *The Legend of Korra* is great but that one had a load of production issues thanks to Nickelodeon being super wishy-washy during production so the fact that it wasn't terrible is a fucking miracle. Anyway we also have *She-Ra and the Princesses of Power*, which told the story it wanted to in the number of seasons it wanted to and was all the better for it. Even extending this idea to anime you've got excellent series like *Trigun*, then there's the obnoxious "there are no real stakes so who cares?" clusterfuck that is *Bleach*.

Look, I don't presume that I know better than people who actually make TV for a living. Hell, I can barely slap together a coherent 500-1000 word rant once per month. But I do know that creative endeavors almost always benefit more from the people that make them being allowed to decide when they're done than they do from an uncaring studio executive trying to squeeze blood from a stone. 🍷



## Leap of Faith

At its best, *Mirror's Edge Catalyst* plays like a rhythm game. There's a sense of momentum to its first-person free-running, a tempo the player will want to maintain and a sense of tension and release in each leap. The openness of the game world allows the player to feel as though they're still directing things and making their own choices rather than following a preset route through the vivid colors of the city. Alongside this is the music by Solar Fields (who also composed the score for the original), a rich mix of ambient soundscapes and propulsive drum work that responds dynamically to what the player's doing and where in the city they're currently at, with different neighborhoods featuring different textures. (There's a series of [hour-long](#) videos featuring the [score's mellowest sections](#) set to [animated backdrops from the city](#) that are invaluable reading/writing aids.)

It's an experience that's unique. It encourages exploration without objective, doesn't push the player toward any sense of heightened drama, but also creates a strong sense of atmosphere. What's unfortunate is that the game feels compelled to offer alternatives to this experience as frequently as possible, most notably through combat encounters with security forces that bring the free-running momentum to a standstill. The mood is disrupted, everything goes on high alert and the combat controls are way less refined than those for movement, so these sequences quickly become irritating rather than exciting. By the end of the game, groups of these enemies populate so much of the map that it feels nearly impossible to go more than a minute or so without running into them and having to reroute or fight them off.

Beyond that, the city is filled with side missions that similarly miscalculate the game's appeal. Almost all of these missions have time limits, so the focus turns to running certain routes as quickly and flawlessly as possible. It's the inverse of what makes the city so inviting in the first place.

It seemed improbable enough that the original *Mirror's Edge* would ever get a follow-up at all, so *Catalyst* seems like something of a small wonder. Released in 2008 to reviews and sales that were generally solid but not exceptional, the original game attracted a dedicated fanbase thanks to its bold aesthetics and parkour-inspired gameplay (still a relative rarity in games over a decade later when presented from a first-person perspective like it was here). *Catalyst* (a reboot, technically, I think?) arrived eight years later and expanded on the scope of just about everything from the first game. But this included expanding on aspects of that game that drew the most criticism, like the combat mentioned earlier.

It's entirely possible that the development team really enjoyed mixing in combat and timed missions to keep the gameplay surprising or varied or unpredictable. But throughout, I couldn't shake the feeling that the game's ambitions were continually being kept in check by the presumed realities of the videogame market – expectations set by an industry that often judges a game based on how many different gameplay mechanics and systems it introduces, on how many hours of content it provides regardless of what that content actually is, on an assumption of spectacle and action that parallels blockbuster movies as often as possible.

*Catalyst* has all of these, but it doesn't excel at any of them. It realizes its potential in its quieter, more focused moments, though it never commits to them for long. Playing it made me wonder if, at budget levels and market expectations that are this high, there'll ever be much room for the kind of game that's buried below the surface here. Skepticism seems warranted, but then again, the series has surprised before. 🍷



## **How'd you get into art?**

Like most kids of my generation, my older sister and I grew up loving Saturday morning cartoons, comics, coloring books and just drawing as an everyday activity. She was the true talented artist, who had the knack at the start, and we always drew and colored for fun. We'd draw for hours; we'd draw our own fake food to play with, we'd draw imaginary friends we had come up with. When I got older, I got interested in the art I'd see in magazines, heavy metal albums, skateboarding and Dungeons & Dragons, but never really considered myself a talented artist to pursue anything like art school.

I never stopped drawing really, just always kept my hand on the pencil 'til one day it was like hey can you draw this for a t-shirt, this for a show, this for skateboard, and etc. Those little things feed my confidence, so I drew more and more 'til it became a major part of my life.

## **How come your wizards mostly seem so chill?**

Hah! I guess wizards are something that make me oh so very happy that when I find myself drawing them, even if I try to make them look evil, they generally come out sort of chillish dudes. It probably has to do more with how I wish I could be if I were some type of powerful wizard – just kind of being mellow and doing my usual demon summoning, scrying on enemies, casting and practicing dark arts.

**There's probably a million cooler and more relevant influences in your work, but I keep coming back to medieval art, especially the [Lewis chessmen](#). Something about the eyes. Are you big on medieval art?**

You're not wrong there by any means. I'm definitely a big fan of medieval and ancient art – from illuminated manuscript drawings to asian Naga paintings to those fantastic illustrations by Olaus Magnus. I just love the two dimensional depictions and styles from that period. The line work, the etchings, the engravings, the detail and the overall stiffness in the eyes. I love recreating a blank stare or the emotionless eyes you see in medieval paintings, sculptures and reliefs. There's a petrification to that look that adds a kind of mystery and intrigue.

**When are you going to release a cool RPG zine?**

One of these days! It's something that I had been working on for a while, and then of course, it went to the sidelines as many things did with the pandemic. But the zine is called *Beasts & Bongs*, and it started out as a collection of various drawings that I created which combined stuff like fantasy, RPGs, drug subcultures and the like. It was kind of a joke to myself, then evolved into me making up fake rules, weird character classes and various spoofs on D&D. It's like an immature adult activity picture book, and not an actual game or system, although I sort of hope somebody

eventually makes it one, ha. I had a good head of steam and it was coming together, then I kind of got discouraged, self conscious and just flat out stopped.

Then in early 2020, some nice folks from [Staf Magazine](#) in Malaga, Spain, actually approached me about doing a small art book, so I decided to pitch them *Beasts & Bongs*. It's delayed for sure mostly because of me, but talking about it helps . . . so maybe now I can finish the damn thing. When it does get made, I'm hoping to have 60 pages of wizards, centaurs, weirdos and a lot of bad bad stoner jokes. I apologize in advance to everyone.

### **What do you hope folks will take away from your work?**

As corny as it sounds, I really enjoy when folks tell me that “my drawing made their day” or that it put “a smile on their face” or that “it made them laugh,” but ultimately I hope my art brings some type of joy, laughter or weirdness to their lives. I hope it encourages them to think about unicorns, wizards, centaurs, mermen and crystals way more than they already do.

\* \* \*

*See more of Michael's artwork at his [official website](#) or follow him on [Instagram](#). 📷*

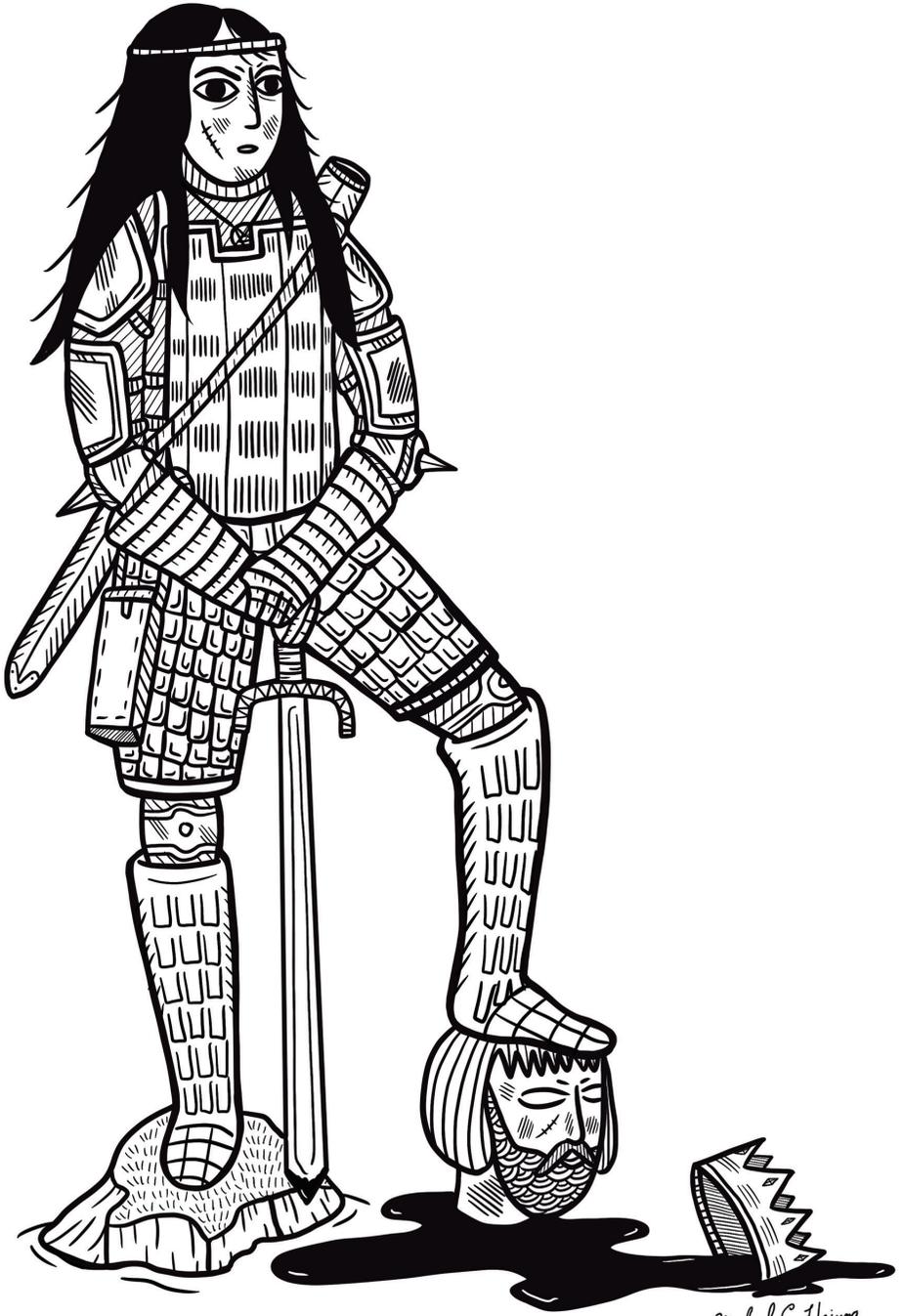


Green Knight, Wavenhair



Wizard, Crystal Altar

*Michael C. Hsiung*



Kingslayer

Michael C. Haung



Magic of Cleaning



Serpent Guardians



Serpent Familiar



Scryers Gonna Scry



Michael C. Hsiung

Dragon Sword Tree

*Features*



# OISHII:

The Yakuza and the Koan



By George Umbarger



**A**s someone who has struggled with the interplay between faith and reason for the majority of my life, I've found Buddhism fascinating ever since my first exposure to it, with its core tenets of recognizing and overcoming suffering in everyday life proving nothing short of invaluable. One facet that wonderfully encapsulates its overall philosophy is the *koan* – essentially a Zen Buddhist fable – and *one particular koan* has always stood out from the rest for me:

*“A man traveling across a field encountered a tiger. He fled, the tiger after him. Coming to a precipice, he caught hold of the root of a wild vine and swung himself down over the edge. The tiger sniffed at him from above. Trembling, the man looked down to where, far below, mother tiger was waiting to eat him. Only the vine sustained him.*

*“Two mice, one white and one black, little by little started to gnaw away the*

*vine. The man saw a luscious strawberry near him. Grasping the vine with one hand, he plucked the strawberry with the other. How sweet it tasted!”*

No, I didn't cut the story off early. That's the whole thing. *The purpose* of a koan isn't to directly state a specific lesson to the student. Rather, the idea is to ponder the nature of the story itself, eventually working back to its relation to the overarching themes of Buddhism (in this particular case, impermanence). Koans are difficult to wrap one's brain around by design, encouraging the student to shift paradigms entirely to explore the idea instead of scrutinizing it to extract a single, fixed solution, as one would a more conventional logic puzzle or riddle.

Given the intentional absence of a concrete answer, koans often have multiple interpretations – sometimes interconnected, sometimes outright contradictory. Taken into consideration within the full context

of its larger belief system, the [most popular interpretation](#) of this story is an urging to live in the moment and discard worry even in the most dire of circumstances, a message which might resonate more in a modern world where you're more readily aware of a vast array of seemingly unsolvable problems than ever.

This brings us to our focal point: Kazuma Kiryu. As the main playable character through the vast majority of the *Yakuza* series, Kiryu is the primary lens through which you as a player view its hyperreal representation of modern Japan, an urban cornucopia overflowing with equally vibrant dangers and pleasures. In how he as a narrative character interacts with the myriad mortal perils and simple joys he's exposed to, he presents a template for how you might desire to approach your own problems. His methods align much more closely with the aforementioned koan than might be readily apparent, so much so that he serves as a perfect expression of it.

Kiryu is no stranger to suffering. *Yakuza* franchise head producer and writer Toshihiro Nagoshi [stated](#) that, from its [origin](#), he intended to gear his games towards older players. The series expresses this through both a setting that rarely pulls punches in regards to the complexity of adult life and a nearly middle-aged main character shouldering the baggage of a life spent in opposition to the law. This combination provides fertile ground for an older demographic to explore more mature themes. Kiryu is just as likely to grapple with awareness of his advancing age or insecurity over his place in a rapidly changing world as he is with hordes of trained killers or labyrinthine extralegal plots. Never let his often comically stoic facade fool you; there is no shortage of tigers or uncertain vines in his life.

Though he's developed a tough exterior to cope with all of this, the key to Kiryu's viability as a relatable player avatar is the heart of gold he maintains underneath.





Several development [staffers](#) have assured that keeping their main character likable despite his immediate gruffness was paramount for the team, so much so that it led to some significant dialogue rewrites during [localization](#). The number of ellipses or complexity of language in his spoken lines might change between regions, but it's all done in service of presenting Kiryu as a positive role model. Whatever the language (player willing), Kiryu will always be available to fetch a blanket to ensure a homeless man will make it through the night more comfortably or help a local dominatrix find the self-confidence she needs to keep her job.

Kiryu's age also factors in heavily, as through it he brings a tacit sense of completeness and world-weary wisdom. Despite how prolific the *Yakuza* series is, Kiryu remains relatively unchanged throughout; you find him 37 years old and fully-realized by the time the first game gets into full swing. Producer Na-

goshi himself noted his creation's flat characterization and lack of a visible character arc, [sharing](#) that he actually doesn't view Kiryu as the "protagonist" as a result, instead considering his adopted daughter Haruka as the one who fills that role. He may have moments of uncertainty, but by and large he remains on a constant ideological path bolstered by both ability and experience.

This combination of strength, awareness and certainty mirrors the first three of [the Four Noble Truths](#), a core tenet of Buddhism detailing the path towards enlightenment: (1) identify pain, (2) identify the source of pain and (3) identify the cessation of pain. Kiryu's adherence to these through his ongoing actions solidifies that, by Buddhism's own metric, he has internalized a virtuous perspective.

Certainty also ties into what makes him stand out in regard to this koan. Videogames as a medium contain countless examples of self-confident characters

undergoing hardship who occasionally partake in unrelated side activities, but what specifically makes Kiryu the man on the vine is the natural intensity with which he throws himself into any and all of the series' ample diversions. This manifests through a raw enthusiasm for both optional and mandatory content that assures, unlike the ambiguous level of involvement of any of his contemporaries, he invests his all in everything he does.

Just as naturally as the man in the story reaches for the strawberry despite his predicament, Kiryu trades conversational aloofness for self-assured, white-knuckled intensity by throwing himself emphatically and wholeheartedly into anything in equal measure, be it chasing the trail of the perpetrator of the lethal criminal conspiracy du jour or engaging in a session of karaoke. He revels in every Pocket Circuit customizable slot car league victory against a grade school child just as much as any victory in a fist fight against a literal crowd of hired

muscle, drinking in an imaginary chorus of cheers from the victory stand of the former and growling righteous admonishment to the crumpled bodies of the latter with equal satisfaction.

One particular activity that even takes an active, if limited, role in imparting Kiryu's philosophy on the player is the phone club in *Yakuza 0*, or more specifically the quicktime event that starts the session. In order for Kiryu to answer an incoming call, the player must successfully press a single random button within a brief time window. Fail, and he fumbles the receiver only to find that the caller has hung up. Succeed, and he doesn't just answer, he swoops a hand in and theatrically snatches the receiver in a single, fluid motion – an artful display of focused ferocity usually reserved for birds of prey acquiring their quarry or precocious teens writing in death-dealing notebooks. There is no in-between. The enjoyment of the strawberry must be intentional and complete. The player's



enthusiastic commitment to the activity is a prerequisite.

I mentioned earlier that this interpretation is the most widely agreed one for this koan, but there is another notable one that – fittingly enough – runs almost entirely counter to it: [don't be distracted by pleasure](#). Though far less common, this take sees the man in the story as a purely negative example, positing that it is perhaps a life full of giving in to distractions that led him to his fate. Though this decidedly literal perspective may miscast the symbolism in play, this doesn't dissuade from Kiryu's perfection in embodying the story for one simple reason: no matter how relatable he might be, he's not meant to be a pragmatic, believable character.

Kiryu may experience and address some extremely human dilemmas, but in action he proves himself outright superhuman. His combination of aforementioned supernatural strength and fortitude, when combined with an unshakable moral fiber – one which even [real-life yakuza who've played the games](#) have identified as idealized relics of a bygone era in their field – make him into something of a mythological figure, someone much more likely to [punch out a tiger](#) than run from it. His innate absurdity qualifies him as something much closer to a metaphor than a step-by-step example for how one should live life.

This sense of exaggerated but ultimately relatable absurdity is central to the tone of *Yakuza*: Producer Nagoshi shared that the idea of real-life tragedy

often stemming from “[something really stupid and hilarious](#)” is a major inspiration for the uniquely wacky yet sincere timbre the series takes. Surely enough, Kiryu's obstacles number among both the tragic and ridiculous, and in his ability to continue rolling with both literal and figurative punches he embraces the fourth and final Noble Truth: identify the path leading to the cessation of pain – in corollary, reality is not always as you think, or want, it to be.

I can think of no single instance that better demonstrates all of the above than the story of Nugget: at another point in *Yakuza 0*, the player can guide Kiryu to victory in an optional bowling challenge, the promised reward of which is a turkey dinner. Due to a series of clerical errors, the reward he instead receives is an extremely alive chicken. At first taken aback, he quickly recovers from a moment of exasperation, decides to keep the chicken as-is (resolving, “Well, I can have [a chicken dinner] some other time.”), bestows him with the aforementioned name and gives him a subordinate position at his real estate firm. In a succinct, sub-two minute exchange, the Truths through the lens of this koan are expertly demonstrated. When life gives Kiryu a chicken, he makes a chicken aide. 🍗



# KEEP CALM WITH A CUP OF COFFEE:

All About *Coffee Talk*  
With Andrew Jeremy



By Katiee McKinstry



Can a videogame be used to reduce anxiety? Absolutely. However, Toge Productions, the creators of *Coffee Talk*, wanted to do more than create a soothing environment: they also poured their hearts into the characters. Each character in the game has their own thought out storyline that makes them feel completely human. Even the mythical creatures.

I was drawn to the game because, well, I'd do anything for a good vanilla latte. But I found that *Coffee Talk* provides players with a getaway, something to distract their minds and hands in a relaxing way. Thus, *Coffee Talk* can be a relief those who suffer from anxiety or anxious thoughts. The lo-fi music, quiet pace and the ASMR (autonomous sensory meridian response) inducing coffee sounds makes *Coffee Talk* a wonderful experience.

*Coffee Talk* was the first time Toge Productions tried their hand at a story

based game. Players are cast as baristas in an overnight coffee shop, making different kinds of coffee and tea for a wild array of customers. This scene provides a kind of nightlife that is extremely soothing. Did I mention, a fair amount of the characters are mythical creatures, too? Don't worry, they are magical and continue the calm vibe. Even if you get the drink wrong, it furthers the storyline. There is no pressure at all. You become attached to the characters and calmed by the sounds of pouring coffee.

The game allows players to learn at their own pace, with chill lo-fi bops in the background. Lo-fi is non-lyrical music that blends together hip hop and jazz; the style has blown up recently as "background music" for studying, working and even anxiety reduction.

It is clear that much love and care went into developing *Coffee Talk*. Creating a game that helped reduce anxiety while provided players with

something soothing was precisely the goal for *Coffee Talk* according to the developers. After playing the game myself, I found myself going back to it whenever I needed something to calm my anxious mind. Inspired by this, I reached out to Andrew Jeremy, the project manager of *Coffee Talk*. I wanted to talk with him about the impact the game had on me, and on other players, too.

**Katiee McKinstry: What inspired you to create *Coffee Talk*?**

**Andrew Jeremy:** It was our writer, Fahmi, who came up with the idea during an internal game jam. The inspiration came from his experience of vibing at a cafe, sipping his favorite coffee and listening to music during a cold, rainy day. He'd sometime hear people's stories throughout the day (or night). He wanted to recreate this experience in a game. He was also inspired by *Midnight Diner*, a TV show about a diner owner who builds bonds with his customers by listening to their stories and problems.

**K.M.: Did you want to create a game that could help reduce anxiety for players?**

**A.J.:** Yes, we knew that not all gamers are looking for fast-paced, all-out action games. Some just demanded non-violence, relaxing games that could help them reduce anxiety. The visual novel format is one of the perfect media for that kind of game. With heart-warming stories, we can provide players with something that will help them relax and heal themselves.

**K.M.: Do you believe in the connection of lo-fi beats and anxiety reduction?**

**A.J.:** I saw some channels on Youtube broadcasting lo-fi chill beats music to accompany their audience to sleep or study, and it works really, really well. Personally, chillhop lo-fi beats music is so soothing to listen to, so I believe it can help in relieving anxiety.

**K.M.: What was the process like creating the game?**





**A.J.:** This is actually Toge Production's first time developing a story-driven visual novel game and also for *Coffee Talk's* team members. The most challenging process in making this game is developing the story. The writer experienced writer's blocks many times and we'd gone through numerous on how to direct the storyline. There were also many revamps on the design of each character before the team finally agreed with it.

**K.M.:** The game is overall very relaxing. What inspired this?

**A.J.:** As I said before, we wanted to recreate a relaxing feeling of being inside a cafe. Jazzy-tuned chillhop music and the ambiance of a rainy day turn out to be a perfect combination to create a relaxing atmosphere. The cafe design, rustic furniture and dimmed lights also help visualize that kind of experience.

**K.M.:** Do you think that *Coffee Talk* has the ability to reduce anxiety? Why or why not?

**A.J.:** Of course, small details like rain sounds and chillhop soundtracks can deliver a soothing experience for relaxation, thus helping in reducing anxiety. But I think the most important part is that people could actually relate to stories that are in the game. They'd find out that they are not alone and there will always be a solution or a way out of their problem.

**K.M.:** Were the characters inspired by anyone?

**A.J.:** Some of the characters' designs are inspired by real people, like Hyde who is based on a singer from a Japanese band, L'Arc-en-Ciel. Even one of the characters is a real person. I'd love to challenge you to figure out which character it is! However, to develop the characters' personalities, we did internal roleplay sessions involving all of Toge Productions' members to help build the dialogue and story arcs.

**K.M.:** Who is your favorite character?

A.J.: My favorite character is Neil. He's just a funny alien, very naive about the world he's in, and having lots of trouble communicating with people.

**K.M.: What is the future of *Coffee Talk*, if anything?**

A.J.: Since *Coffee Talk* is a narrative-based game, lots of people from all over the world asked us to include their language in the game, so we are currently working on that. Also, some already asked and talked about DLC, so we'll see. Lastly, we are preparing the physical Collector's Edition in collaboration with Strictly Limited Games, please look forward to it!

\* \* \*

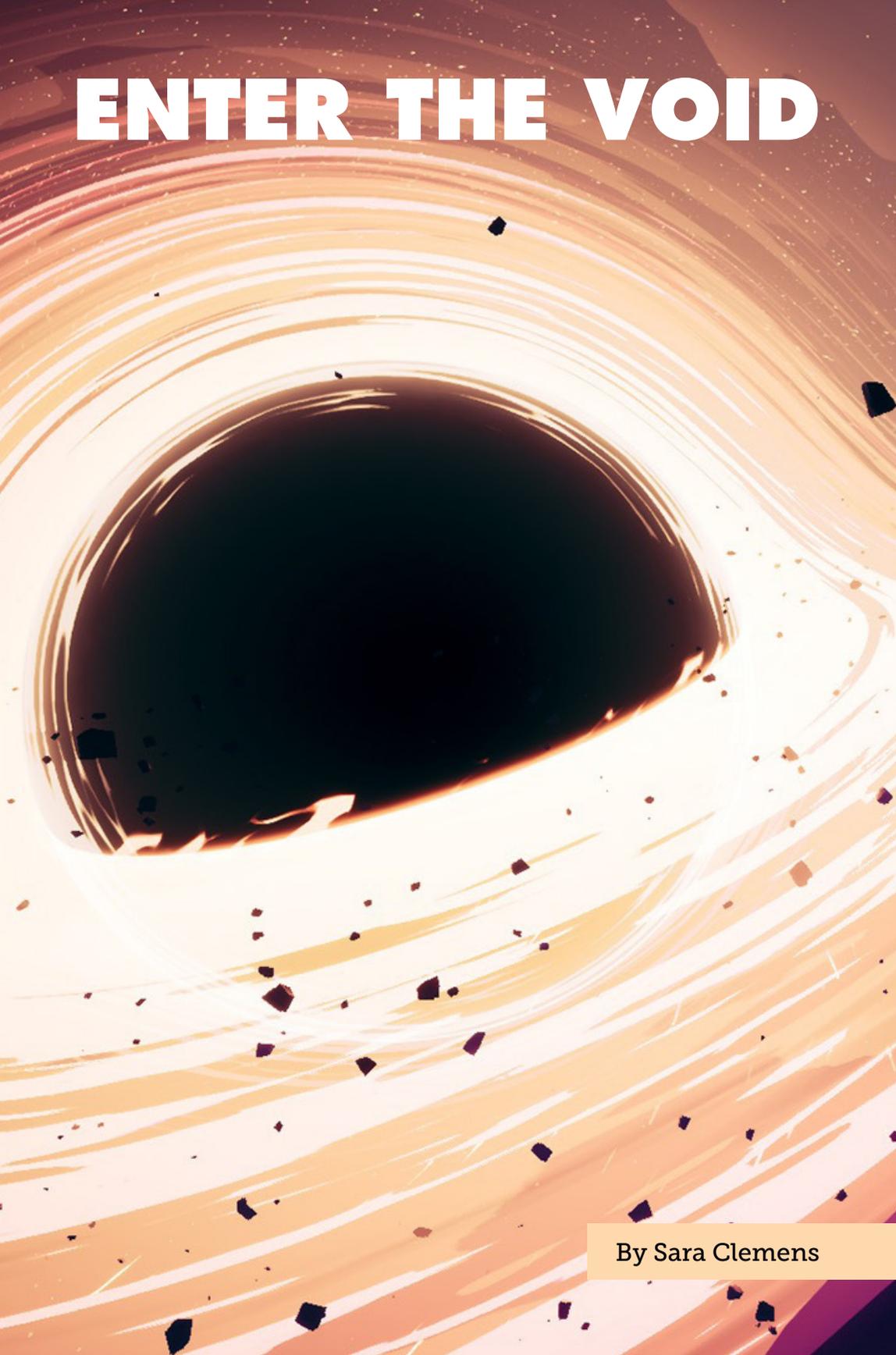
When I first played *Coffee Talk* I felt a sudden sense of *home*. I always loved

the idea of coffee shops, each with their own unique feel. Snagging a cup, settling in the corner and reading a book or writing. People watching. Something about coffee shops is so relaxing, and the developers of *Coffee Talk* capture that feeling, combining it with the videogame experience.

If you suffer from anxiety, or are just looking for something relaxing to do, *Coffee Talk* is an amazing gift. There's even an option outside of the storyline to simply make different coffee or tea combinations, making for a relaxing puzzle-like game. Especially in this time where a lot of us are staying home, *Coffee Talk* gives you the chance to experience the slow-living, calm coffee shop lifestyle without leaving your couch! You don't even have to enjoy coffee to enjoy the game. What more could you ask for? ☺



# ENTER THE VOID



By Sara Clemens



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

**Y**ou've arrived," says a giant being made of light to a smaller one composed of darker, shadowy stuff. "Afraid? You should be," they threaten, before thrusting their fist into the soft maroon earth, sending the small one careening backwards through fire, or an electric-yellow wind tunnel, or maybe just time itself. The shadow-being falls hard on a cracked stone dais and appears to briefly lose consciousness, coming to in what looks to be a grand hall overgrown with blush-colored ivy, crimson grass and pale pink flowers, a pool of phosphorescent green liquid settled into the center.

They take off towards the exit, moving in skate-like glides, hair and cape billowing backwards like smoke. Once outside, the perspective shifts precipitously until the shadowy subject is inverted onscreen, still planted in the waving grass but standing upside-down. A huge and bony creature appears with a wail and the caped adventurer leaps onto its back, a gyroscope-framed star burning bright in the distance. So ends the short, enigmatic trailer for *Solar Ash*, the upcoming title from indie game studio Heart Machine.

\* \* \*

Alx Preston is Heart Machine's "Creative Director/Studio Head/Too-Many-Hats person." Long wanting to become a game developer, he made several failed attempts before finally seeing things fall into place when starting work on the concept that would eventually become the critically acclaimed *Hyper Light Drifter*, creating the art while friend-of-a-friend Beau Blyth worked on the code. He launched a Kickstarter for the game in 2013, which quickly exceeded its funding goals. In addition to Blyth, Preston assembled an accomplished team to see the project through. "I was fortunate enough to have some super talented people to keep developing the game with," says Preston, "and we released in early 2016."

Due to release sometime next year, *Solar Ash* isn't a direct sequel to *Hyper Light Drifter*, though Preston has confirmed that it takes place in the same universe, and the trailer makes clear the two games share DNA. For one, the music seems just as evocative as that of the studio's first release. The two titles share a composer in Rich Vreeland, stage name Disasterpeace, who also created the soundtracks for the 2012 game *Fez* and the 2015 film *It Follows*. "Sound is just as important to the experience in games as the visuals or gameplay," Preston explains. "It's vital! It impacts every single moment a player experiences. You can elevate entire scenes to such incredible highs with the right sound design. Developers that really understand this can make such impactful games."



Preston clearly values the collaboration inherent in game design and is quick to also praise the rest of his group, which numbers around 25 full- and part-timers depending on the stage of development. They've slowly grown since Heart Machine's early days, when the studio had a core team of five full-time employees. That gradual increase made it easy for the team to stay tight and grow together over the years. "My team is incredibly funny, and we laugh all the time. It can be a silly environment (for the better!) with all the bad puns and self-burns we trundle through." When asked for the funniest story from *Solar Ash*'s development process, Preston recalls, "we had an impromptu pumpkin-eating contest one holiday (Halloween or Thanksgiving time, I forget); the off-the-cuff moment came when someone decided to try to eat a raw tiny pumpkin. They did succeed in taking a bite. I'm not sure they like pumpkin anymore."

However, like the rest of the world, Heart Machine has felt the effects of the pandemic. New people have joined the team since March, making that easy-going bonding difficult without in-person interaction. Preston tries to make a good go of it anyway: “We manage to stay focused but ridiculous, [we] blow off steam in happy-hours on our Discord to maintain some semblance of normalcy through some challenging and absurd times.”

Much like its predecessor, *Solar Ash* wears its gaming influences on its sleeve. “I’ve been open about my influences in games and other design + art for *HLD* – I always love hearing about process and influences and feel like it’s a responsibility for creators to share as much as we feel comfortable with. *Solar Ash* absolutely has a few influences with games like *Mario Galaxy*, *Shadow of The Colossus* and even *Breath of the Wild*. I’m sure these references will become apparent in some form or another once you play.”



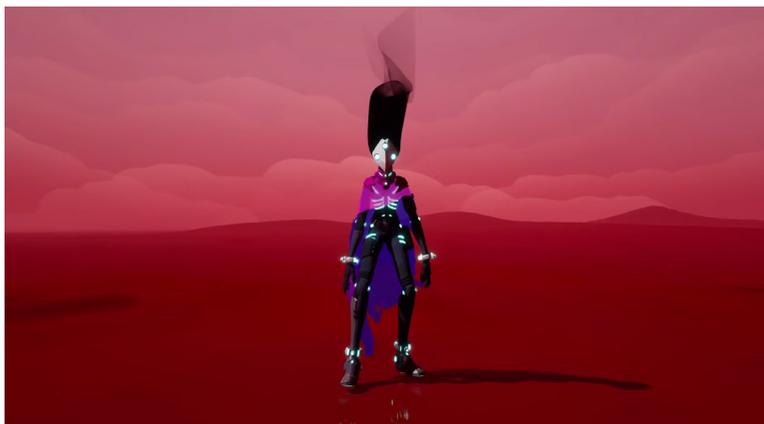
Indeed, *Solar Ash* marks the studio’s move from 2D to 3D gameplay. Preston explains the game starts with the player jumping into a black hole called the Ultravoid. “Strange spaces with wild gravity and grotesque creatures are what fill this void. Third person traversal is our main focus for gameplay in *Solar Ash*, though we do have plenty of other action occurring.” The trailer features much of this action, including a mechanic Preston calls cloud-surfing. “We’ve developed a system with some neat rendering tech (SDF) to achieve a really fluid, reactive and buoyant experience on the clouds. It has its own gravity system allowing for some wild traversal in every direction. It serves as our large-scale traversal mechanic across the fairly big world.”

Famously, the story for *Hyper Light Drifter* evolved from Preston's own health issues, including congenital heart disease. Speaking to *The Guardian* shortly after that game's release, he explained, "the main character in *Hyper Light Drifter* suffers from a deadly illness, one he is desperately seeking a cure for. It haunts him, endlessly. That's something I'm keenly familiar with." The inspiration for *Solar Ash* is similarly drawn from Preston's life. "The initial concept was drawing from my own life experiences, dealing with a post-crisis mode and how to let go of some of the massive baggage being carried around. The story has evolved over the years, but the core themes have remained consistent as we have written more and more, fleshing out the world and experience. *Solar Ash* is a game about letting go and moving on."

Nonetheless, Preston insists the themes in *Solar Ash* are not quite so heavy. "Our general tone for *Solar* leans a little less dark than *HLD* – it's more focused on the adventure, the scale of the experience, making the player feel small in a vast and strange world. I hope the game can resonate on some level and make players feel some way about the characters, the world, the ideas we are trying to express through it. Good, bad or otherwise!"

\* \* \*

Players can visit [heartmachine.com](http://heartmachine.com) to view the trailer, get more information on the game and sign up for behind-the-scenes posts on the development process. *Solar Ash* will release in 2021. 🕒



## Contributors

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