

# UNWINNABLE MONTHLY

Volume 7, Issue 12 - December 2020

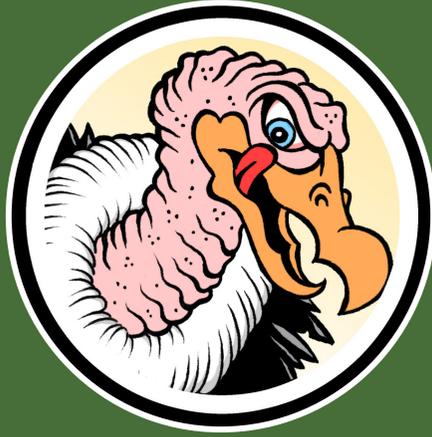


**FIREWATCHING • VIDEOGAME BODIES**

**U N**  
**W I**  
**N N**  
**A B**  
**L E**

*Monthly*

134



*Editor in Chief* | Stu Horvath

*Managing Editor* | Amanda Hudgins

*Design* | Stu Horvath

*Social Editor* | Melissa King

Copyright © 2020 by Unwinnable LLC  
All rights reserved. This book or any portion thereof may not be reproduced or used in any manner whatsoever without the express written permission of the publisher except for the use of brief quotations in a book review.

Unwinnable LLC does not claim copyright of the screenshots and promotional imagery herein. Copyright of all screenshots within this publication are owned by their respective companies

Unwinnable  
820 Chestnut Street  
Kearny, NJ 07032

[www.unwinnable.com](http://www.unwinnable.com)

For more information, email:  
[info@unwinnable.com](mailto:info@unwinnable.com)

[Subscribe](#) | [Store](#) | [Submissions](#)

This machine kills fascists.



### SHORTFORM

a brief introduction to the issue **LETTER FROM THE EDITOR** | STU HORVATH  
 selections of noteworthy hip hop **THE BEAT BOX** | NOAH SPRINGER  
 your next favorite comic **TRY READING...** | HARRY RABINOWITZ  
 globetrotting through media **WORLD TOUR** | OLUWATAYO ADEWOLE  
 examining trends in fanfiction **SELF INSERT** | AMANDA HUDGINS  
 personal marks scattered through time **TRACES** | DIEGO NICOLÁS ARGÜELLO  
 fictional companions and goth concerns **THIS MORTAL COYLE** | DEIRDRE COYLE  
 imaginary correspondence **LETTER TO A HEROINE** | MELISSA KING  
 where videogames meet real life **COLLISION DETECTION** | BEN SAILER  
 ridiculing and revering everything **ROOKIE OF THE YEAR** | MATT MARRONE  
 finding deeper meaning **ANOTHER LOOK** | YUSSEF COLE  
 peripatetic. orientation. discourse. **ALWAYS AUTUMN** | AUTUMN WRIGHT  
 architecture and games **FORMS IN LIGHT** | JUSTIN REEVE  
 a monthly soapbox **HERE'S THE THING** | ROB RICH  
 art, and words about making it **ARTIST SPOTLIGHT** | JOHAN NOHR

### LONGFORM

Marshall played Firewatch, became a firewatcher **WHO FIREWATCHES THE FIREWATCHERS**  
 | CAROLINE DELBERT  
 press leg button to move your legs **BIRTH OF MASCULINE BODIES** | ZSOLT DAVID  
 a developer Q&A, sponsored **REVVING THE ENGINE: ADIOS** |

### CONTRIBUTORS



**H**i folks. Quite a year, huh? Let's start winding it down with the last Unwinnable Monthly of 2020.

First off, fresh off November's Artist Spotlight, we're psyched to have Michael Hsiung back and doing the honors on our cover. That'd be for Caroline Delbert's monster feature on firewatching, *Firewatch* and a friend who became a firewatcher after playing *Firewatch*. Wild.

Our second feature is about masculine bodies in videogames, specifically *Assassin's Creed II*, by Zsolt David. This month's sponsored feature is a pretty swell chat with Doc Burford about the forthcoming game *Adios*, a game about the illicit uses of pig farms. Finally, last month's cover artist Johan Nohr sits himself in the Artist Spotlight.

The columns are no less stacked. Noah Springer skips album recommendations this month in favor of a killer interview with Zach Schonfeld, author of a new book about the unfairly forgotten funk and soul band 24-Carat Black. Harry Rabinowitz also skips his usual recommendation, instead using his space to perform a post-mortem on his first year as a bookseller specializing in comics. Oluwatayo Adewole goes to Germany to take in *Aguirre, Wrath of God* and *Wings of Desire*. Amanda Hudgins explains the fanfic phenomenon of rarepairs.

Diego Nicolás Argüello compares the long miserable slog of existing through 2020 to the long miserable slog of playing *The Banner Saga*. Deirdre Coyle goes to *Monster Camp* and gets sweet on a goth witch (no surprise there). Melissa King appreciates Fischl from *Genshin Impact*. Ben Sailer checks out a game that inoculates players against coronavirus misinformation. Matt Marrone appreciates Phoebe Bridgers' all-year-long skeleton costume.

Yussef Cole takes a close look at *Umurangi Generation*. Autumn Wright feels the first wind of winter. Justin Reeve examines the really weird architecture of the *Gone Home* house. Finally, Rob Rich says "fuck it" and deletes his YouTube channel.

Look for our best of 2020 lists right after Christmas and the first Exploits of a new and hopefully better year on January 2. Have a happy holiday if that's your thing and if not, Unwinnable is sending our love.

Stu Horvath  
Kearny, New Jersey  
December 14, 2020



I just did the math, and since I started this column in March of 2019, I have reviewed 105 albums. While this has been awesome in many ways, it is often also a bit overwhelming to start up the next month's column. So this month, I'm excited to do something a little new. Instead of my normal album breakdown, I interviewed Zach Schonfeld, author of the [new entry in the 33 ½ book series](#) on 24-Carat Black's nearly forgotten masterpiece, *Ghetto: Misfortune's Wealth*.

Briefly, 24-Carat Black was a funk/soul band founded in the early 1970s and signed to Stax records, home of (among others) Otis Redding, Isaac Hayes and The Staple Singers. The collective released one album in 1973, *Ghetto: Misfortune's Wealth*, and then effectively disappeared. Fifteen years later, as hip hop was on the ascendancy, producers began digging through vinyl crates, looking for cuts to sample. By 2020, 24-Carat Black has been sampled by everyone from Ishmael Butler of Digable Planets, to Metro Boomin, to Kendrick Lamar and Kanye West. Yet, living members of the band have yet to see serious compensation for their groundbreaking work.

*This interview has been edited and condensed for length and clarity.*

**Noah Springer:** Can you tell me about the genesis for your book and what piqued your interest in this album specifically?

**Zach Schonfeld.:** I've been really interested in sampling for a long time and my interest in 24-Carat Black grew out of my interest in sampling. I remember when I was first getting into hip hop in high school, I would be listening to some old record and I would recognize a sample that I had heard on a rap album or vice versa.

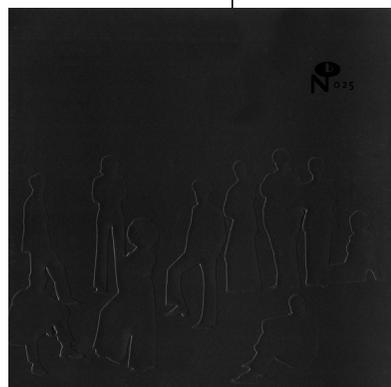
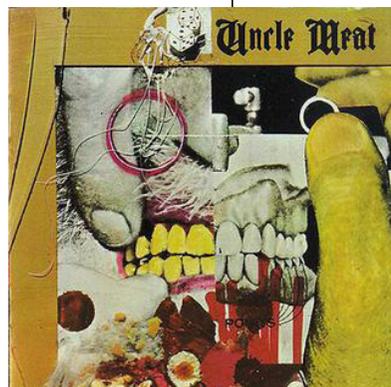
*Madvillainy* was one of the albums that first got me into hip hop and my dad is a huge Frank Zappa fan. I kind of inherited his interest in Zappa and there was this one short interlude track on Frank Zappa's album *Uncle Meat* called, "Sleeping in a Jar." I recognized it from the *Madvillain* album, and that just blew my mind. My dad's Frank Zappa CDs were the least cool thing imaginable and the fact that the hippest, most critically acclaimed indie rap album was sampling this weird interlude from a CD that I found in my dad's record collection was crazy to me. That was one of those experiences that really piqued my interest in sampling, just the way that little snippets of music from the past could be resurrected and reimagined within the parameters of a completely new style of music.

Over the years, I had noticed that this group 24-Carat Black had been sampled by a lot of my favorite rap groups. Dignable Planets and Kendrick Lamar piqued my interest in checking out this album and trying to figure out what it was all about, but the immediate impetus for [my Pitchfork story](#) was the Pusha T album, *Daytona*, sampling of Tyrone Steels saying "infrared, you know what I mean?" [from the 2009 compilation album, *Gone*, released by the Numero Group].

I kind of became obsessed with that sample and that inspired me to Google 24-Carat Black and find out what was written about them. I knew that they'd been sampled many times and I knew that the *Ghetto* album was interesting and unique, but I was surprised by how little had been written about them. The only really detailed account of their existence was based on interviews with members of the group for the liner notes for the Numero Group album.

N.S.: What was your initial reaction to the album from your first spin?

Z.S.: It really is a one of a kind album, and different from any other album that was released on Stax, which



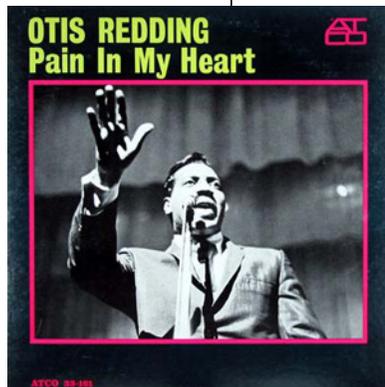
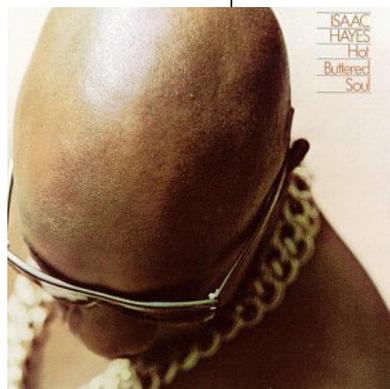
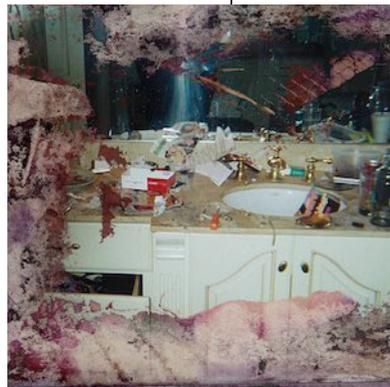
released a lot of amazing soul and funk albums, and a lot of albums that I love. I'm a big fan of Isaac Hayes and Otis Redding, and you know that's amazing stuff. But I was struck by how dark and how desperate this album is. It has this darkness about it that really struck me, and at the same time it manages to be really funky. There are some jams on there that really go on and on, and hit you over the head with how funky they are. But it also didn't sound like anything else I had heard in its combination of funk and soul tropes with more orchestral elements. I think this unique quality of the album is a big part of why it has endured and why it has inspired so many subsequent generations of artists.

**N.S.:** I was immediately struck by how this just seems so perfect to be sampled because there's these little loops that the album gives room to breathe, and it makes them ripe for the plucking.

**Z.S.:** There's also sort of a cinematic element to it. It has a lot of very lush orchestration that reminds me of the blaxploitation soundtracks of that era, and I can understand why rap producers are eager to bring that orchestral feel to their music. A lot of rap albums have kind of a cinematic feel, like an intro, an overture and skits. It makes sense that 24-Carat Black fits within that aesthetic.

**N.S.:** Tell me a little bit about the members of 24-Carat Black that you interviewed for this book.

**Z.S.:** To track down Princess Hearn, the lead singer from 24-Carat Black, I just messaged her on Facebook, out of the blue. She was very happy to have an opportunity to talk about the group and she was bursting with really amazing stories and memories about her time with them. Princess Hearn was also a real driving force for this book and helped me get in touch with a lot of the other members for the book.



I also interviewed C. Niambi Steele for the Pitchfork piece. She was very wary of me at first because as she told me, “I’m still living in poverty. My mom just died and I can’t afford to keep her house, and you’re telling me that Kanye West and Pusha T are sampling my music? I still can’t pay my bills.” I was able to convince her that I didn’t want to sugarcoat her story and I wanted to tell the brutally honest truth about the fact that she wasn’t getting paid for the samples. Eventually, I think I earned her trust and she and I had a very long conversation about 24-Carat Black and she slowly opened up. I think she recognized that I was sincerely interested in engaging with the brutal truth and the exploitation that are at the center of this story.

I even flew to Michigan to meet with Princess Hearn and her older brother Clarence Campbell. Clarence was one of the managers of the group, and he actually introduced the band to Dale Warren. He was very eager to tell his side of the story, and he felt his role in this album had never really been brought to life before. We sat in the living room of his house in Ann Arbor, the same room where he sat with Dale Warren

almost 50 years prior, and he told me that that was where Dale Warren first decided to change the group’s name to 24-Carat Black. I remember, he left the room and went to some sort of storage space and he came back with an original pressing of the *Ghetto* album. He also drove me around Michigan, and gave me a driving tour of 24-Carat Black history.

Just going to Michigan to meet with some of these people was fascinating. I also met with Tyrone Steels (the drummer) when I was there. We talked for hours. He was one of the founding members of the teenage band, The Ditalians, which later evolved into 24-Carat Black so he had the full story from the very beginning. He’s stuck with the group through all these trials and tribulations. At one point, I pulled out my phone and played him the Pusha T song that sampled his voice, and I asked, “did you get any money for the sample?” He said, “You know, I got a check for 60 something dollars.” His wife opened up a drawer and pulled out the check and said this is the only money we’ve ever gotten paid for any of the samples of this music.



N.S.: You have mentioned Dale Warren and he’s quite a character in the book. Could you talk about him a little bit?

Z.S.: Dale Warren was the composer, arranger and general mastermind of 24-Carat Black. Warren saw the Ditalians perform and decided to take this group under his wing and completely reimagine their repertoire, bring them in a completely new musical direction and rename them 24-Carat Black. He started his career as an arranger for Motown later he ended up at Stax Records, and was a really fascinating and influential figure in this era of funk music. He was a classically trained arranger and had this dream of fusing classical compositions with funk and R&B, and 24-Carat Black was his attempt to bring that vision to fruition.

But he was a complicated figure. Over the course of reporting this book, I interviewed a lot of people who knew

Dale Warren quite intimately, including Princess Hearn who was married to him during the time of 24-Carat Black's existence, and pretty much everyone that I interviewed about Dale talked about the fact that he was an alcoholic. He always had a bottle of Beefeater gin as he was working. He left his wife and young child to marry 18-year-old Princess Hearn. I interviewed his daughter who spoke very candidly about the fact that Dale was abusive to her when she was a young child. I didn't want the book to gloss over the fact that this person was a musical genius and he was also an abusive alcoholic.

Dale Warren arranged the strings for some truly incredible records, including most of Isaac Hayes's early albums and some of The Staple Singers albums from this era. He helped create some incredible music but I'm not sure very many people know his name today outside of the rarified circles of record collectors and soul obsessives. Because 24-Carat Black's rise and fall was so intertwined with his own story, I feel like the first half of the book kind of functions like the most detailed account of his life that has ever been written. He died in the mid-90s, so obviously I wasn't able to interview him for the book. He was a musical visionary and I hope that this book brings his story to life, because I think people should know his name.

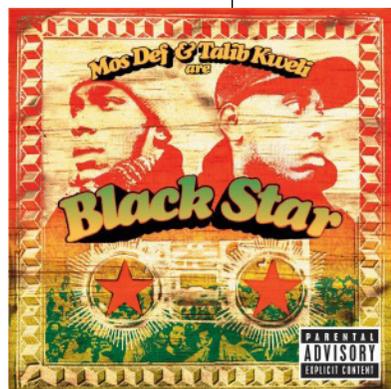
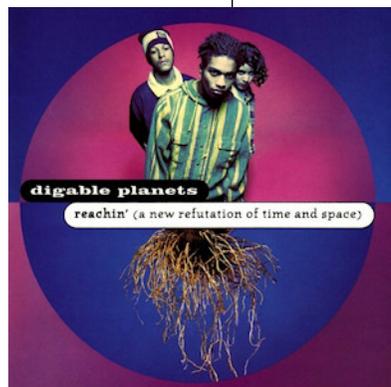


N.S.: I want to flip over to the other side of things and talk about the kind of hip-hop side of the book now. You got some really incredible people to chat with you. What was the process like for interviewing rappers and producers?

Z.S.: I wanted to really dig into the stories behind the samples. I feel like what gets lost a lot of the time when people write about samples are questions like, how did this producer stumble across this record, or, why did this record, speak to this rapper? When you're talking about the 80s and 90s, there was no YouTube, there was no Spotify. If you were looking for records to sample you had to go out and you know really go crate digging and really dig in the most literal sense for cool and interesting records. I really wanted to do some real detective work to try and figure out how this record became such an underground phenomenon.

I interviewed Ishmael Butler from Shabazz Palaces and formerly Diggable Planets numerous times while I was working on this project and he has such a great story about how he discovered the 24-Carat Black Album. His father was super into progressive funk and avant-garde jazz of that era, and Ish had a wonderful story about discovering the record in his father's record collection and then going back and literally stealing it from him when he was working on the first Diggable Planets album. I love how it embodies this idea of these records being passed down from generation to generation. I think that story probably spoke to me personally a little bit, because I also discovered a lot of great music just from digging through my parent's records.

Another interview that I was really excited about was with the producer Hi-Tek who produced the Black Star album, which almost included a 24-Carat Black sample, but then he changed up at the last minute and the sample got cut. What's crazy is that Hi-Tek's father and uncle were both members of the Ditalians, but left the group before Dale Warren later transformed it into



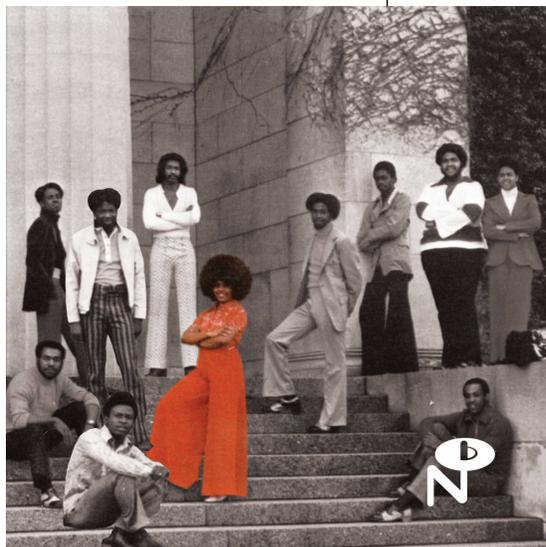
24-Carat Black, and Hi-Tek didn't know that his father was involved with this group until he was sampling it.

N.S.: Who's one producer or rapper who didn't talk to you that you wish you could have gotten? Who was your white whale that got away?

Z.S.: I tried really hard to get to talk to Eric B. and Rakim because their song "In the Ghetto" was the first major rap song to sample 24-Carat Black which kind of kicked off this trend. I kept emailing their manager and he kept saying he would try but eventually he stopped responding to my emails, but there was kind of a workaround.

I was able to interview TR Love from the group Ultramagnetic MCs who was able to help me piece the story of the sample together. He was friends with Paul C., one of the producers who worked on the Eric B. and Rakim album, *Let the Rhythm Hit 'Em*. According to numerous accounts Paul C. was the one who found *Ghetto: Misfortune's Wealth* at a flea market in the late 80s. To my knowledge, he was the first DJ who heard 24-Carat Black and decided to sample their music. He was a really influential and brilliant producer – one of the forefathers of sampling in the 80s. He died a tragic death and was murdered in 1989, so he did not live to produce the Eric B. and Rakim album, but he left behind a cassette tape with some of the records that he had been wanting to sample. Large Professor, the producer who ended up working on "In the Ghetto" heard that tape and decided to sample 24-Carat Black.

N.S.: I want to pull us to the crux of your story with the closing lines of the book, by C. Niambi Steele, comparing 24-Carat Black to a dinosaur: "the dead dinosaur made the fuel that runs the world. The dinosaur wasn't paying attention. He was too busy trying to live. He didn't know that he was going to be fuel. And neither did I." I think that this metaphor really sums up the dynamic between hip-hop and the soul and funk of the '60s and '70s.



Z.S.: I knew that 24-Carat Black's story was unique and the number of rappers who have sampled this music is incredibly striking. But on the other hand, I also knew that their story fit into a larger pattern of exploitation within the music industry, and I wanted to explore the long and ugly history of predominantly black musicians being cheated out of money and recognition.

Especially towards the end of the book, I wanted to explore some other examples of heavily sampled musicians who have been cheated out of compensation for the samples. The Amen break, from "Amen, Brother" by The Winsons, has been sampled hundreds if not thousands of times, but the drummer who played on that track never got paid for any of those samples and he died in relative poverty. That story has an unexpected ending. The songwriter behind that track was still alive and these two DJs put together a GoFundMe campaign in order to get that songwriter paid, which was kind of a happy ending. But, there's still the fact that the drummer, who played that drum break died and never got his due. I wanted to explore just how many great musicians whose music has endured from this particular era got cheated, tossed aside like garbage once their music was no longer selling. And then, their music lives on and has a new life among DJs and rap producers, but the musicians themselves never get compensated to the degree they deserve.

The core of this issue is that copyright law, as it applies to music publishing, is really antiquated. It obviously was not written to take into account sampling. In all likelihood, if you don't own the publishing or the recording copyright to the music, you have no recourse to get a cut of royalties when the music



gets sampled. I talk about “Funky Drummer” in the book. Clyde Stubblefield, who was James Brown’s drummer, who played this legendary drum break which was sampled over 1000 times, but he never got paid. And the reason he never got paid is because he did not have the songwriting *credit* for “Funky Drummer.” James Brown wrote the song, but James didn’t play that break beat. Clyde Stubblefield played that break beat, and that break beat is what’s getting sampled. Logically speaking, Clyde Stubblefield was the author of that beat, but legally speaking, Clyde Stubblefield was not the author of that song. That is a longstanding problem that has created this situation where these musicians can’t get paid.

I also think that industry wide reparations are in order. In the wake of the Black Lives Matter uprisings in June, there was a good deal of discussion about racial inequities in the music industry, historically speaking. Some very prominent musicians such as Jeff Tweedy were publicly calling for reparations. I don’t know exactly what form that would take, but I do believe that they are called for. Too many musicians have been cheated by predatory contracts.

I think there needs to be some legal means of reforming the system so that musicians can maintain their copyright. Some of that needs to be baked into the record label contracts, who need to reform their own practices in order to ensure that musicians are given more ownership of their own music. This isn’t just something that affects obscure session musicians either. This is an issue that affects Taylor Swift, who is currently in the studio re-recording her earlier albums because she doesn’t own the masters. I believe there needs to be industry wide reforms to give musicians more ownership and power over their own music.

\* \* \*

*Thanks to Zach Schonfeld for taking the time to speak with me. The book is [24-Carat Black’s Ghetto: Misfortune’s Wealth](#). You can also find a playlist of the album and associated samples on [Spotify](#). 🎧*



## A Year at a Comics Store

Most of my friends and family do not read comics or graphic novels. When I ask them why, they all say the same thing: comics are confusing.

The comics industry can be strange, intimidating and often exclusionary. There are barriers to entry, preventing the masses from jumping in. My desire to get amazing comic books in the hands of non-readers and my starting work at a comic book store led to me starting this column. After a year of both, I wanted to share some takeaways from 2020 as a new comics reader myself.

### A Good Bookseller is an Invaluable Resource

Walking into any bookstore is like walking onto another planet. There is an overwhelming amount of titles, genres, authors, sections and books (so many books). Unless you have something specific in mind, browsing can quickly become overwhelming.

A good bookseller solves this problem. They are the ultimate resource, whether its recommendations, locating an item, sharing information about publishers, imprints, release dates, popularity, stock levels, whatever, a good bookseller is your guide to a complex and overwhelming world that would otherwise be inaccessible.

So if you ever encounter a good bookseller, be nice to them. Okay? Okay.

### The Marvel and DC Problem

When I first started at the comic book store, the only comic publishers I knew by name were Marvel and DC. Boy what a greenhorn I was.

There is so much more to the comics medium than Marvel and DC. Let me repeat that. *There is so much more to the comics medium than Marvel and DC.*

I don't blame anyone for only knowing the aforementioned Big Two. They hold the biggest IPs, biggest market shares and largest amount of space on the shelf. My main issue is that Marvel and DC have, historically, published the most inaccessible books ever. A large reason none of my friends and family read comics is because comics means Marvel and DC, and Marvel and DC's comics are exceedingly confusing. "What is an 'Issue #0?'" "Is a trade paperback the same thing as a softcover?" "This one says volume one, but so do these five other Spiderman books." "Is Batman Joker War the same thing as Batman Universe?" "Which X-Men story am I supposed to *start* with?" "Which of these series are any good, anyway?" The questions are justified and endless.

Thankfully, most other big comics publishers have much more accessible catalogs.



### Each Publisher Fills A Different Role

I know a lot more comic publishers by name now. Image, Dark Horse, Drawn & Quarterly, IDW, they all play a role in the bookstore. Here is my experience with a few of them and what role they played as I became a bookseller this year.

### Marvel

Marvel is my personal nightmare. Understanding the way they publish books baffles me. Don't get me started on understanding the actual "Marvel Universe." Simple things like being able to look at the shelf and differentiate [2013's \*Guardians of the Galaxy\*](#) series from [2017's](#) and [2020's](#) is very difficult. And if it's difficult for me, who, y'know, *works at the bookstore*, you bet it's difficult for potential readers.

Marvel is the current [champion of single issue/periodical style comics](#). These are the four to five dollar, thirty-five-ish page, weekly or monthly comics you only find at a comic book store. This is also my least favorite comic format. It's the most expensive, the pages are often filled with ads (think magazines) and the format is highly restrictive for writers and artists. I do not think this format is the future. [Sales data agrees](#).

Marvel loves big, interconnected storylines. Think the Marvel Cinematic Universe is complicated? Try the Marvel Comic Universe. Unless you are in the thick of it, keeping up with these hulking "event storylines" is impossible. Even after such storylines are over, Marvel doesn't reprint them in accessible formats. Often you'll see them collected in [mammoth sized omnibus books](#) that have thousands of pages, tons of different writers and artists, weigh over 6 pounds and cost somewhere between \$100 and \$250. Not the easiest thing to recommend, or carry home.

The only two highlights I can point out from Marvel are their full reboot of X-Men and their small-sized book fair reprints. Both of these started, well, *last year*, but hey, *I* started this whole comics thing this year.

The major positive of Jonathan Hickman's X-Men reboot is simple: it's nice to have a definitive new starting point for the X-Men, a book I can hand someone and not have to attach five pages of summary context to. The name of the starting point reboot book though, "[House of X/Powers of X](#)" is totally confusing, especially considering they named the sequel series "[X-Men](#)."

The small format book fair reprints are much more interesting to me. Essentially, to gain favor at book fairs (primarily Scholastic's book fair), Marvel reformatted and reprinted some of its best series into smaller, thicker, more affordable, graphic novel style books. As book fairs largely target the all-ages demographic, these series are largely recent, young adult affairs, but that happens to be where many Marvel hits are. Series like Willow Wilson's [Ms. Marvel](#) and Brian Bendis' [Miles Morales](#) are huge standouts and they are in good company with series like [Moon Girl and Devil Dinosaur](#), [Hawkeye: Kate Bishop](#), [Shuri](#) and more. You can pick up book one of any of these series and know that you are starting *at the start*, no context, issue #0s or handbooks needed.



# MARVEL

## DC

The other comics juggernaut, I expected DC to be similarly inaccessible. While DC's single issue comics sometimes fit that description, its other offerings do a fairly good job collecting and presenting material to newcomers. DC's reprint style, alongside its dedicated publishing imprints, place it leagues ahead of Marvel in terms of accessibility to new readers.

First, the reprints. DC has done an excellent job collecting and reprinting material into easy-to-read paperbacks. There are amazing stand-alone books like *Watchmen*, *DC: The New Frontier*, and *Daytripper*, in addition to amazing stand-alone series like *The Sandman*. But even for long-running, complex superhero IPs like Batman, DC has figured out how to publish stories in an accessible way. Instead of focusing on chronology, timelines and continuity like Marvel has, DC's paperbacks place more emphasis on story arcs and creators. Because of this, you're unlikely to find the artist or writer suddenly change between chapters like in some Marvel books. DC's paperbacks for critically acclaimed stories like *Batman: The Long Halloween*, *Batman: Year One* and *All-Star Superman* effectively act as standalone material, making them a million times easier to pick up.

Second, imprints. In the past five years, DC has made, consolidated or relaunched distinct publishing imprints, leading to its own publishing houses like DC Black Label, Hill House Comics, DC Graphic Novels for Kids and DC Graphic Novels for Young Adults. All of these publish accessible books you can hand someone without much context. DC Black Label publishes many hit "non-canon" superhero books like *Harleen* and *Wonder Woman: Dead Earth*. The "non-canon" status means creators and readers don't need to worry about the baggage and backstory of the "official" DC comics canon. Meanwhile, DC's imprints for younger readers focus on accessible graphic novels. DC Kids and DC Young Adult have published some of the best selling and easiest to recommend superhero graphic novels in recent memory with titles like *Teen Titans: Raven*, *Superman Smashes the Klan*, *Green Lantern: Legacy* and more.

While discussions of Marvel versus DC forever run rampant, DC's efforts towards reprints, new imprints and graphic novels have put it thoroughly ahead of Marvel in terms of accessibility. It's also put them literally ahead of Marvel in [graphic novel sales](#).



## Everyone Else

Most of the best work in comics comes from outside Marvel and DC. Perhaps it is unfair to compare two superhero publishers to a bunch of more traditional ones. But they all stand side by side in a bookstore, all vying for your dollar, so the comparison exists regardless.

## Image Comics

Image Comics holds the third largest comic store market share and for good reason: they publish a huge, wide ranging batch of riveting (and not-so-riveting) series. Image's strength lies in its diversity of titles, genres, styles and creators, meaning they have something for everyone. On top of that, their printing style makes sense, with series having consistent authors, book designs and numbering methods. Image's *Saga*, *The Walking Dead*, *Monstress* and *Paper Girls* are incredibly good and incredibly popular, consistently selling out and consistently bringing new folks into the comic book store.

While series from Image have less consistent publishing schedules than many other publishers, I believe art takes time and can let delays and hiatuses go if the final book ends up being worth the wait.

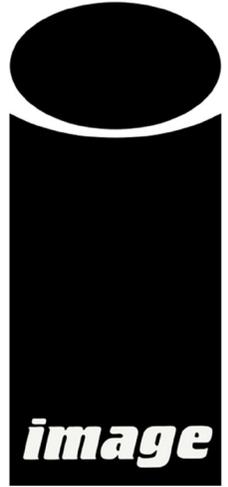
## Dark Horse Comics

Dark Horse is the king of media tie-in comics. Did you know that there are comics for *Stranger Things*? *Avatar: The Last Airbender*? *The Witcher*? *Assassin's Creed Valhalla*? *Cyberpunk 2077*? Dark Horse publishes all of them. These comics bring in new readers almost every day. For that alone, I am a fan of Dark Horse. Added on to that, their books are usually stand alone, thicker paperbacks, a very accessible and easy to understand format.

Their media tie-in work, combined with consistently popular series like *The Umbrella Academy*, *Hellboy*, *Berserk* and *Critical Role* means Dark Horse is the king of its own niche.

## First Second

First Second, an imprint of Macmillan Publishers, largely publishes graphic novels for all-age and young adult readers. Because of this, First Second (and similar imprints like



Graphix) avoid nearly all the accessibility problems plaguing single issue publishing. While infinitely smaller than Marvel and DC, First Second's book catalog has a wide reach, stocking shelves in all kinds of bookstores everywhere. Some of their hit titles, like *On a Sunbeam*, *The Adventure Zone* and *Laura Dean Keeps Breaking Up With Me*, remain favorites of mine, and favorites of comic newcomers.



### Manga is King

I haven't talked about manga (comics from Japan), and I really should. The manga section of our store, while small, is always the busiest. Manga sell with tremendous frequency. And like First Second's graphic novels, you're likely to find manga in every kind of bookstore, not just comics shops.

Manga remains accessible, both in price and story content. 99% of the time, you do not need to worry about spinoffs, tie-in books or "extended universe" content. Add onto that their small form factor, softcover style and black and white pages, manga is easy to buy and easy to read. With a wealth of amazing series and publishers to choose from, it's no wonder manga has taken [more and more comic market share recently](#). From popular action series like *My Hero Academia*, *One Punch Man*, *Demon Slayer*, *Akira* and *Dragonball* to any series created by visionaries like [Junji Ito](#) or [Naoki Urasawa](#), the list of good, easy-to-recommend manga goes on and on.

### The Sales Data

Taking all of that into account, comics sales data and trends start to make a lot of sense. While I am tempted to share snippets of shoddy 2020 sales data, 2020 was an *extremely weird year*, so here is the much-more-complete, much-more-normal data from 2019.

For the first time *ever*, comic books had larger total sales in traditional bookstores and online retailers as compared to comic stores. Things have been heading in that direction for a while, but it's still a big deal. The sales by format chart helps to show why.

Sales have been trending towards graphic novels for years now. The format, as discussed, is more accessible in nearly every way. 2019 really solidified this trend.

### The Future

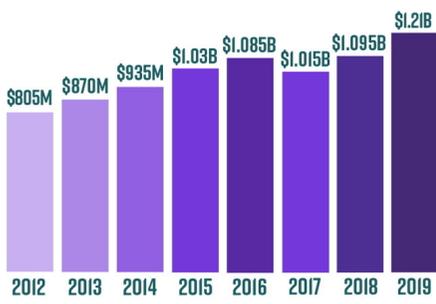
Graphic novels have allowed the comics medium to expand beyond the niche comic book store into the greater bookselling landscape. That's a win, anyway you spin it.

As for comic book stores, I believe they will always have their place. I hope to make mine, and the comics medium as a whole, more accessible to all.

I'll see you in 2021. 🍷

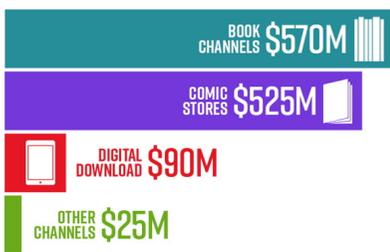
# THE ICv2-COMICHRON COMIC SALES REPORT 2019

## NORTH AMERICAN COMIC SALES ACROSS TIME

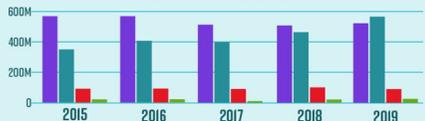


(Combined Print & Digital Download Sales)

## NORTH AMERICAN COMIC SALES BY CHANNEL



## BY CHANNEL ACROSS TIME



## NORTH AMERICAN COMIC SALES BY FORMAT



## BY FORMAT ACROSS TIME





**W**elcome to this month's World Tour! Bring out your beers and your Bratwurst, and let's get going!

### **Aguirre**

In *Aguirre, Wrath of God*, we follow the 'insane' Don Lope de Aguirre as he leads a group of 16th-century conquistadors into the jungle to look for the mythical El Dorado, city of gold. As the journey continues it gets increasingly perplexing as the men continue to press on with their mission, driven by promises of wealth and glory. While never defined, it's clear that this "madness" is a metaphor for the colonial mindset and Herzog gives a pretty interesting visceration of it that is worth analyzing.

The preeminent feature of the colonial mindset in this film is obsession. From the moment their expedition starts, Aguirre is plotting his hostile takeover, slinking through the ranks to make the circumstances for the pursuit of his obsession. There isn't a particular logic to it either, it's all predicated on a fantasy of a place based on rumors and myth that we (as the audience) know doesn't exist. The jarring editing breaks up your sense of sequence and disorients you. This emphasizes how this is a journey of faith, not cold logic. Each of the colonizers have different creeds. For most of the men, it's the promise of gold. For some, it's a religious venture. For others, it's sovereignty. For some it's glory. For the slaves, it's the chance of freedom. The lines between these are deliberately blurred, excuses, lies, faith – they all merge into a singular obsession. This is something we can see paralleled in neo-colonial efforts today. If Western nations invade out of a desire for oil, some pursuit of

“freedom,” a modern-day crusade, or national security – the result is the same . . . it all folds into blood, domination and rubble.

Herzog also demonstrates the destructive nature of colonialism. Everywhere these colonizers go they leave a trail of wreckage behind. They kill the natives. They kill their appointed leader. They burn a village to the ground. They abandon their horses to die in the jungle. No matter how much it gets wrapped up in dogma or religion, violence is the only language that colonialism knows. In some ways Aguirre is like a disaster capitalist, everything around him is being destroyed (by his own hand), but instead of encouraging him to stop, he finds a way to make the chaos work for him. Each pointless death becomes a martyrdom through which he can push them to keep going. All that matters is increasing his dominion, “Even if this land consists of only trees and water – we will conquer it.”



The colonizers in this film are full of self-aggrandizement. They talk of God and kings and gold, but Herzog effectively shows how pathetic they are in actuality. The subtlest way this is done is through the opening, where we watch the mostly silent trudging of these invaders through the jungles. Instead of being glorious and bright, it's absolutely miserable. Everything is muddy and disorienting with random cannon shots in between. We often pull out to wide shots that show just how small these men are compared to the magnificent landscape than encompasses them. The contrast between the grandeur the land and the awkwardness of the men makes them feel more like amateur historical reenactors struggling with clunky costumes than brave heroes fighting for glory. At every possible point, we are shown how these men are completely unequipped to deal with the environment, and suffering for it. Every time they try to take dominion it becomes ridiculous. Their raft is a pathetic hodgepodge of wooden logs and hastily crafted nails carried at the

whims of an unforgiving river. They appoint Don Fernando de Guzman as king because of his proximity to aristocracy back in the home country, giving him a pathetic throne and even having a show trial which is ultimately just an excuse to discipline a political enemy. After they invade a village, the colonizers end up licking the natives' salt off of the floor out of desperation, even as they are under attack. There is no power or glory or might given to colonizers here, they are instead reduced to their truest form. Violent killers rolling in the dirt, desperately consuming the riches they haven't burned yet.



There's an infectious lure to colonialism which Herzog captures pretty well, with Klaus Kinski's star performance as the wormtongue Aguirre. He convinces the rest of his peers to keep traveling into almost certain death and, in the few moments where his piercing blue eyes look dead into the lens of the camera, he almost gets you. And in many ways, the colonial mindset does actually affect Herzog. Even in his righteous effort. Herzog repeatedly others the indigenous people. They're cannibals, servants, an existential threat – but they're never humans. One of the few times their language is translated is when they're screeching “floating meat” as the invaders drift on the open water. The virulence of this racism actually allows for a message that he clearly didn't get when he was making this film – that without self-reflection we can still reproduce the systems we rail against. This is pretty reflective of a broader issue in Germany (and other Western states), where there is a cultural amnesia about the [role they played in colonialism](#) and the ways that colonial mindsets are fundamental to their cultural consciousness.

It is impossible to exist in this world of the colonizers and the colonized without those attitudes affecting you somehow. It is however, your responsibility to do the work and decolonize your mind. I include myself in

that, as someone who is both colonized, but also born and raised in the land of one the most ardent imperialists. There's a way in which this column could very easily become a gross kind of cultural tourism, where I pretend a little research makes me the expert on complicated national histories, reducing and aestheticising them for the (predominantly) Western gaze. I try not to do that and hopefully succeed.

Regardless, the point is we have to do the work of unlearning, Colonialism doesn't just come in a funny hat and shiny armor – sometimes it comes with a camera and a pen.



### **Wings of Desire**

Written and directed by Wim Wenders, *Wings of Desire* follows an angel Damien (Bruno Ganz) in West Berlin as he grows sick of watching over the world from a distance and falls in love with a mortal.

So much of this film is just people watching. A man smokes in his room. His dad sits in the living room reading the newspaper. His mum sits in the kitchen cleaning up. A couple meet outside a showroom. People read in the library. Others fidget on the train. An old man remembers the world before the wall and tries to chronicle it. The city moves, the city breathes. The city lives, the city dies. Everything happens at once and you get to watch – hearing the thoughts people are too scared to say aloud.

These thoughts have so much insight and power, easily being the strongest part of the film – but one from a taxi driver hit me hardest:

“Are there still borders? More than ever! Every street has its borderline. Between each plot, there's a strip of no-man's-land disguised as a hedge or a ditch. Whoever dares, will fall into booby traps or be hit by laser rays. The

trout are really torpedoes. Every homeowner, or even every tenant nails his nameplate on the door, like a coat of arms and studies the morning paper as if he were a world leader. Germany has crumbled into as many small states as there are individuals. And these small states are mobile. Everyone carries his own state with him, and demands a toll when another wants to enter. A fly caught in amber, or a leather bottle. So much for the border. But one can only enter each state with a password. The German soul of today can only be conquered and governed by one who arrives at each small state with the password. Fortunately, no one is currently in a position to do this. So . . . everyone migrates, and waves his one-man-state flag in all earthly directions.”

I think that’s something which struck me personally about this – especially in 2020. I detach from things a lot and retreat into my own ‘small state’ – this year more than ever. I don’t think I’m alone in this, and why we do it makes sense. Sometimes it’s for safety. Sometimes it’s ignorance. Oftentimes I just have nothing left in the tank to give anymore. Living in the world is hard enough, especially as a marginalized person. But during a pandemic that is running rampant through the communities I hold dear? A year where general acts of violence against those same communities has actually spiked? It often feels impossible to take another step – and I am nowhere near the most materially hard-hit.

The key to *Wings of Desire* is pointing out the little things that make it worth staying present. It’s the warmth of a cup of coffee, the wind on your face, kids running in the street. It’s seeing the limits of your humanity and finding a way to make that worth it. That’s never easy, or simple. More often than not it fucking hurts – especially when there are a bunch of systems specifically designed to torture you. But if there’s anything this year has shown, it’s that we need each other now more than ever, and that’s all we can rely on.

We’ve “been outside long enough, absent long enough” – and it’s time to break down the walls. 🇺





## Rarepairs

**T**hey never met, or they met but they only briefly saw each other from across the room. Their pairing often isn't just not canon – it's so far off the beaten path that other writers maybe don't even see it themselves. Like a gem buried deep, these are rarepairs.

There are two primary varieties of rarepairs – the first is when the two characters exist in the same canon, and the other is when they don't. Take the first example. In *Teen Wolf*, the inarguable largest pairing is Derek Hale and Stiles Stilinski with almost 63,000 works on Archive of Our Own. But some folks have also sat down and written 37 works pairing Stiles Stilinski and Melissa McCall, the mother of Stiles' in-universe best friend and the main character of the show. Rarepairs don't necessarily have to run into questionable pairings (like romantically pursuing your best friend's mother); in the Harry Potter fandom, a frequent rarepair sighting would be pairing off the next generation, the children of the characters in the franchise who are effectively only mentioned by name at the end of the 7th book. Some of those pairings are bigger than others – Scorpius Malfoy/Albus Severus Potter have a pairing tag that is larger than the *Metal Gear* fandom – but most of them are relatively small.

The second example is a bit harder to find and usually involves crossover alternative universes. These can be one-offs, the rarest of rarepairs, that are only written by a single writer. But they will occasionally gain a bit of traction. A prime example of this is the crossover between *The Chronicles of Riddick* and the television show *Firefly*. Dating all the way back to 2008 and fanfiction.net

and still continuing to this year on both that site and AO3, there is a small crossover community pairing Richard B. Riddick (the main character of *Pitch Black* and *The Chronicles of Riddick*) and River Tam (the psychic waif super soldier). It's not big; there's only about 40 works across both platforms, but it's stuck around for over a decade despite these universes having absolutely nothing to do with each other. There isn't a [crossover actor](#) or a shared universe (like say the MCU where folks like to pair off Darcy Lewis with Tony Stark). These characters are entirely separate. But at some point, their universes collided in fandom and have remained entwined.

Fanfiction is already frequently an act of looking at pre-existing works and thinking, "Oh, that's not right" and putting pen to paper to adjust the narrative. Rarepairs are an extension of that, pulling together characters and universes that the original creator probably could not have even conceived as being in the same room, and bringing them into romantic relationships with each other. With advanced tagging systems like the ones employed at Archive of Our Own, it's easier to miss these gems, to not even know that you could be looking for, say, fiction that pairs John Wick and Santino D'Antonio, so finding them is always an experience. 🇺





## Marching On

There were many times this year in which I felt stuck in place. I would start my day, follow the same routine and then go to bed at night mainly to think. It took me a while to fully grasp the situation. To try and understand that I was in lockdown for the foreseeable future, seeing nothing but bad news on social media and waiting to hear about the inevitable extension every 15 days from the government. I kept on thinking when exactly all of this would end, when that precious moment of realizing that you're finally over an awful life event would finally arrive. For a while, nothing changed.

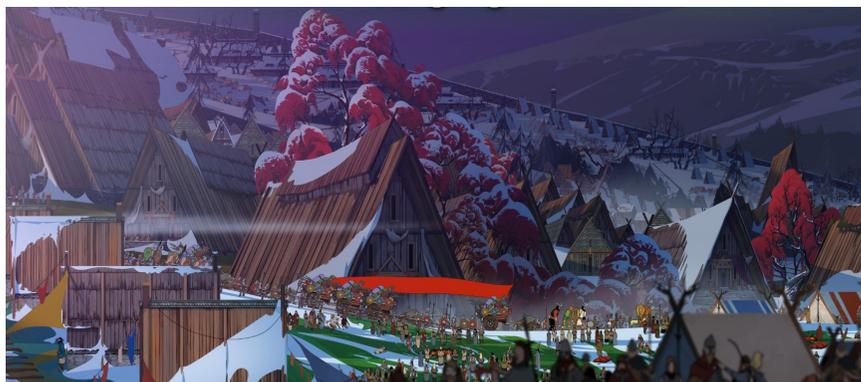
2020, I think, was the year in which I felt terrified about the future. A lot of worries that had suddenly never had come to mind before now haunted me on a daily basis. Going outside turned dangerous. Getting close to others was prohibited. We all suddenly had to wear masks and use gallons of hand sanitizer to buy groceries. The people I cared about were all on the same page and I had no idea when I was going to see them again. Drowning myself in work helped me to have a reason to get up from bed, with the cost of strengthening some of [my worst habits](#). I admit that, for a while, it was hard to motivate myself to keep my head up and look forward to a better tomorrow.

It's always like this. We go through periods of time where everything seems to be final. We survive literal hells in ways that are hard to describe, only to look back at them and breathe with ease and enthusiasm. Most of the time there's a new calamity waiting around the corner because as we all know life can be like that, but we get to enjoy the in betweens, regardless of how long they last. This year, though? It felt different. I couldn't see a way out of this.

Now, I'm not writing this from a post-COVID-19 reality or anything alike. The situation, by and large, has remained the same, if not worse, depending on the side of the world from where you're reading this. But we have been through almost 10 months of this already. It seems it was possible for time to move on, after all, even in a year like this. And I take that as a reassurance that we're slowly marching somewhere.

Thinking about this has led me to sympathize with the people in *The Banner Saga*. The premise is gloomy right from the start: the gods are dead, the sun suddenly stops in the face of a long winter and, to make things even worse, a mender called Juno shares a bad omen. She has received a prophecy from the Serpent, a terrifying creature of colossal scale.

"I am the end. Do you understand? This world, and this tapestry, I would devour. It is my purpose."



The main characters are split into groups, each carrying their own banner and leading a caravan through mud and snow. Step by heavy step, they march towards familiar places in hopes to stumble upon a face they recognize so they can make a stop and spend the night thinking, planning ahead. They go through unthinkable obstacles, pushing against an ancient civilization that has emerged from its sleep, imposing itself as an enemy that is at best one step behind, and at worst one step ahead.

Rumors from across the land are always changing the course of action, but conflicts are abound pretty much everywhere. Some cities have become strongholds denying the entry to trespassers, while kings and masters hide inside their lustrous halls, trading the needs and worries of their people for their own safety. But hopelessness often leads to retaliation. Not only is there danger in the sky, or looming in the ethereal distance as a colossal observer. The people living through it are tired, scared, desperate. The situation has made them willing to give or lose it all, and that's something we constantly witness in our travels.

When you're not engaging in dialogue or fighting enemies, you and your caravan travel. Lush, vast landscapes are left with the marks of footsteps and cart wheels, all the while an indicator on the top of the screen illustrates the situation. It signals how many days have passed, how many people are still in your caravan and how long will your food supplies last. All of these factors affect the group's morale, so managing and thinking ahead is key for survival. But both external and internal conflicts often take place to interrupt your plans. You might find a lost caravan in the road asking for help, who then turn out to be a band of thieves that strike as soon as you lower your guard. A village set on fire may have left a handful of families without home and you can let them tag along or let destiny decide what the fate might be.

Stories emerge and come to an end during the long walks in *The Banner Saga*. I found these moments to be the most memorable not only for the often heart wrenching decisions that linger in your mind, but also because of how they shaped you as a player. I always tried to give troublesome people in the caravan a second chance, but this often backfired. I tried to grant everyone in need shelter and food, but as the needs increased due to a bigger population, this also meant that they were bound to starve in the coming days. I often asked if I was truly being helpful or not by lending a hand, exposing them to new worries that they might not have experienced before.



It's hard to put the blame on anything, or anyone. The situation is outside everyone's control, and no one can predict the outcomes of their actions. The people in the caravan are bound together, for better or worse, such as I've been with my family since quarantine started. But I think the scale is even wider. To wake up is also to login on Twitter and Discord and check how my friends and peers are doing, what they decide to spend time on during the day, and what sort of goals or objectives they have set themselves as motivators. And yet social media continues to be toxic and harmful. So what is there left for the people who need the interaction, or escapism, from the stillness of their routines?

2020 has brought the worst out of people, including myself, and still continues to do so. It's hard to find healthy ways to channel frustration and discouragement. There aren't tangible tools to oppose the impending doom, either. Sometimes my only wish is for people to just wear the goddamn mask and stay inside to make things easier for everyone, or in my line of work, to log off more often and stop quote retweeting fascists only to dunk on them.

These have been the least favorite of my constants, but there's been a few other positive ones, such as this column. It's been hard to summarize, even as I'm writing this, how to close a year like this. By far, I think that what has pushed me to continue is the fact that everyone is enduring in their own ways. It's a global, collective struggle that has been with us for months now, and yet we are still out there. Albeit small, it's a reassurance.

I wish I could travel back in time to March and tell myself to just be patient, that this, too, seems like it's bound to pass sometime soon. I can't wait to return to this piece and look back at this period of time, breathing with ease and enthusiasm. But until then, we can face the end of the world together. All we have to do is keep marching on. 🇺🇸





Remember when I played *Monster Prom* and couldn't get the ruthless, snake-haired Vera Oberlin to be my date? Remember when she said "I'd shoot you, but I'm saving these guns for my wedding night"? That kind of ice cold rejection might keep some people from going back to the *Monster Prom* universe, but not this idiot. I was born to date monsters, baby.

In *Monster Prom 2: Monster Camp*, you get on a bus with a bunch of over-eighteen supernatural cuties to attend a three-week summer camp. Vera, apparently, does not attend summer camp. So what was I, a blue-skinned, bolt-necked Franken-girl ("I think you mean *Frankenstein's monster-girl*") supposed to do, *not* have a romance for the three weeks of summer camp? No, I was supposed to seduce Joy Johnson-Johjima, a twenty-three-year-old world-saving goth witch who stars in a TV show called *The Coven*.

Despite my long-term affection for Vera, I have a lot more in common with Joy. Vera wears designer blazers; Joy wears fishnets. Vera is a cutthroat capitalist; Joy is a Stevie Nicks-obsessed witch who loves to read.

I can't imagine voluntarily attending summer camp, but if I did, I would definitely want to be left alone with a novel. In one fireside chat, Joy said, "I'm not busy at all with this book I've been trying to finish since I got here and am only on page fifteen because people keep interrupting—" Of course, she had to save the world and find romance (preferably with me), so interruptions were inevitable. I guess a game about watching another character read books would be pretty boring . . . or would it? What if the character read aloud from *The Tome of Bakunin*, "the most powerful collection of anti-capitalist magicks ever assembled"? If you wind up on *that* adventure with Joy, here's a helpful spoiler: summon the invisible hand of the market. Joy will love you for it.

At one point, I also borrowed (or stole?) a book from Joy called *How to Be a Slightly Better Friend Despite Your Suffocating Horniness* by Dr. Hugh G. Boner, MD. Joy reads books by *doctors*. Literature abounds in her questlines.

Now, let's get back to Joy's Stevie Nicks obsession. In another thread, I found myself helping Joy liberate a Fleetwood Mac t-shirt from one of her evil exes. "It was vintage from the '78 tour. Stevie Nicks blessed it herself!" Joy got a bee in her bonnet about this shirt and called the toxic ex who had it in his lair. As I patiently waited for Joy to pay attention to me, a "magical evil centipede person" named Axarax appeared through a portal and tried to get Joy back *right in front of me*. Fortunately, Joy didn't want to engage with him, and I had to help her. So I created a black market specifically for buying and selling Joy's things (an extremely normal way to get a date). This black market ploy succeeded, and I was rewarded with Joy's affection: "I can feel Stevie's powerful witch blessing radiating over me. Thanks a lot, Deirdre. You were super chill about my clingy, centipede-person ex. You're pretty great, huh?"

I don't think Vera would ever have said that to me.

Not that Joy can't be cruel when you fail her quests. In one playthrough, I asked her to attend the romantic meteor shower with me, and she said, "Is it 'cause you heard I usually end up dating the villains I fight, so you assumed I have very low standards and you might have a chance? Well . . . I can still tell you there's one rule: if you're a bad dating choice . . . at least you need to be hot." Ouch.

Still, the brutality of failure in *Monster Camp* is part of what makes it so metal. There aren't really any soft landings in these stories: you either win the heart of your beloved, or you get shit-talked into the ground.

All of that said, maybe some of my affection for Joy is simple narcissism. Joy and I have similar musical sensibilities, similar wardrobe color palettes and similar proclivities towards the occult. If I overheard someone talking about a bookish goth who listens to *Rumours* on repeat too much, I'd assume they were talking about me. 🍷



*(Spoiler warning for Fischl's unlockable backstory in Genshin Impact)*

**D**ear Fischl,  
“A long time ago in a place far, far away, there was a tiny little girl,” reads your backstory.

Left without a stable parental presence or friends, she made friends with books and the characters within. When the outside world rejected her, she found companionship in her own worlds.

Was it lonely, being left in your library by yourself? I was lonely like you once, too.

As I got older, I found out that I wasn't alone in being lonely. It turned out that so many of today's adults were once isolated, misunderstood children like us. In this fact about our past selves, we find solidarity in each other today.

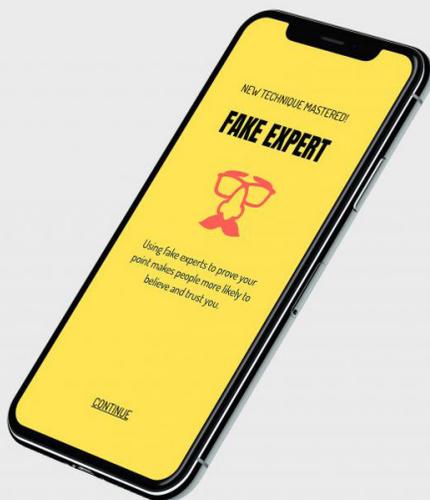
So, when you're told to conform to everyone else's expectations to make friends, keep traveling your own path. Soon, you'll find others walking along with you who understand what it's like to reject convention.

You'll discover companions who appreciate the way that you walk and talk. Instead of forcing you to act like them, they'll find ways to connect with you on your terms. Beneath the stubborn exterior, they'll see someone who genuinely cares about their well-being.

In spite of those who want to put you in line, keep making your own adventures. Keep telling the tales of the Immernachtreich and your rule. Keep finding ways to make the mundane poetic as only you can.

Fly forth, Prinzessin der Verurteilung! I promise that your kingdom is waiting out there.

-Melissa 🍷



## Countering COVID-19 Disinformation in Five Minutes or Less

I get a lot of weird email forwards from older right-wing relatives who are shocked by everything they see on the Internet because they didn't grow up with computers. As a case in point, an aunt sent me a YouTube video from someone claiming to have bought a voting machine in order to hack it, implying that the 2020 presidential election was rigged. It turned out to be a clip from the 2006 HBO documentary *Hacking Democracy*, and while the content of the video itself was factual, the context around it in the email was meant to be misleading. I doubt my aunt understood the video wasn't new.

For better or worse, viral disinformation – which often targets those less tech and media savvy than, say, an Unwinnable reader – is so common that it's hardly noteworthy. Since the start of the pandemic though, I've seen more people in their 20s and 30s fooled by false propaganda too, and it's no longer just the usual suspects filling my feeds with cursed content. I'm speaking anecdotally, but I have a feeling I'm not alone.

It's not necessarily their fault that separating fact from fiction on the Internet has gotten harder, either. Social media is more overloaded with bad actors than ever and people don't feel like they know what they can trust. So, when a friend of mine claimed antifa bussed rioters into our town this past

summer to disrupt a peaceful protest based on a doctored video (like many similar videos and stories that cropped up in cities across the United States after George Floyd's murder), I almost couldn't blame them. The clip looked legit enough at first and, before local news media could debunk it that night, the damage had been done. Facebook and YouTube had beaten our local NBC affiliate.

Trust in media is dead. And in the middle of a global pandemic, that's bad news.

The core problem is a lack of media literacy combined with increasingly aggressive efforts from all manner of organizations – governments, activists, who even knows anymore – to pollute the information ecosystem we rely on to maintain public trust and social order. The problem is everywhere too, thanks to the decline of the news industry and the rise

of social networks creating a perfect environment for propaganda to drown out actual news. And in a time when a lethal pandemic is tearing through the planet, the consequences have been fatal.

Solutions to this problem won't come easily nor in time; back in September, 49% of Americans said they [wouldn't get a COVID-19 vaccine](#), due in no small part to persistent scaremongering and deception on behalf of extreme right-wing propaganda.

Combating disinformation like this in the future will not be easy. But the Social Decision Making Lab at the University of Cambridge may have built a videogame that could play a small part in pointing us in the right direction. The basic browser-based game titled [Go Viral!](#) (created in collaboration with counter-disinformation organization [DROG](#), development studio [Gusmanson](#), and the [UK Cabinet Office](#)), helps players understand how disinformation works by asking them to help spread it. As the follow-up to 2018's [Bad News](#), which similarly aimed to educate players on how to spot fake news, it's an accessible yet effective social impact game that takes about five minutes to complete.

The basic mechanics underpinning [Go Viral!](#) seem simple enough beneath the surface of its illustrated "indie" aesthetic. It starts by presenting the player



**JOEL**

In: Not Co-fraid group

this global NGO covering up that eating kiwis actually CURES the virus - Khrakozia knew all along but KEPT IT HIDDEN!

23 likes

with an optional series of hypothetical social media posts that need to be scored on a seven-point scale for how manipulative they appear. While this step can be skipped, the anonymized results are aggregated for research purposes, and you'll be asked the same questions again after completing the game so you can see if your attitudes toward anything you've seen has changed. They're worth answering to help the cause and to get the full experience.

Next, players are put in the shoes of a manipulator (essentially an amateur amplifier of disinformation), tasked with creating and sharing emotionally charged and deliberately deceptive social media posts with the goal of becoming a notorious negative influencer. After choosing from one of four avatars, you're then given several successive social media posts to either post or skip, with the goal of identifying messages that are A) false and B) written to scare people. The more incendiary your posts, the more likes you'll get and the more credibility you earn.

As the game continues, you're presented with different scenarios as you climb the ladder of insidious social influence, advancing from a relative nobody to a full-fledged fake expert. In order to achieve that dubious distinction, you'll need to choose the worst and most self-serving actions possible. See something from an obvious huckster calling COVID-19 fatalities a myth? Share it. Someone posted a level-headed claim that a new COVID-19 vaccine is safe? Discredit it. The more outrage you can incite, the better.

At the end, you're asked to share the game with other people, turning its title from an accurate descriptor to a clever promotional directive. And while the game's intents and aspirations may not be world-changing, its execution both as a means of gathering research data and as an inviting educational tool is intriguing. The idea to meet people where they are with something more inviting than a dry article about fake news, in a format that's more interesting than a condescending lecture, is smart. It shows as much as it tells in a way that may not feel groundbreaking to anyone familiar with games or technology, but could be genuinely helpful, especially for those who aren't news nerds.

*Go Viral!* understands not everyone knows what a filter bubble is, even if all of us know how to build one. The game does not counterproductively shame ignorance the way online discourse sometimes can either. Sure, it's a small project, and one that I didn't expect much from after stumbling upon it, yet the ideas underpinning its design and approach to educational entertainment deserve further exploration. If nothing else, it shows how entertainment can offer an effective counterpunch to disinformation – about COVID-19 and in general – and games may have a small place among other solutions. 🍷



## 365 Days of Halloween

Practically every time we saw Phoebe Bridgers in 2020, she was wearing a full-body skeleton costume.

On her album cover. In her videos. In her remote appearances on late night television. In her one-off performances – one of the worthiest among them a quiet cover of Radiohead’s “Fake Plastic Trees” recorded in a London church. In each case, she’s sporting a classic black suit of white skeleton bones, marking this time of perpetual Halloween.

In her video for “I Know the End,” she’s wearing the skeleton suit while nearly drowning in a bathtub. At one point, she climbs out of the water and steps dripping wet into a locker room – where in each locker hangs the same skeleton suit, one after another after another. She has, it seems, an endless supply.

“I Know the End” is the stunning finale of Phoebe Bridgers’ sophomore solo album *Punisher* – my 28th annual Album of the Year. “Punisher” was released amid a deadly, incompetently mismanaged pandemic and raging civil unrest over the continuing murder of Black people by an out-of-control police force. Its original release date was discarded in deference to Juneteenth.

Though *Punisher* was written and recorded in 2018 and 2019, its mix of hope, sadness, irony and a lingering sense of dread feels inspired by current events – even as they are still unfolding today.

Those of us quarantined at home have watched helplessly as the body count grows, hoping it won’t take us, too – or our parents or grandparents. That it won’t keep our children out of school any longer or force us out of our jobs.

The only thing we've prayed to lose this year is our psychopathic president.

So Bridgers' Halloween fashion, all things considered, made a ton of sense – even down to simply wearing the same comfy outfit every day. Why change your pants for a Zoom call, why do laundry, why try to put a fresh scent and unwrinkled polish on what for many was the worst year in America they'd ever seen?

Make no mistake, *Punisher* is a record worthy of any year. "DVD Menu" starts it with an orchestral foreshadowing, only to be reprised at the end of the record, bringing the haunting full circle. "Garden Song" has one of the most sublimely lo-fi guitar hooks you'll hear, a pulsing heartbeat from under a blanket of snow. "Kyoto" (like other tracks on *Punisher*) touches on the ludicrousness of being a touring musician – how finding yourself in an alien land, far from the comfort of your bedroom is not

always all it's cracked up to be. "I wanted to see the world / Then I flew over the ocean / And I changed my mind." Later, in "Chinese Satellite" Bridgers sings, "I've been running around in circles / Pretending to be myself / Why would somebody do this on purpose / When they could do something else?" Heard in 2020, traveling the world, performing songs over and over – as absurd and as strange a calling as it might be – seems very much worth doing on purpose, especially when you can't do it anymore.

The title track – an ode to the late Elliot Smith – is both a song about fan obsession and an earnest tribute to a dead musician. A love song to a dead person you admire works anytime; it especially works now. There is also, fittingly, a song called "Halloween," which features a purposely tasteless joke about living near a hospital and sucks the joy from the holiday by focusing its limited powers on trying to conjure one final flicker out of a dying relationship.

There's so much more to love on *Punisher*, but let's go back to the finale: "I Know the End" contains the most telling and memorable moment on the record. As the album approaches its climax, Bridgers is riding down the highway in her car, screaming along to an "America First rap country song" with her windows rolled down. Bridgers sings:



*The billboard said “The End Is Near”  
I turned around, there was nothing there  
Yeah, I guess the end is here*

Yes, this might sound tongue-in-cheek – a wink-wink chem trails reference and an earnest wish to be whisked away by aliens from earlier in the record is also consistent with surviving our time of alternative facts and unending conspiracy theories. But the record never faces fear more head-on than as the song and album concludes with a chorus of voices singing “The end is here” in unison as the “DVD Menu” reprise swells beneath.

As you listen, you are free to choose whether to laugh or scream along with her. She does both in the closing seconds. Vaccines are coming but we’re still dying, and in numbers greater than before. We’ve elected a new president for 2021 but the current one’s dangerous mental health issues will continue to poison the country for the foreseeable future. Which is why – even on the best days of this Halloween year – it’s hard to deny what we’ve all wondered sometimes: Maybe the end really *is* here. 🍷





## Take a Look

In an essay discussing *Call of Duty: Black Ops Cold War's* empty, if elaborate visual direction for [Bullet Points Monthly](#) (which I co-edit), Edwin Evans-Thirlwell described one of the game's first missions as "... rammed with period touches such as taped-up customer Polaroids, walls of car license plates and year upon year of toilet graffiti. This is an intensity of research and location design most developers can only dream of, and yet, the first thing the game asks you to do is leave the premises."

Games like these, meant to be experienced with the sprint button held down, serve as examples of the thoughtless level of expenditure which has come to be expected from big-budget, triple-A videogames. As players, we've become used to carelessly dashing through spaces full of beautiful and painstakingly crafted detail, which are meant only to serve as ephemeral flavor, not to be examined or truly seen.

It's the bizarre dissonance inherent to games like *Cold War*: these are the *fun* games, there to be entertaining, to be enjoyed casually, not studied so much as quick-loaded on the console after finishing dinner and before going to bed. These games are escapist playgrounds to hang out in with our friends, vibrant amusement parks full of content rather than specific objects to be examined. Yet occurring in tandem with this forced frivolity is a pressure which continues to build in alarming ways. We're one (perpetually sold-out) foot in the new generation now, our fun must be had in 8k at 80fps, with DSLL, Ray-Tracing and instantaneous load times. As an inevitable result we've seen videogame price tags skyrocket and endless stories of grueling developer crunch, as the

people making these games are asked to produce more and more with the same, sometimes even less.

And for what? Beautiful worlds we can remark on to our friends for maybe the first few days before it all gets taken, once again, entirely for granted? Before the passive expectation sets in and the dazzle wears off? We're not primarily here for the worlds of these games; they're a useful setting for the bombastic action that tends to happen within them, but they aren't the real star, not the precise subject of our excited interest.



Ironically, it's smaller games like *Umarangi Generation* that show us what it looks like when the world is allowed to shine. In it, you play as a photographer tasked with recording various ephemera and vistas in a grim, neon, futuristic setting, where hipsters skate and throw up tags as giant squids and robots trade laser fire over the horizon. It's a game which fills its world, like its AAA contemporaries, with tons of stuff to see. But unlike these games, *Umarangi* doesn't want you to miss a thing. Your mode of interaction is not a gun or a sword but a camera. Your purpose is to observe, both from afar and right up close, this vibrant and intricate space. Your goal is to uncover all of its curious, exciting, clever and funny little details.

Though *Umarangi* has a bonus timer and a check-list of items to photograph (holdovers from games like *Jet Set Radio* which it knowingly pays homage to), it also encourages players to explore and experiment. It gives us an ever-expanding assortment of lenses to play with, color-correction dials to tweak, and it saves all of our photos to the desktop, ready to upload and share online. A lesson I quickly absorbed while playing was that I should take my time with *Umarangi's* world. There's nothing preventing me from sitting in these spaces, from learning about what each one is for and what kind of people live

in and spend their time in them. It's hard to resist reading every last sign or billboard as you run around searching for perfect shots, impossible not to begin to recognize the characters who show up in subsequent levels, like the hot smoking guy, or the breakdancing roller-blade punk.

This is part of the pleasure of playing something which asks you to look, not just to act. Together with the game, the player also helps construct its space. Its presentation is thus a joint effort. The colors, the shapes and the layers are all laid out, patiently waiting to catch the player's eye; it's how each of us frames, captures and shares our impression of *Umurangi's* cyberpunk cities that fully completes the game's picture.

As technology continues to race ever-forward in the search of ever more impressive levels of fidelity, more detail and bigger production values, it remains important to continue, as the audience, to ask why. Games are not broad buckets of content but highly specific experiences. They guide us to engage with their worlds in specific ways towards necessarily specific ends. There will always be a place for the frivolous toy box or the adrenaline tapping shooter. And there is plenty to admire about seeing technology and art direction pushed to greater, more impressive heights.

But the act of looking in one direction means having to ignore another. *Umurangi* recognizes and works within this limitation. When we lift up the camera to our eye, we swap out the wide view for the confined and tightly focused one. *Umurangi's* loop bounces back and forth between the shifting and selective viewpoints of the photographer. It builds its worlds with bold shapes and high-contrast, fills it with parallax and depth; its design decisions are meant to draw our attention, with no pixel wasted, no object or detail that might, given the proper framing and context, allow the player to create something visually stunning and unique.

It's a piece of art which knows its purpose, and wastes no energy pushing beyond its limits. As the triple-A industry grows ever larger and more top-heavy, its organizations need to internalize these lessons (and its workers desperately need to unionize). Any art with confidence trusts its audience to look where we are guided, and doesn't fill the peripheries of our vision with sparkling emptiness churned out by exploited artists whose work we glide by, rarely ever stopping to look or to understand. 🙏





## Winter's Wind

*The year may end, but some things never do. You may not see them with your eyes, but when you look with your heart, you can.*

*—Dera, Tamako Market*

This year, too, has come to an end and now I feel the fall is not so green. Spotify lists, Christmas movies and holiday Muzak do more to weather the cypress needles than intermittent cold fronts in the sub tropics ever could. The autumn's departure may not mean the end of everything, but that it will return. And as the gentle wind beckons through the leaves I am reminded that ends are never punctual.

The swirl of golden leaves settles as debris, and I can't help but feel that we are in need of evergreen. For time diminishes the polemics of the past; all that once was green fades to brown. And if this tree is rotten, if it's invasive, if its leaves withered (scorched edges curled up thin), then it will meet winter all the same. When just decay remains, no one will remember how this trunk formed a bridge over the flooded trail floor and how you still splashed into the water. With shoes caked in mud I regret how many of our ends will also elude joy, revise progress.

If [death is inevitable](#) in *Outer Wilds*, then so is Timberhearth. [Memory](#) evokes the cozy glow of red and orange in the atmosphere, just campfires with an abundance of marshmallows; a drape of fireflies suspended on a chilly breeze the cooling flames of stellar fusion. It's as Fitzgerald wrote: "Life starts all over again when it gets crisp in the fall." And it is on Timberhearth, planet

of evergreen arbor, that [the postmodern apocalypse unfurls](#); that, despite our philosophizing, even the old growth forests that have always known green will wither in the dawning night.

But something remains after Timberhearth. Post-everything, a sky, not quite still, silently posits even such grand conclusions as the heat death of the universe are not ends unto themselves. Everything ends, everything returns, everything stays. In this, a lovely death, we can try again, try again, try again. 🍷

And again...

...and again...

...and again...



## Bizarre Banality

Take a walk around the residence in *Gone Home* and let me know if you see anything strange. I don't mean in terms of the contents, though. The house has all sorts of secrets in the form of hidden objects that reveal interesting things about the inhabitants. I mean in terms of the architecture.

The residence in *Gone Home* looks perfectly normal at first glance. I would even go so far as to say that it seems a little bit banal. Poke around the place and you'll discover all sorts of dated decorations like wainscoting and wallpaper. You'll see tons of tasteless tile and shaggy carpet. You'll find quite a few fixtures that look like they're from a different decade. In other words, the residence in *Gone Home* is no different from the hundreds of houses that you've probably been in before. Right? Well, not so much. Take in the details and I'm sure that you'll come to this conclusion. The residence in *Gone Home* is by no means banal. The building is actually bizarre.

You can break down the bizarre banality of the place into a couple of different categories. The first would have to be the building plan. The second is definitely the interior design. When you aren't really looking, these appear perfectly normal, but if you stop to think about the details, they seem pretty strange.

How about we start by discussing the building plan? This makes very little sense no matter how you slice up the stories.

The residence in *Gone Home* has a second story without a first floor. You might be wondering what I mean by this. The structure has a first floor, but the second story isn't actually on top of it. The majority of houses are basically just

really big boxes because everything above the first floor has to be supported by something. You can't have a hovering house. When it comes to the residence in *Gone Home*, the second story seems to be floating somewhere behind the first floor, though. You reach this part of the structure by going up a staircase in the foyer, but if you take a second to situate yourself in space when you get there, you'll notice that you aren't actually where you're supposed to be. The fact of the matter is that you're above and behind what amounts to the back wall of the building.

Walk up the staircase to the second story of the structure and you'll find a bunch of bedrooms. In terms of the architecture, the most interesting aspect of these would have to be the ceilings. The main bedroom has a skylight. The guest bedrooms have walls that angle inward above the point at which they meet the rafters. Why are these features interesting? They suggest that nothing could be above them. You can't have a skylight which isn't built into a roof. You also can't have a story above what amounts to an attic. The residence in *Gone Home* on the other hand has a third floor that you access by going up a ladder behind the main bedroom. This part of the building seems even more strange when you stop to think about the turrets. These would have to be supported by something on the second story.

I could say more about the building plan, but you can probably see where I'm going with this by now, so let's just talk a little bit about the interior design. This hardly holds together any better.



The doors and windows of the building are completely out of proportion with almost everything else in the structure. They're huge. When you place these in relation to the walls, you can definitely appreciate this phenomenon, but if you compare the doors and windows to some of the contents, you'll see

the degree to which they're distorted. In my personal opinion, the desks and chairs provide the best examples. These are totally out of whack in terms of size and scale. Take a look at them and you'll soon see what I mean. The problem of proportion seems even more strange when you stop to think about the light switches and electrical outlets. These are absolutely massive. They take up a lot more than their fair share of wall space. When it comes to the contents, they seem to be about the same size as most of the books and magazines.

The structure has a lot of strange features. The doors for example are double hinged, so they open in both directions. I really can't think of too many houses that have this particular feature. You can occasionally find these opening onto a deck or patio, but I've never heard of doors with double hinges being used in every single room of a house. The heating and ventilation system is pretty strange, too. Spend a while exploring the structure and you'll soon find yourself in the basement. Take a look at the water boiler. You can find steam radiators in most of the rooms, but the residence in *Gone Home* seems to be heated by forced air. The ceiling of the basement is covered with ducts. You can see vents on every floor. The heating system is complicated even further by the fireplaces. Where exactly are the chimneys?

They seem banal at first glance, but the building plan and interior design of the residence in *Gone Home* are actually bizarre. What exactly is the deal with this? The answer is more simple than it seems.

The structure doesn't exist in the real world. The banality makes it seem like a real place, but this bizarre building is just a game world. This has an important implication. Since it has no physical existence, the building isn't actually bound by the laws of physics. This means that you can have a second story without a first floor. This means that you can have doors and windows that are completely out of proportion with everything around them, too. You don't tend to notice these quirks because the experience of being in the game world is the only thing which really matters. You might call them concessions. What does it matter if the building is structurally sound? Who wants to get stuck behind a door that only opens in one direction? The most important thing is that you're able to move around the place in a way that doesn't detract from the experience of being there in the first place. The details have to contribute to this, but they don't actually need to make any sense. 🍷





This video is unavailable.

## Why I'm Leaving YouTube

It was a random, inconsequential moment on Twitter a little over five years ago that resulted in me getting back into Transformers toy collecting after more than a decade away. Someone asked “What’s your favorite action figure?” and after some thought I went and got my Alternators Grimlock out of my closet to snap a few photos. Which lead to me looking up YouTube videos on how to transform the thing because, if you’re at all familiar with Alternators Grimlock, you know how tough it is to remember what to do with those fucking arms when you haven’t touched the thing in several years. Anyway the process of finding one toy video on YouTube lead to finding another. And another. And before long I was subscribed to several toy channels and watching video reviews daily – to the point where I decided to try making toy videos myself.

After almost five years I’ve uploaded hundreds of videos, developed a small but pleasant community, branched out into doing custom paint work and have even been told by more than a few people that some of my videos were a big help to them when they had figures with problematic joints or missing parts. It’s a fantastic feeling and I love being able to have a sort of sub-hobby for my hobby. But here’s the thing: pretty much every step of the way, YouTube has been actively trying to make my – and many other small channels’ – experience as miserable as possible. I’ve finally had enough.

YouTube being shit (especially to channels that are run by anyone other than cis white guys with extremist views and tedious opinions about *Star Wars*) isn’t a revelation or anything, but their most recent fuck-up, which I’ll get into shortly, has made me realize that there’s always going to be *something*. And I’m

just so, so tired of having to go through the bi-annual ritual of trying to decide if I really want to stick around every time they try to “fix” something.

Okay, so, the recent thing. Right. Some of you may remember (but it’s okay if you don’t because it was like 30 years ago, back in 2018) that in order to teach one of their biggest and shittiest channels a lesson about why it’s wrong to film and upload a dead body found in Japan’s Aokigahara forest, YouTube decided to change the requirements for a channel to be monetized and thus make it more difficult for small channels to earn any kind of money. Makes perfect sense, right? Anyway they did that ridiculous thing about two years ago and then, just this past month, updated their Terms of Service with this little gem (this is a direct quote by the way): “YouTube has the right to monetize all content on the platform and ads may appear on videos from channels not in the YouTube Partner Program.” In other words they can still monetize and profit from popular videos belonging to channels that aren’t able to do so themselves. They are actively stealing money from creators that they prevented from earning money in the first place.

Whether or not this atrocity affects my channel, I’m still not sure. I’ve been able to monetize for a while now, even though my ability to do so was ripped away because of that 2018 bullshit. I ended up hitting their absurd goals, but I made the conscious choice to avoid monetization because 1) ads are annoying and 2) I don’t *want* to earn those assholes any extra money. It’s tough not to imagine YouTube deciding to slap ads on some of my videos in the future without so much as a heads-up, or an option to say no. So I’m calling it quits.

Not because I’m so opposed to having my videos monetized against my will (though I am opposed to it) and not necessarily as a way of protesting this disgusting mistreatment and straight-up robbery of small channels (though that is a factor), but because I can’t trust the platform any longer. I can’t trust YouTube not to do something shitty and awful again in another few months. I can’t trust them to do anything about the extremely awful channels that continue to foster bigotry and dangerous conspiracy theories – to say nothing of the channels that depict animal cruelty for clicks (please don’t look it up). I can’t trust them to ever do right by marginalized creators, in any capacity.

I’m just so fucking tired of it all. To the point that even though it means saying goodbye to a five year long passion project and leaving a handful of nice fellow toy nerds behind, I’m walking away. It’s going to happen sooner or later, because YouTube is never going to get better, so I’d rather it be now because it’s only going to get more difficult with time.

I don’t have anything clever to add as a closing argument or statement. YouTube is awful and the people who make its policies are awful. So fuck ‘em. 🍑

## **How'd you get started with illustration and design?**

Like most artists, I have been drawing since I was a little kid and would stack up piles of drawings – mostly of monsters and random comics. I would always doodle in class and when we began playing RPGs, I put almost all my energy into drawing campaign maps, character sheets and art for our games. I began freelancing as an illustrator quite early and have been involved in a bunch of Swedish RPGs over the years, making maps at first but then gradually moving over to making more graphic design, which I absolutely love. I work as an art director full time by day, so this is really what I do for a living. But while the stuff I create on my day job is a bit more traditional, the RPG projects I'm involved with are perfect opportunities to just go wild and push my own limits.

**I'm no artist, but I drew a lot of monsters as a kid. My gran would always ask, "Why don't you ever draw anything nice?" I never had a good answer for her. Anyway, why don't you ever draw anything nice?**

Haha, I do recognize that. I haven't thought about it too much to be honest but I guess the answer is; nice is boring. If I had to choose between drawing a sword-wielding horned skeleton-demon or a beautiful park at sunset I would draw the horns first. I guess I've always liked monsters and horror imagery, being exposed to that aesthetic my entire childhood from movies, comics, videogames and internet horror stories. Plus, skulls and monsters never go out of style.

**How did *Mörk Borg* come about?**

Pelle and I had made a small Swedish horror game called Barkhäxan and though it was just a simple print on demand

booklet (only in Swedish) we enjoyed working together and the game was pretty well received. Then, Pelle mentioned wanting to do something more artsy and punk-zine-like with another one of his minimalistic games and I immediately agreed to join in a collaboration. That became *Mörk Borg*. At first, we expected it to be yet another print on demand zine, and we designed and wrote the game in that style and with that mindset. But after talking to Free League Publishing about maybe running a Kickstarter for a proper hardcover book, it just expanded into the weird thing it is today.

We kept the DIY approach but added every high-end book printing technique we could imagine (and afford). Most of all, we had a ton of fun doing it and it was more of an experiment in how out there we could make the game and get away with it, than anything intended to really work on a larger scale. We never once sat down and thought to ourselves “will this be marketable” or “this has never been done so we probably shouldn’t do it.” The idea was to just build this wonky, upside-down boat and see if it would float or just explode. Never in a billion years did we expect it to get the attention it did. It’s wild!

**A lot of your work embraces bright color (particularly yellow for *Mörk Borg*) that seems pleasingly at odds with your otherwise doomy vibes. Can you talk a bit about how you use color?**

I think there are several reasons for that. First of all, it’s a lot of fun to go all-in with the colors and I kind of like it when the art obnoxiously screams in your face. Like, nothing is subtle about it. Much like the music it’s inspired by. I also think it goes hand in hand with the whole DIY punk-like vibe of *Mörk Borg*, the unapologetic attitude and turned-to-eleven style. Much like us and the game, the art never takes itself too seriously, there’s no pretension and despite (or because)

of how dark and hopeless the world gets, humor will always be an important part of the game. We want to laugh while our characters wither to dust. That's the escapism I guess, laughing at our avatars' misery. It's just dark humor.

Another reason is simply that we wanted the book to pop on the shelf. As I was sort of sketching the first design ideas for this I had a look at my RPG shelf and realized almost all the spines are either black, dark blue, dark red, brown or similar. A fluorescent, neon yellow book would be impossible to miss. You can't hide *Mörk Borg* on your shelf. Especially not when it's also glowing in the dark.

But not everyone likes it. I know a few people who have commented that "bright colors aren't metal in the slightest," and my only response to that is: well obviously it is.

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

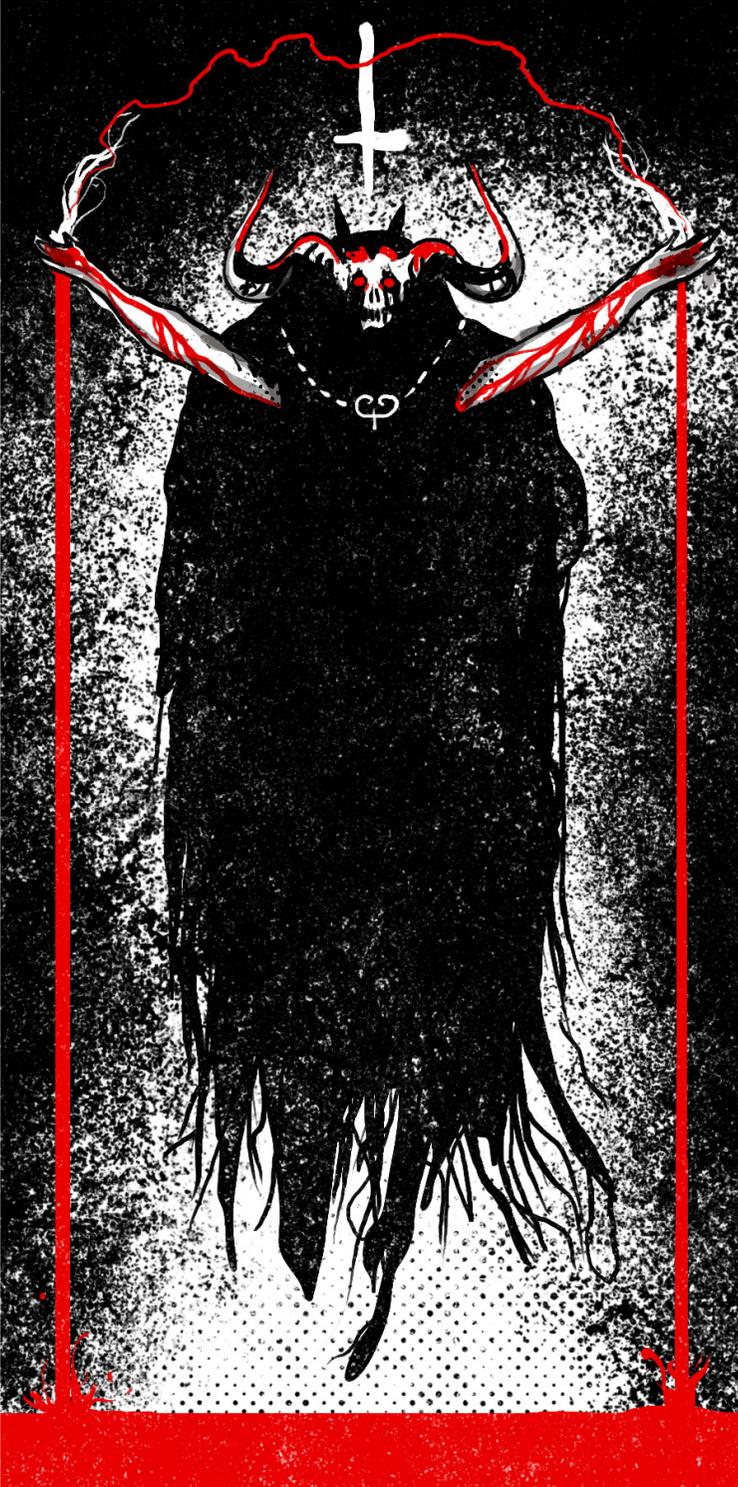
If anything I'd hope people would be inspired to experiment with breaking the rules of art and design. There's plenty of good reasons to follow a lot of them, but the really interesting things happen when you start bending the rules and norms. Also, don't be afraid to paint outside the lines or leave it looking a bit rough around the edges. I think way too many artists stress about perfecting the final pixels when perhaps letting the piece run wild for a bit would elevate it into something unexpected and new. I rarely end up with the image I had in my mind when I begin drawing but will constantly allow the artwork to surprise me and head in its own direction. Start with a vague idea, then just see where it takes you I guess.

\* \* \*

Follow Johan on [Instagram](#). Learn more about [Mörk Borg](#) at the official site. 



Blood Drenched Skeleton



Demon



Ashen Hermit



Putrescence Regnant

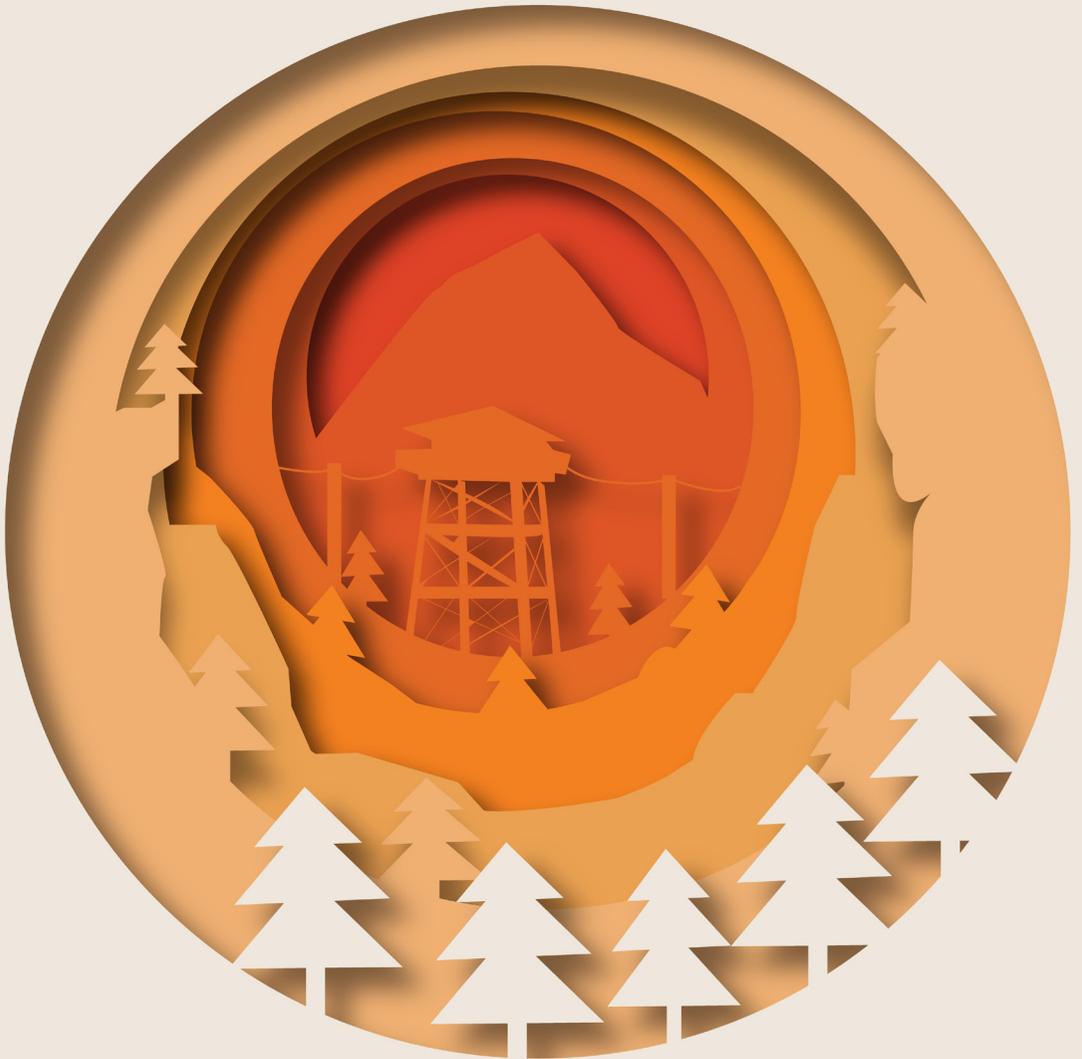


Combat Wheelchair



Tenebrous Reliquary

# WHO FIREWATCHES THE FIREWATCHERS?



By Caroline Delbert



The first thing that happens in *Firewatch* is that Campo Santo tells you how shitty Henry is. “Henry is not a blank slate, not an innocent receiving the call to adventure, not an established hero and not a powerful antihero either,” Emily Short wrote in 2016. “He is a person composed more of weaknesses than of strengths, and one who has routinely avoided taking responsibility up to this point.”

With his wife’s hopeless illness looming in his pessimistic imagination, Henry has taken a summer job in a fire lookout. He travels to Shoshone National Forest, which is not only real but also the first national forest established in the United States. After a days-long hike to his fire lookout tower, Henry settles in and begins to do errands at the behest of his supervisor Delilah. The pastoral normalcy doesn’t last.

“The thing that I liked was the whole wandering around and seeing nature

thing, and the game is very pretty,” my friend Marshall (a pseudonym) tells me. “And there’s the whole thing with the dead kid, and the strange pseudo conspiracy theory, but I was pretty sure that wasn’t really likely to happen.” It’s been about a year since his first shifts in a California fire lookout. I’ve known Marshall a long time, and when I learned he wanted to become a lookout volunteer after playing *Firewatch*, I had questions.

\* \* \*

Cal Fire is the state government department that oversees all of California’s fire action, from prevention and education to firefighting. They say the beginnings of fire control in the United States were in 19th century private sector and citizen concerns about the timber supply, a shortage of which could have crashed the economy almost singlehandedly.

“They were alarmed by newspaper accounts of a succession of conflagration fires that had burned millions of acres in the upper mid-West and by the continuing reports of massive timber destruction by homestead and lumber industry land clearing practices,” Cal Fire explains on their website. For the first time, white Americans had reached across the entire continent and found they did not, in fact, have infinite trees to take down.

Today, Idaho leads the states in percentage of land area dedicated to national forests at about 37%, but California is close behind at about 32%. Wyoming, where *Firewatch* takes place, is still high at about 18% national forest. With over 300,000 square miles of National Forest nationwide, that’s nearly 10% of the total surface area of the United States.

The goal to protect land and stanch runaway forest fires was noble enough 100 years ago, when many fire lookouts were originally built and put into service. Men employed by the government spent stretches of time living in remote areas without power, indoor plumbing or telephones, but many Americans didn’t have those technologies in their homes either. Lookouts used radio, telegraph and analog navigational equipment to pinpoint and report fires.

Now, technology has made leaps that would be unfathomable to those men, and wildfires are more destructive than ever before. Constant air travel means many eyes on the skies at all times.



Most National Forests use webcams, monitored by citizen volunteers who watch from their desktop computers at home or even algorithms that register dramatic changes.

NASA can observe emerging fires with satellite technologies: “polar orbiters and geostationary platforms” that form a blanket of daily data, combined with cameras as well as input from orbiting astronauts. In Australia, a system called *Aurora predicts* bushfires using data. And people around the world can track fire events in California, for example, by following the vibrant [@CAL\\_FIRE](#) Twitter account.

If this sounds like a typical story of automation replacing human jobs, it both is and isn’t. Funding was cut long ago for many staffed fire lookout programs, which lookout advocates say cost very little to begin with. “U.S. Forest Service seasonal lookouts make about \$16,000 per summer,” retired career fire official Michael Guerin wrote just a year ago in the *Los Angeles Times*. “By comparison, the valuable Boeing 747 Air Tanker often

seen dropping water and fire-retardant substances on California's devastating fires costs \$16,500 an hour to operate."

Like my friend Marshall, Guerin is now an unpaid volunteer fire watcher. "Each summer day we staff 11 towers in the Angeles, Cleveland and San Bernardino national forests," he wrote in 2019. "As I scan for 'smokes' I often gaze at the peaks that used to have staffed towers, and calculate how much more land we watchers could help protect."

Guerin's understanding matches the broader rationale for places that still hire paid fire lookout staff each season, the roughly four to five hottest and driest months. A Forest Service spokesperson told AP in 2018, "The biggest piece of this puzzle is to keep fires small, [a]nd the way to do that is to have someone who is vigilant and scanning."

In the AP story, reporter Keith Ridler wrote that fire lookouts began in earnest following a fire that began in Idaho,

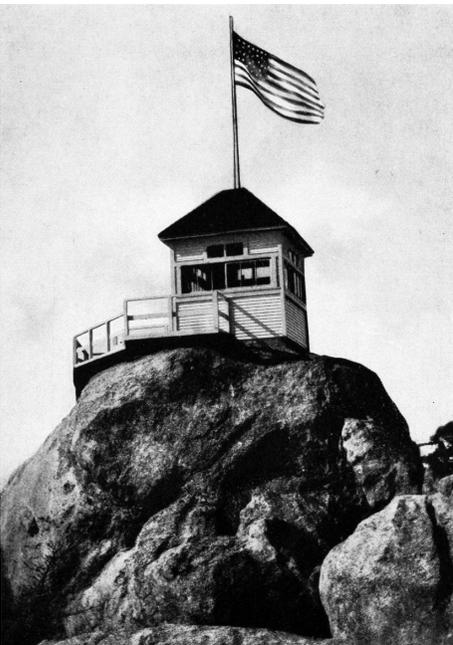
rolled *Katamari*-like into surrounding states, and killed a total of 87 people. But in response to 2020's escalating wildfires, the *Washington Post* wrote in September, "Not even 1910's 'Big Blowup' matches what is happening now."

The biggest year for staffed, paid lookouts came during the 1940s, Ridler writes, when about 5,000 lookout towers were operational, many built with public funds from Great Depression works programs. "Only about 400 lookouts remain, mostly in the West, after the Forest Service decided aircraft could replace them and destroyed many lookouts from the 1960s through 1980s rather than pay for needed repairs," Ridler concludes.

\* \* \*

The team that made *Firewatch* – Campo Santo, who Valve bought and seemed to fridge afterward – came from different successful projects. I tried many times to reach Campo Santo for this piece, but head writer Sean Vanaman has just been married *and* closed a new *Firewatch* movie deal, both in August. Vanaman came from Telltale Games and eventually had a team of seven workers and three contract workers on *Firewatch*.

Vanaman wasn't in absolute charge, but he *was* the one who grew up in Wyoming, along with lead designer Nels Anderson. If Vanaman is 36 today, his family moved to Wyoming when he was 9, so in about 1993. He traveled to Shoshone National Forest for childhood trips. There, he saw



fire lookout towers, likely some that still operated at the time and some that were defunct, used as vacation rentals, or open as historic or educational sites.

Shoshone's real-life Clay Butte lookout tower is an educational site most years, but was closed for the 2020 season. All fire lookout towers are different - biologist and enthusiast Terry Thomas pointed out in an August piece about Clay Butte that every tower was built to serve its own terrain, for example, and varying local needs. Other towers in Shoshone have their lower steps removed so visitors can't continue to climb into them.

"I think I just saw one once, and it just stuck with me. It was evocative, and I could sketch it on a napkin and go to this place on this mountain," Vanaman told the *Billings Gazette* in 2016. It's easy to trace that effect through to *Firewatch's* stark promotional art and splash screens, where

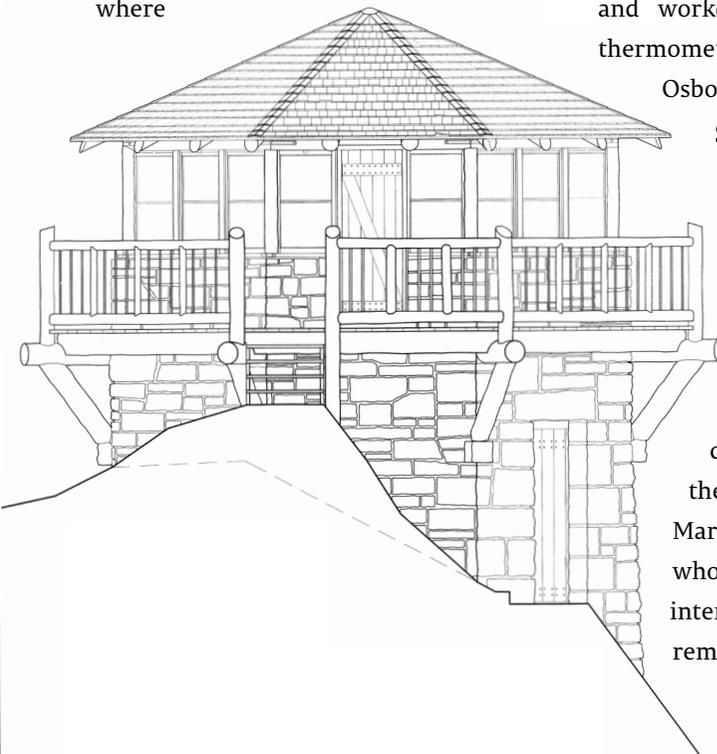
a silhouetted tower stands against an empty sky of sunset colors.

Into that, Anderson drew experiences from a 2001 fire to help make the game's escalating climactic fire feel harrowing and real. With the setting and careful details, both men told the *Billings Gazette* that the game they made felt like Wyoming to them both, not just a genericized National Forest. "Hopefully we make good on all the Wyomingness," Vanaman and Anderson told Wyoming Public Media in 2014.

Vanaman has said choosing the 1980s let him lean on radios instead of cell phones, avoiding a narrative short circuit where Henry would just Google his new supervisor Delilah. But by the 1980s, Shoshone's towers were already mostly empty or, like Clay Butte, open to the public as de facto working museums. Inside working towers, volunteers and workers still use radios, analog thermometers and the cauldron-shaped Osborne mechanism seen in the game.

\*\*\*

*Firewatch's* Henry is running from his life, but even in Shoshone, he ends up craving Delilah's companionship even just over the two-way radio. My friend Marshall is something of a loner who has grown more and more interested in more and more remote things. He has a normal



day job but spends as much time as possible outside, hiking and climbing things at a far faster clip than most other hikers.

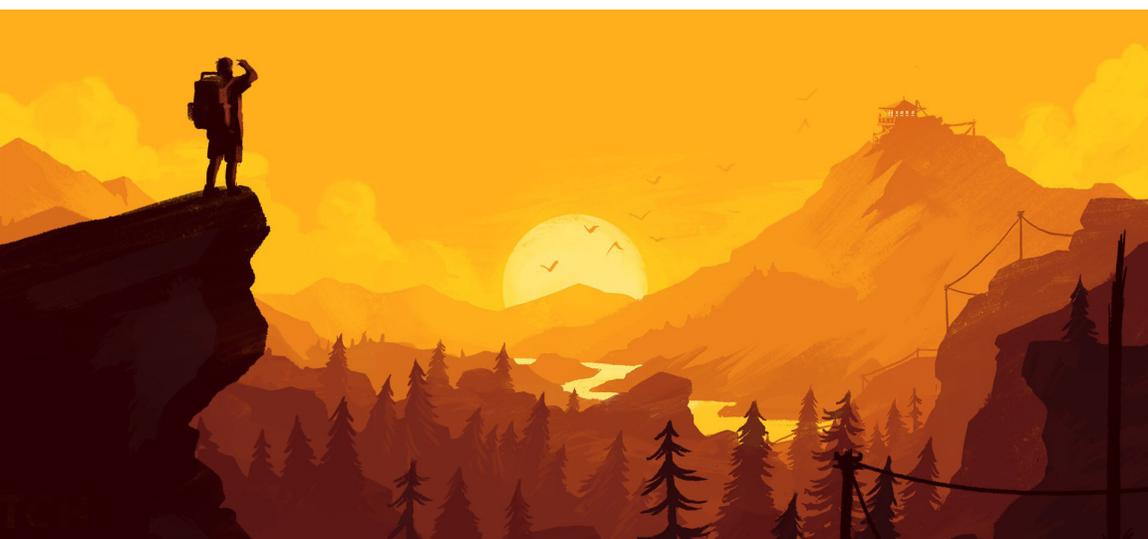
When he first played the game a couple years after its release, Marshall liked how the game showed such an outdoorsy job in a beautiful setting. For an avid hiker who prefers his own company anyway, what isn't to like? It seemed like a good pretense to hike somewhere and then stay there for a while. But with a regular, full-time job, Marshall couldn't pick up for four or five months a year, even if paid fire lookout positions still existed in his part of California. "I thought it was something where you had to quit your job and get sent to the wilderness, *Firewatch* style," he says.

Then, on a trip to nearby Baja, Marshall met someone who said she had recently started working as a fire lookout volunteer: "[O]ne of the women on the trip had been doing it for two or three years and said, 'You just do a few days of training and they just put you up the tower.'"

Her commitment was for a weekend at a time, not a season. And because of the unique qualities of the state of California, Marshall didn't even have to go far to find an active lookout where he could volunteer.

"If you start a fire in the wilderness in Alaska, it's like *Firewatch*," he says, meaning in an extremely remote area where people must call in outside firefighters. (Dr. Joel Fleischman even visits a fire lookout to treat a troubled park ranger in an episode of *Northern Exposure*.) The forest damage may be the same, but a fire in Alaska must usually travel much further before it runs into a settlement. In California, any wildfire becomes a human population problem.

"[Fires] got right up to the edge of Idyllwild, the only significant mountain settlement in the [San Jacinto Mountains], and driving up there the first time after the fires it was an absolute moonscape," Marshall says. "Seeing how close it got and how much it destroyed was a motivating factor, because I really like the area and don't want it to burn down."



I joke to him that southern California sounds like a full real-life geophysical diagram - I promise you know the one, usually a hand-drawn illustration in a textbook where you see a mountain, a hill, a butte, and a mesa; an ocean, a delta, a river, a stream and a lake; all labeled and crammed into one square mile of landscape. Yes, Marshall confirms, he *has* hiked in the snow and gone to the beach on the same day.

Because of its high population and increasingly frequent wildfires, California leads the way in multidimensional fire prevention and reporting. If Marshall ever does see a fire he must report, that radio call triggers a reaction that could involve bringing in helicopters to pinpoint the fire and planes to drop water onto it, for example. Yes, cameras and automation do a great job, but the human eye is still a valuable tool, especially when people like Marshall volunteer for the job and cost very little to house.

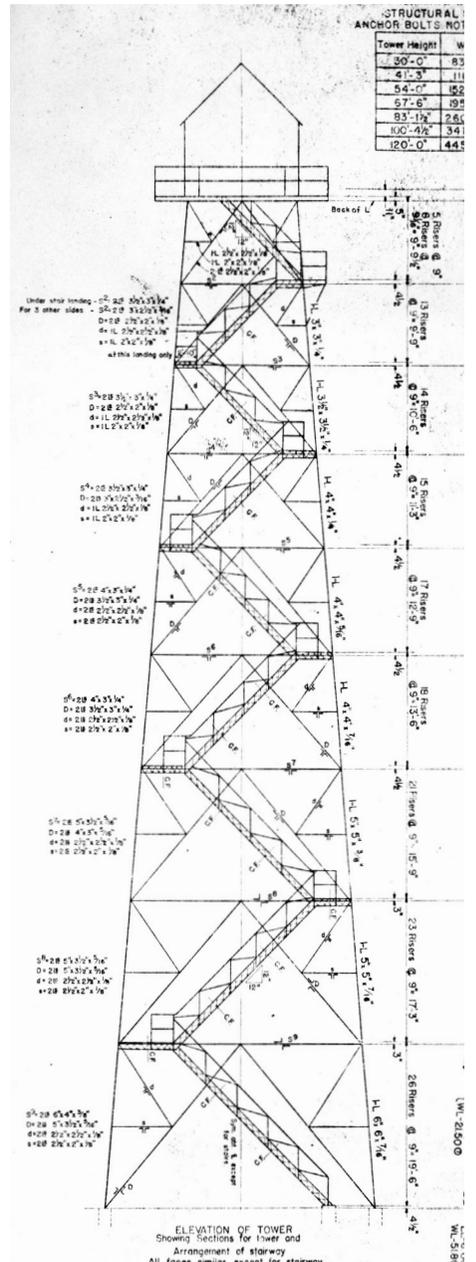
\* \* \*

Sean Vanaman has said he imagines the entire game area being about a square mile. Henry must hike for a couple of days straight to reach his tower, then he basically runs around the area nonstop. I wondered aloud to Marshall that this would make Henry actually a pretty terrible fire lookout, right?

“If you’re not in the tower, you can’t see what’s going on,” Marshall says at first. “The base station for the radio

allows for it to function up to half a mile or something like that. The furthest I’ve ever been with the radio is down to the base of the tower, so like 1,000 feet, and even there it starts to get a little sketchy. The radio’s probably also older than me.”

But Henry’s timeframe, chosen for its lack of some technologies, could account for a difference in firewatching style as



well. “The reason he spends a lot of time out of the tower is he’s trying to figure out what’s on fire and where,” Marshall muses. “If you don’t have a direct line to a helicopter pad, you’d probably be the person to do that.”

This is also where the Osborne Fire Finder comes in. It’s based on some older mechanisms but was invented in its complete, exigent form by W.B. Osborne in 1915. When a firewatcher spots a smoke, they can use the Osborne to get a reading they can tell to firefighters over the radio. No new Osbornes have been manufactured for decades – not even parts! – leading to experimental limited runs of Osborne lookalikes to replace instruments that could, at their oldest, be over 100 years old. And that’s not the only low-tech task on a fire lookout’s checklist.

“There’s no power to the tower and there’s no water, so the only thing we’re running on batteries is the radio,”

Marshall says. “The radio’s hooked into the emergency alert system. Everything else is still manual: we take the temperature and wind direction and it’s all using little [non-powered] machines. The Osborne’s what you use for sighting smokes when you see them. On a really clear day, I can see like 150 miles off.”

In the tower, he measures and logs the air temperature and humidity. “Temperature’s a lot of it, yes, but if it gets much hotter and drier really fast, that indicates the Santa Anas,” Marshall explains, referring to a local wind current from the desert that can worsen fire risk and rapidly accelerate existing fires.

Is Henry’s days-long hike true to life? It probably is in some more remote locations. Even so, to get to his tower in densely populated California, Marshall still drives up a mountain. “I was intending to hike it each time which is six miles each way,” he says. But his plans changed when he saw that other park





staff were driving up in “some large-looking Jeep thing,” and he took the drive up a shallow fire trail in a regular consumer car: “I turned up on the first day and I was planning to leave my car at the base of the mountain. Instead, I made it all the way.”

Packing a car is different than planning to hike with a pack, but he still has to carry everything up the stairs, and there’s still no power or plumbing. In the game, Henry’s tower is filled with canned goods, a portable stove, and other minor amenities. “The stuff that’s there is mostly emergency rations,” Marshall says. “I usually bring a 4-gallon thing of water and enough to feed me throughout the course of a day, or night if I’m staying overnight, and enough clothing for 20 degrees in either direction because you never know. Hiking poles, waterproof shoes, I bring a little more than when I go backpacking.”

\* \* \*

*The Atlantic’s David Sims* reviewed *Firewatch* in 2016. “[M]ore than anything, *Firewatch* is a game that explores the state of being alone, both psychologically and physically,” Sims wrote. “You hang on your walkie-talkie conversations with Delilah, mostly small talk and technical information, because staving off silence feels so important.”

Indeed, the game ultimately falls into dynamics of pairs: Henry and Delilah; two rambunctious teen visitors; and a former firewatcher and his young son. But isolation, maybe in fact *heightened* by the one-on-one dynamics, is a strong theme in the game. *Firewatch* director Jake Rodkin talked with *Paste* in 2016 about the game’s cinematic influences.

“[W]hen we started talking about the setting of the lookout tower and being out alone in the woods and then something strange happened, the easiest way that we were able to explain it to people was looking at other isolationist, paranoid stories, like maybe *The Shining* or *Moon* by Duncan Jones, of course,”

Rodkin said. Characters feel trapped as well as disoriented.

“[I]n the middle of nowhere [...] when things start happening that no one else can quite vouch for, it’s just working them into thinking...you know, you don’t know what’s going on, you don’t know what’s happening to you,” he continued. “The image of a fire lookout tower in the wilderness and the idea of being a person out alone, out in the middle of Wyoming and what that could mean...being out alone in nature is really beautiful, but also you’re out in the middle of nowhere with no people around, and what does that mean[?]”

Designer and composer Chris Remo said similar things in a 2017 interview with *Designing Sound* about scoring the game. “Henry is very isolated, and we wanted the soundscape of the game to reflect that,” he said. “I also think it’s striking how few quiet spaces are left in our lives; most of us, certainly myself included, are surrounded by sound of some kind fairly constantly, and when you go out into these massive wilderness areas, it can be amazing how quiet it can be.”

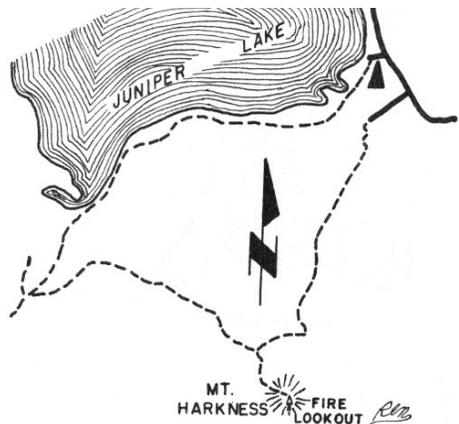
\* \* \*

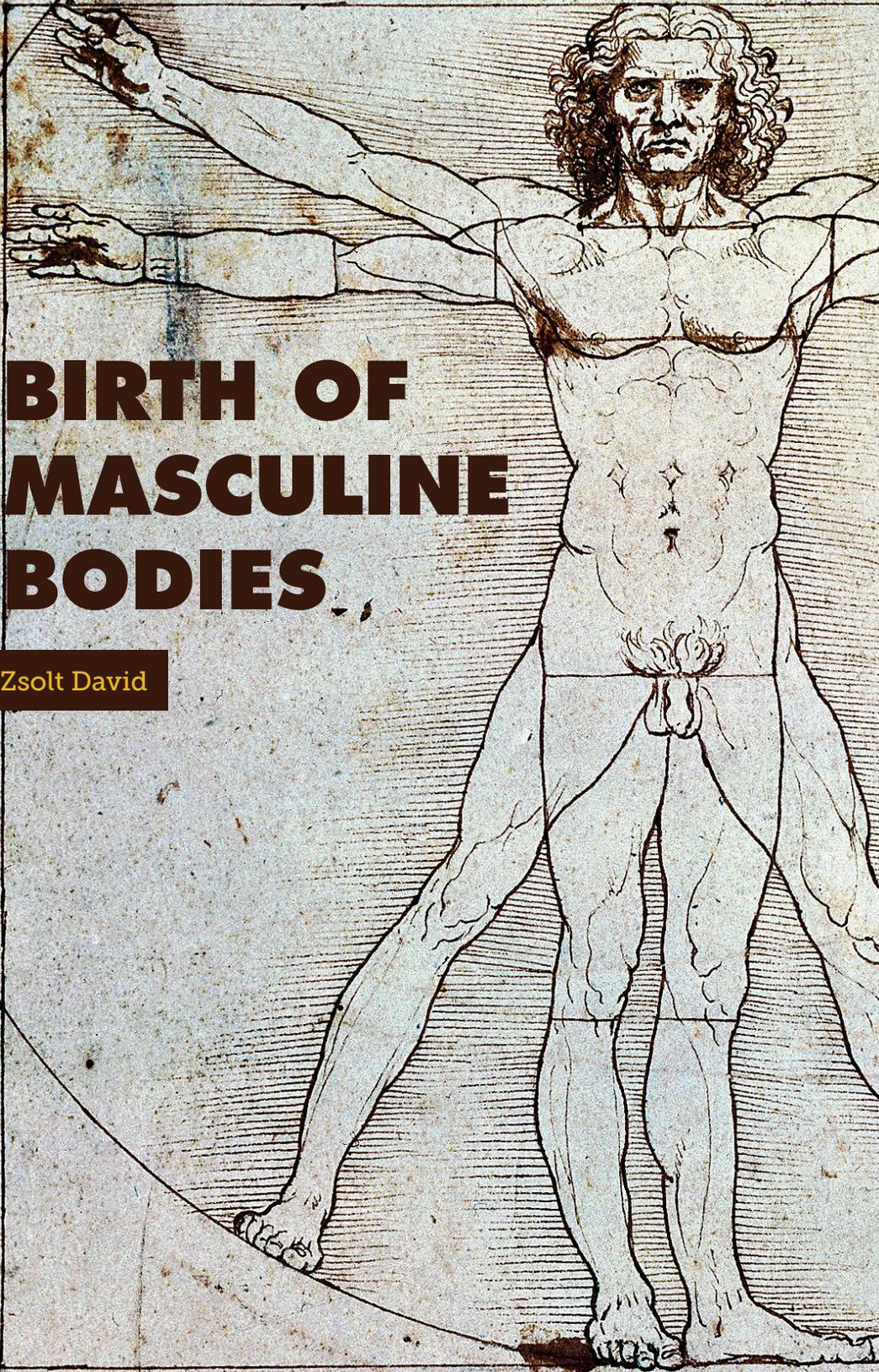
For what it’s worth, Marshall really likes the calm and quiet in the tower. Honestly, if you were designing a structured activity for someone like him, this is very close to the Platonic ideal. Has he encountered any puzzling clues or mystery beeps, I ask? “I did find a crashed

plane up there,” he says, but not a fresh one or a *Lost*-like drug trove or anything. It’s chill, and that’s what he wanted when he signed up.

“If the weather changes drastically from morning to afternoon, you’re supposed to call that in,” he says. “But the rule is you don’t want to bother dispatch.” He missed the nearby Apple fire by one shift, which would have been cause to bother dispatch after all. “I’m a little surprised by how manual and imprecise the job is compared to how much access they have to official channels,” he says. “When we talk, everyone that’s related to fire of any kind over a 100 mile radius hears us. It’s just a bunch of random people who go up to the tower and hang out alone.”

Finally, we talk about the end of the game. The story gets very dark, which makes for a curious path to seeking out a fire lookout gig. Marshall and I agree that we think the climactic event was an accident, but that’s also not really the point for him. “It’s not something super conclusive but I liked that about it,” Marshall says. “I like not knowing stuff.” 🍵





# BIRTH OF MASCULINE BODIES.

Zsolt David



**F**eed to grow until it makes them nauseous; grow to weigh them down so they can barely walk; burst through their transformed body once it can transform no more: birth – what a wonderful thing! Like ejecting a part of society’s body in a public hanging. Applaud life, applaud for what it brings to the onlookers! Celebrate blood, puke, excrement and the violent display of them to the perpetuation of a system that brings more and more of it.

To come into life is to come into being. The formation of the self is mythologized, systematized and celebrated throughout history, including the violence it does to the body. Whose body? A mother’s body, a woman’s body, bringing forth life from a place unknown in blood and feces to be elevated and be repulsed by it. Analogies selectively mythologize this body to create systems and according to systems, what we may call values to label these bodies sacred and profane in cultures with Christian history.

Videogames draw on these mythologies to create life. From the unknown, players

come into being to fill in the shoes of a character. They slowly learn to use the character’s limbs to a direction of taking full control over their body. This remains an unfulfilled direction, since characters regain control in cinematics and conversations. Players burst into life to an unfamiliar body, then look at it from afar to regain control over it only to lose it again. Through this back and forth, we can drive them off cliffs to respawn, stuff them with food and drinks and make them run without ever having to rest. Player characters are inhabitable and uninhabitable, controllable and uncontrollable, destructible and indestructible at once. Violence strings these contradictory notions together.

We come into being as a character shaped after ourselves and as an imagined one in relation to this self. We see this self from one viewpoint to another that only leaves the point of view itself intact. Another back and forth that allows us to imagine ourselves as ourselves and not ourselves as we destroy selves. It’s about living, not-living and reliving this

simulated presence with a joystick at hand that grants control. The controller gives joy through control which is eroded once the player gives themselves over to joy. Strokes of control become reversed to give way to the controlling grasp of joy. Players penetrate and are penetrated through this phallic imagery of the joystick that's greeted with acceptance and refusal, repression and disinhibition to imagine and unimagine selves.

Inception emerges in *Assassin's Creed II* with a birth scene. The camera focuses on a newborn baby boy and prompts players to press buttons to move parts of its body. Once they do, a scream comes forth as a signal of life. The gendered roles of mother and father in this scene are unremarkable. What's interesting is the game's references to a male body. Players must move the baby's arms, legs and head with icons alluding to these body parts and texts describing them as such. There's a distinction, however, between an armed and empty hand. Babies are

born violent in *Assassin's Creed II*. Does birth make them violent, are men born violent, is violence inherent to humanity? A press of a button corresponds with a body part by making it move. What happens between the movement and the button press? Where does violence come from? Are we really in control of their body parts like the text suggests?

In the following scenes, we inhabit a grown man called Ezio Auditore. A street-fighting scene teaches how we can control him. New texts appear to describe the button layout, but the corresponding icons remain the same as in the birth scene. This reinforces that we control the same character. We can punch bodies and gently push them aside. If we hold down some buttons, new actions relating to bodies appear. Some of these act on bodies, while others react to them, like the counter move. The game is concerned with bodies and how we engage with them. A text says what they do while the icons remain unchanged. If



we press the corresponding buttons, Ezio carries out an action far more intricate than it is described and implied. Some of these actions launch unconstrained attacks, while others repress them to strike at the right moment for a decisive action. Repression and release is the game's modus operandi. Not senseless but directed violence is the creed assassins have. This meticulous execution is constrained and unconstrained at once as blood spills everywhere from stabbing bodies with an enormous needle.

Through this restrained pose, Ezio is modeled according to contemporary ideals: he's slim and muscular. Running and climbing rooftops day and night can do this to the body. The birth scene implies a holistic ideal of coming into life to which all buttons must be pressed. Yet, Ezio and the assassins engage in restraint that emerges in button use as well. We should hold down one button and press another corresponding with the counter action to be most effective at killing. Running and climbing similarly requires holding down two buttons to barely use the others.

Bodies imply perfection, but are inhibited and restrained. It follows the code of priests, who preach restraint but their code controls modes of engagement in relation to what it restrains via repression and release. "Nothing is true, everything is permitted" is the phrase assassins meditate on. If truth equals something that is not, then this nothing can only affirm nothing. The second part of this aphorism encapsulates a contradiction as well, because if everything is permitted

then they wouldn't have to think about how to carry out murder. Assassins calculate and practice violence while thinking about bringing peace. These contradictions foster resentment and come forth in forms of violence that's prohibited and encouraged at once. They carry out murder with a concealed blade but put as much force into it as they can by leaping at their victims from rooftops. Murder is constrained and unconstrained at once. It unshackles resentment with the act itself and reinserts it by the way it's carried out. This brings the assassins close and afar to this code and its subjects. Bodies are distant and close, alien and familiar. The self comes forth and recedes by being repulsed by itself and the shell that contains it. They look at other bodies to differentiate themselves from and strive towards them. Opposition emerges in themselves and towards others. Different bodies' difference reminds them of themselves and not-themselves which brings forth admiration and repulsion.

A woman's body represents this through the assassin's code that makes them appear both constrained and unconstrained. They're constrained by their body that makes them unconstrained from the assassin's code that constrains while purporting unconstraints. This code evokes admiration for its constraints that makes women's unconstraints reviled while at the same time it brings forth revulsion for its constraints that makes women's unconstraints admired. Difference between bodies make men and women appear constrained and

unconstrained depending on a code that itself states this difference. The code's tautological imperative states the truth that can only stand if the self strips itself from all relations outside this code. It's to deny life itself which is only possible by approximation of murder. Birth stands in opposition of this less so because it represents life itself, and more so for its uncontrolled form. A women's body is thus seen as the penultimate manifestation of uncontrol that must be brought under control to prevent it from metastasizing uncontrol. But it can only be carried out by approximations, such as repression that tries to keep spreading uncontrol under control but instead transforms and conceals it, and murder that aims to stop uncontrol but serves as an admission for loss of control.

Labeling this mode the assassin's creed inscribes as contradictory and paradoxical doesn't quite capture the concurrency of alienation and familiarity towards one's own body. *Assassin's Creed II* puts us in

the shoes of Desmond Miles who inhabits Ezio Auditore's avatar through the so-called Animus machine. An exterior facilitates this inhabitation made out of ones and zeroes. It's a code that reframes the concept of avatar to that of analogy to emphasize the constructed nature of Ezio's world and body. This construction needs synchronizations because its code is unstable which is carried out by Desmond taking breaks because inhabiting this avatar takes a toll on his body. A virtual avatar thus encapsulates an idealized version of this ideology, whose users can enter and leave bodies at will to fight imagined battles between factions ever-present and invisible who operate through violence of repression and disinhibition. But this imagined world is marred by repulsive bodily fluids, as Desmond becomes corrupted by the so-called bleeding effect. Idealizing and being repulsed by one's own body thus remains a never-ending fight that brings ruin to the self and selves within and around it. 🇺



A man in a blue shirt is seen from behind, looking into a fenced-in pen. Two piglets are in the pen; one is in the foreground, and another is slightly behind it. A blue wheelbarrow is on the ground. In the background, there is a large, corrugated metal water tower and a barn with a red roof. The scene is set in a rural farm environment.

By Stu Horvath, with David Shimomura

**ADIOS, FAREWELL,  
GOODBYE, GOOD LUCK,  
SO LONG**



This series of articles is made possible through the generous sponsorship of Epic's Unreal Engine 4. While Epic puts us in touch with our subjects, they have no input or approval in the final story.

You can be forgiven if you see the short synopsis of *Adios* on Steam and think it is a horror game. “A pig farmer decides he no longer wants to dispose of bodies for the mob. What follows is a discussion between him and his would-be killer.” Considering the last time I visited a pig farm in fiction was in *Hannibal*, I understand why you’d brace for the worst.

“We talk a lot about ‘horror games,’ and I’ve always liked horror because it’s the only game genre where everyone on the team knows exactly what kind of emotions the team is going for,” says Doc Burford, director and writer of the game, and founder of Mischief, the studio developing it. “My design work is all about trying to capture emotion, so *Paratopic* was a horror game, and *Adios* is a melancholy game. Narratively, it’s a game about a pig farmer deciding he doesn’t want to dispose of bodies for the mob anymore; it’s a character study, a way of looking at a person and seeing who he is and how he reacts to things, fleshing him out both in the things the player can do and the way other people respond to him. *Adios* is a melancholy game.”

That idea of “melancholy” is penetrating. It isn’t a game about the mob, not really. Certainly not the way *The Godfather* or *Goodfellas* are, with characters discussing meatballs in the same breath as Sal potentially sleeping with the fishes. Nor is it a crime game. Well, except for the feeding people to pigs part.

“I don’t think I’ve ever encountered a mob story like this. I use the mob more as a means of creating tension; one man has to kill another man, but he doesn’t want to. The two of you are arguing about whether or not he has to, at least at first,” says Burford. “When I studied mob film back in school, a lot of what we watched really deals with the crimes and the complications that come from those crimes; *Adios* is a game where a father calls his neighbor and she starts rambling and he has to tell her how much she means to him without putting her life in danger. The mob functions as a complication, its role matters to the

narrative, but it's more of the plot motivator, rather than something we're directly dealing with in the game. *Adios* has a lot more in common with, say, Martin Ritt's movies like *Hud* or *Norma Rae* than Martin Scorsese's, even though I wasn't thinking about them as I was writing the game. I think they impacted my style, if that makes sense."



In fact, more than other games or movies, *Adios* springs from a news story. "I read an article about a woman having a seizure and passing out on her farm, where she was eaten by her pigs, and after the initial sense of, 'wow, that's gruesome,' I couldn't help but find myself thinking about how sad it was that a person who's loved and cared for their animals might end up finding those animals don't really care for them at all. My reaction to reading this was just this powerful sense of heartbreak, and it was trying to untangle the melancholy feelings that came with it that helped me work out the game."

\* \* \*

*Adios* is Mischief's debut game, but it has been a long road to get here. Way back when, Burford wanted to fly. "I was going to be a pilot before I became disabled, but after my doctors said I wouldn't be able to fly anymore, I had to completely reevaluate my life."

Burford combined a love of flight with videogames at an early age, modding *Microsoft Flight Simulator*, making new planes, messing with particle systems. Once being a pilot was off the table, game design seemed like a good alternative. "I went to school, but the department

collapsed while I was there, so I didn't really learn what I needed to," he says. "I ended up in poverty, surviving off of food stamps while trying to make my way through college."

Next up were film and journalism. Games got in the mix again, with Burford contributing to Kotaku, over the course of seven years, a series of articles about how games work. That led to a stint of consulting for game development, but that still wasn't enough. "I still couldn't afford to treat my disability and live, so I ended up losing my home. Since I was still wanting to make games, I came up with a really small project about a sort of road trip walking sim about chasing a series of video tapes, which ended up being called *Paratopic*.



"*Paratopic* was my attempt at addressing issues I saw with the walking sim, so where many of them were about off-screen narratives happening with no one around and little interactivity, I designed *Paratopic* around this idea of having lots of things to do, with the story you were engaging with also being the main story of the game; at the same time, it was really, really important for me to have the player interact with other characters, because I've played so many walking sims where you're the only person around."

*Paratopic* shipped in March of 2018 and went on to win the 2019 Independent Games Festival award for excellence in audio. Burford met new collaborators and was keen to take his ideas further, not just in design but in the structure of the workplace.

Burford founded Mischief with an eye towards the health of himself and his team. The studio puts supportive policies regarding health

first. “I’ve crunched really bad on previous titles, and had people at various employers throughout my life go out of their way to make things worse because I’m disabled, like assigning me to locations with bad ventilation after receiving a doctor’s note saying that I needed to work in a place with good ventilation,” he says. “So I wanted to create a studio that’s super supportive of its team’s health and needs, because no one should have to go through what I’ve been through as a disabled person.”



*Adios* builds on Burford’s previous creative work, too, of course. *Paratopic* is in many ways Burford posing a question about walking simulators and narrative. *Adios* is about taking the answers learned through *Paratopic* further. “The goal here is trying to create a contiguous environment where you spend lots of time with another person, rather than just simple dialog trees with characters in fixed locations, and having lots of different verbs within that same space,” he says. “It’s very much a natural progression from what I came up with when I conceived *Paratopic*. My goal is, ultimately, to take the lessons I’m learning from this and the technology my partner Cameron [Ceschini, lead programmer and studio co-founder] and I are building here and ultimately build extremely dense, fully realized worlds with narrative experiences that do more than traditional games. To get there, I’ve got to make small games until I can afford to make big ones.”

\* \* \*

As much as *Adios* is about two people talking, the farm itself is also a looming character. Or, at the very least, an extension of the farmer's character.

"I spent a lot of time thinking of the history of the space, when the farmer might have built additions to the house, when he first started disposing of bodies and how he used some of that money to rebuild the entire kitchen, which is why the kitchen furniture is all clearly part of a set, one of those yellow fridges from the late 70s," says Burford. "Each room is a bit different; there's something like 50 years of set dressing there, condensed into one space. I also tried to use it as a way of creating character, so as I was writing the game – that script's all me – I thought about how the farmer was probably a bit of a pack rat and liked repurposing things, so there's things like an old church pew out by the fire pit near the fishing pond. Instead of feeling like this sort of immaculately-designed AAA 'everything in the game is super high detail,' I went for recognizable variety that feels true to the farms I've been to throughout my life."



The idea is to create a truly believable space. Lead artist Andrea Jörgensen has brought in real world geographical data from Kansas to breathe life into the space. Burford appreciates this attention to detail and specificity. And it gets at something larger about approach that *Adios* is reaching for. It goes back to Burford's time studying film.

"American films are built for export – they're made so people who don't speak English can enjoy them just as much as everyone else – but the result is that there's a kind of lack of authenticity; it's not

communicating the lived experiences of Americans,” says Burford. “I’ve never sat there and watched a movie and gone ‘Oh, wow, that’s me, I finally feel like I’ve been seen.’ Foreign films are different. When someone in Korea or Argentina makes a movie, that movie is always going to be far more about the culture it’s made in, often because these countries prioritize funding for movies specifically about their cultures. I’m used to being told Kansas doesn’t matter, it’s a flyover state, it isn’t real. When people compared *Paratopic* to Lynch, they were doing it because their exposure to the haunted strangeness of small towns in America is nothing beyond that one reference, while I was making an autobiographical game through the lens of horror. My own exposure to Lynch’s work was extremely minimal at the time; I ended up watching him because people kept comparing us.”



These details, this sort of accuracy is important, even if you can’t perceive them. Unnoticed, they contribute to the bigger tapestry of the game. “I remember reading this story about a filmmaker, whose name I’m forgetting right now, who was making movies in the 1950s or 60s with cameras that couldn’t pick up set detail very well,” he says. “Despite this, they had things like dust and dead flies on their set, and when someone asked the filmmaker why this was necessary, their response was like, ‘Well, you might not be able to see it, but you can feel it.’ Capturing the true sense of a space is so key to making the player feel like they’re there. So as we worked on the game, a big goal of mine was to make it feel like a truly authentic Kansas farmhouse from 1992.”

\* \* \*

Which still leaves us with the burning question: what is *Adios* really, truly about? A farmer dealing with the consequences of his actions. A place evolved out of those actions. The details of a life filtered through a videogame. More? Less? Does it matter?

“There’s this moment in *Stalker*, one of my favorite movies, where the stalker says ‘I bring people here like me, desperate and tormented, and I can help them! I can help them, and it makes me so happy I want to cry.’ I know a lot of English 101 classes try to teach students that there can be more to fiction than just the plot, but I feel like a lot of people learn the wrong lesson and think every work of fiction must have some sort of actionable message it’s trying to convey. I’m not trying to do that, and you’ll find that a lot of the great artists, Le Guin, Tarkovsky, Lynch, Taro, all vehemently oppose this kind of message fiction. Stories aren’t argumentative essays; I’m not trying to argue a point and have the audience take something away from it. That’s something I do when I write, y’know, actually argumentative essays, which I’ve done a lot as a games critic.



“So, yes, I want you to take something away from this, but I’m not writing my stories like a first-year film student who’s just read *Story* and thinks every story has to have a theme that you can get in a single sentence. This is a game about existing within a space, closely observing and empathizing with another human being. He’s flawed, he’s messed up, some people are never going to forgive him, and it’s

not clear whether or not he's capable of forgiving himself. What I want for everyone who plays the game is for them to just let it wash over them, feel it, embrace it and, hopefully, if it works, then those people who are desperate and tormented and dealing with difficult things can play this game and the act of playing the game can help them through the difficult things they're working through."

\* \* \*

*Adios doesn't have a firm release date, but Burford is aiming for sometime in the first quarter of 2021. It will be out on Xbox and [Steam](#).*

*You can watch the [trailer here](#). 📺*



## Contributors

**MICHAEL C. HSIUNG** was raised in the San Fernando Valley where exposure to skateboarding, heavy metal and Dungeons & Dragons fueled his imagination. He is a self-taught artist and illustrator known for his detailed line-drawn characters and worlds and has been exhibited in venues that include the Chinese American Museum, Murray State University and the Vincent Price Art Museum.

**STU HORVATH** is the editor in chief of Unwinnable. He also runs [@VintageRPG](#) on Instagram. Follow him on Twitter [@StuHorvath](#)

**NOAH SPRINGER** is a writer and editor based in Boston. You can follow him on Twitter [@noahjspringer](#)

**HARRY RABINOWITZ** is a writer and editor focused on technology and entertainment. You can find him on Twitter, probably talking about Dungeons & Dragons, [@harryrabinowitz](#)

**OLUWATAYO ADEWOLE** is a writer, podcaster and general procrastinator from London. You can find their ramblings [@naijap-rince21](#) and their poetry [@tayowrites](#)

**AMANDA HUDGINS** is an occasional writer, former rugby player, and wearer of incredibly tall shoes.

**DIEGO NICOLÁS ARGÜELLO** is a writer from Argentina who has learned English thanks to videogames. He also runs Into The Spine and is objectively bad at taking breaks. You can catch him procrastinating on Twitter [@diegoarguello66](#)

**DEIRDRE COYLE** is a goth living in Brooklyn. Find her at [deirdrecoyle.com](#) or on Twitter [@DeirdreKoala](#)

**MELISSA KING** is a freelance writer and a triple threat at Unwinnable – contributor, social media editor and Exploits managing editor. Follow her writing or commission her work [@LongLiveMelKing](#)

**BEN SAILER** is a writer based out of Fargo, ND, where he survives the cold with his wife and dog. His writing also regularly appears in New Noise Magazine.

**MATT MARRONE** is a senior MLB editor at [ESPN.com](#). He has been Unwinnable's reigning

Rookie of the Year since 2011. You can follow him on Twitter [@thebigm](#)

**YUSSEF COLE** is a writer and a visual artist hailing from the Bronx, NY. He makes images for the screen and also enjoys writing words about the screen's images.

**AUTUMN WRIGHT** is an essayist. They do criticism on games and other media. Find their latest writing at [@TheAutumnWright](#)

**JUSTIN REEVE** is an archaeologist specializing in architecture, urbanism and spatial theory, but he can frequently be found writing about videogames, too. You can follow him on Twitter [@JustinAndyReeve](#)

**ROB RICH** has loved videogames since the 80s and has the good fortune to be able to write about them. Catch his rants on Twitter at [@RobsteinOne](#)

**JOHAN NOHR** is a Swedish designer, illustrator and roleplaying game writer.

**CAROLINE DELBERT** is a writer, avid reader, and enthusiast of just about everything. Find her everywhere at [@aetataureate](#)

**ZSOLT DAVID** is a writer and critic from Hungary. You can reach him [@zoldtav](#) on Twitter.

## Illustrations

All screenshots, film stills and promotional images courtesy of their copyright holders. All photography is in the public domain unless otherwise noted. Original works and Creative Commons licenses below.

Cover: Michael C. Hsiung  
Page 47: Britney Koehler