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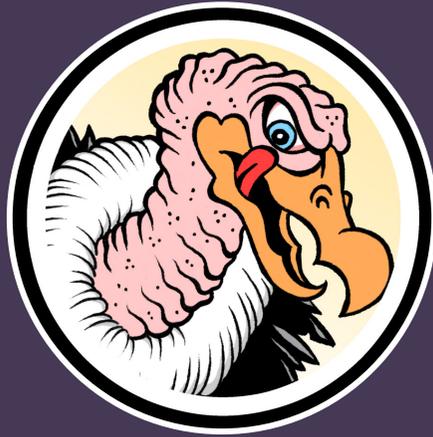


THE WORLD'S ONLY PLAYER • THE PLAGUES OF DUNWALL

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Monthly

135



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This machine kills fascists.



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Happy new year, gang! Let's see how Unwinnable is kicking off 2021. For starters, welcome David Shimomura, who came on as assistant editor this issue!

In our cover feature, Henry Ewins looks at game developers who are crafting communities through an absence of players. Zack Giallongo delivers a fabulous cover capturing the spirit of being a lone explorer of a strange and empty wilderness.

Our second feature sees Alma Roda-Gil interrogating the political commentary of plague in the *Dishonored* games. In our sponsored feature, Jason McMaster talks to Anthony Gallegos about the development of *Torchlight III*.

In the columns, Noah Springer eulogizes MF DOOM. Harry Rabinowitz cheers Superman for smashing the Klan. Olutwatayo Adewole's world tour brings them to France, where they find rap metal and a film about cycles of violence. Diego Nicolás Argüello tells part one of his three part history of the Into The Spine Discord. Melissa King pens a letter to Mei, from *My Time at Portia*.

Ben Sailer shows up for work in *Prey*. Matt Marrone weaves an interesting theory about the Talking Heads. Yussef Cole commits to some blasphemy. Autumn Wright welcomes winter. Justin Reeve takes a look at the architecture in *Immortals Fenix Rising*. Rob Rich closes it out with some thoughts on that whole *Cyberpunk 2077* fiasco.

January, in the best of times, is a sleepy time at Unwinnable HQ, after the scramble for year-end lists and the rushed relaxation of the holidays and the fact that the sun only pops in to say hi for like five minutes a day, if it shows up at all. Add in a pandemic and a violent insurrection and it is a small wonder any of us have managed to get out of bed. Which is a long way of saying A. some of our columnists are off this month, but they'll be back in February and also B. I hope you are taking care out there.

Stu Horvath
Kearny, New Jersey
January 14, 2021



RIP MF DOOM

It's hard to know how to process the death of a celebrity. For the most part, I try and keep a strong distance, no matter how well known they are. "You didn't personally know this person - it's a parasocial relationship," I tell myself. For me at least, that relief holds me through most celebrities' deaths, but not this time. On the last day of 2020, MF DOOM's family announced that he died at the end of October in London, giving one of the worst years ever a final fuck you.

Often called your favorite rapper's favorite rapper, Daniel Dumile had a storied career. From his auspicious beginnings with KMD in the 1990s to his commercial and critical success as Madvillain, Dumile survived the deepest of personal tragedies and the greatest of personal triumphs in his 49 years in this realm.

I wish I could say that I've known about MF DOOM since he was breaking through in the early '90s. I wish I was one of those elite few, following him from his career as an unknown artist in the New York underground, but I'm not. I'm not a rapper who spent everyday pouring over his lyrics, dying to replicate his style as grow with it. No . . . I'm just a fan. But having DOOM work his way into my life over the last decade and a half through my headphones, speaking eloquent truths and posing metaphysical questions that wrinkled my brain, I feel like his death hurts more than most.

I remember coming across DOOM's work first on *The Mouse and the Mask* - his collab albums with Danger Mouse and Adult Swim, a year or two after

it premiered. It was funny, audacious and, above all, lyrically brilliant. But even though I understood how good it was, I was still too deep in the 90s vibe to give it a second look. This seemed just kind of goofy, even if there were interesting tracks.

I knew DOOM was good, but I wasn't aware of how good until a couple years later, when I picked up his first album as MF DOOM, *Operation: Doomsday*. From the first sample to the final beat, DOOM's blend of comic book mythology, intricate rhyme schemes and psychedelic scratching and production hooked me. I suddenly needed to learn everything I could about DOOM, and in that blog-era before streaming music went global, the torrent underground was ripe with DOOM material to explore. Soon, I was diving deep into the mythology that he had built for himself over the course of two decades.

From his early work with KMD to his reappearance as an anonymous rapper wearing a broken *Gladiator* mask five years later, to his alternative personas that each took on different tones and different styles, I felt like his depths were endless. DOOM was funny, acerbic, witty, biting and genuinely brilliant. Above all, DOOM was best known for his internal tongue-twisting rhyme-schemes, dripping every verse with double and triple (and, if you believe [Genius.com](https://www.genius.com), quadruple) entendres.

Although not political on the surface, Dumile continued the radical politics of KMD as MF DOOM, layering commentary throughout his lyrics, deeply embedding it within the metaphor of the eternal outsider. In fact, Dumile was an outsider himself. Although he came up in the heady underground of classic-NYC hip hop in the 80s and 90s, he was actually born in London to African immigrants. As the Obama administration cracked down on immigration, DOOM's visa was caught up in the sweep and he was stranded in London, never to set foot in the US again --banished, like the supervillain he portrayed.

Fundamentally, he was able to achieve this level of depth due to his self-mythologizing. I don't know if he has *the* most alternate personas in the history of hip hop (I feel like Kool Keith probably holds the crown on that front), but Dumile created whole worlds with his music. Yes, MF DOOM, the supervillain who loved children, was his most successful character, but all of his characters produced amazing music that circulated in the same realm, but with distinct



personas. Viktor Vaughn, the narcissistic playboy, and King Gheedor, the alien monster here to destroy the world, populated DOOM's comic universe, providing comedic relief and threats to the ultimate villain.

His production was just as amazing as his lyrical content, if not more so. Drawing on samples from old Fantastic Four cartoons, the Godzilla franchise and countless movies, TV shows and albums that I can't even begin to list, DOOM's production aesthetic is unparalleled. At once boom-bap oriented but futuristic, surreal but straightforward, as *Metal Fingers*, DOOM was able to broaden his influence beyond lyrical stylings and self-mythologizing. Instead, he became a lodestar for rappers; a self-produced, independent rapper who inhabited his own world and didn't rely on anybody else to make his fortune.

He also regularly partnered up with established artists and up-and comers to create unique, collaborative albums. The most well-known, and probably most well-regarded MF DOOM album, is his collaboration with Madlib, *Madvillainy*. Of all the albums that people praise DOOM for, *Madvillainy* probably reigns supreme as his masterpiece, but also the album I found the most inaccessible. Madlib's jazzy production actively avoided radio-friendly tunes, eschewing hooks in favor of esoteric rhymes and blunt-infused psychedelia. Some of DOOM's most iconic rhymes appear here, riding over snappy drums, funky bass, accordions, and obscure samples. Now an icon of independent hip hop and one of the best albums of all-time, *Madvillainy* will stand as DOOM's lasting legacy to the hip hop world.

In the grand scheme of things, DOOM's life ended as he lived it: in private. Often, his broken mask was a metaphor for hiding himself from the world, and hiding his own tragedy. In opposition to the glamorous image of mainstream hip hop at the end of the 1990s, DOOM hid from the bling, preferring anonymity to celebrity. It also felt like a mask for his emotions, shielding him from the 1993 death of his fellow-KMD member and brother, DJ Subroc and later the death of his son Malachi in 2017. Instead, his alternate personalities took over, papering his own tragic backstory with those from comics.



And maybe this is why his death feels somehow more personal than other celebrities -- even more so than other rappers who also spit verses into my ears for years on end. Because DOOM spent his life behind a mask, adopting different personalities, emerging with different groups, he almost felt invincible. He would always appear in a different form, emerging from the shadows of another song, making a brief cameo in the background of another artist's story. Even banished from his hometown, he would return triumphant. It still feels unreal that he isn't lurking around a new corner, waiting to jump back into the fray. But maybe he'll surprise us - he wouldn't be the first rapper to release an album after death, and he certainly wouldn't be the first supervillain to rise from the ashes.

[RIP TO MF DOOM SPOTIFY PLAYLIST](#) 🇺





50 Years Later, Superman Defeats the Klan Again.

I've never really cared about Superman. I don't know why, exactly. Maybe it's because he is too powerful, although I don't have a problem with similarly all-powerful characters like Dr. Manhattan and Phoenix. Maybe the characters in the series, folks like Lois Lane, Jimmy Olsen, General Zod, Martha and Jonathan Kent, never really *grabbed* me. Clark Kent most certainly never did. As such, I've not read many Superman comics. All that to say: *Superman Smashes the Klan* is damn good.

Superman Smashes the Klan feels at once original and sensible. The premise, 1940s Superman *fighting the KKK*, is bold and exciting, but also perfectly fitting for Superman the character. To my surprise, *Superman Smashes the Klan* is loosely based on an older Superman story titled "The Clan of the Fiery Cross." That 16-part radio program aired in 1946 on the wildly popular *The Adventures of Superman* radio show. In "The Clan of the Fiery Cross," Superman defended a Chinese American family from a clear KKK stand-in. *The Adventures of Superman* was very successful, especially throughout World War II, where Superman often fought Nazis, but "The Clan

Harry Recommends:
Superman Smashes the Klan. Written by Gene Luen Yang. Illustrated by Gurihiru.

GENRE: Action, Coming of Age

RATING: Young Adult (language, racial slurs, violence)

INFO: Published by DC Graphic Novels for Young Adults. 240pp

AVAILABLE AT:

[BookShop](#) (we earn an affiliate commission), [IndieBound](#), [Your Local Comics Store](#)

of the Fiery Cross” was particularly successful, winning awards from various magazines and parent association groups.

2020’s *Superman Smashes the Klan*, written by Gene Luen Yang (*Avatar*, *American Born Chinese*) and drawn by artist duo Gurihiru (*Avatar*, *The Unbelievable Gwenpool*), takes the groundwork from “The Clan of the Fiery Cross” and reinforces it greatly. Set in 1946 Metropolis, *Superman Smashes the Klan* stars the Lee family, a Chinese American family who move from Chinatown to the suburbs after their father lands a new job. One night, shortly after their move, they find a burning cross on their lawn, with a group of Klan members threatening, then inciting, violence against them. What follows is a story about fighting racism and claiming your unique, powerful identity.

Despite the book’s title, this is just as much the story of the Lee family as it is Superman’s. Our co-protagonist, Lan-Shin “Roberta” Lee, misses Chinatown, and is unsure how to behave in her new, largely white, neighborhood. She struggles with feelings of belonging, a struggle that escalates as her family (and Metropolis) is confronted with an increasingly violent Klan. Inspired

by her brother and *Superman* regulars Lois Lane and Jimmy Olsen, Roberta stands against the Klan, working with her friends, and later Superman, to foil their violent machinations. Yang is particularly talented at writing conflicts around race, identity and belonging, and his penmanship is here in full force, managing to tackle deep issues with weight, brevity and clarity.

We also follow Superman as he confronts his own identity. While Superman still does Superman things, swooping in, saving the day, inspiring us to be our best selves, he struggles not only to balance Clark Kent and Superman, but Superman and his alien origins. Much of the book is dedicated to Clark’s past, and his struggle growing up not knowing who he is or where he comes from. As a child, he starts to believe that he is better off blending in, keeping his alien-ness under wraps, appearing as normal as possible. He keeps that belief all the way through adulthood. Even when he is Superman, leaping stories high, speed-running on phone wires, beating up bad guys, he is holding himself back, making sure people see him as just a super-man, not someone different, someone *alien*. This comes back to bite him when he is unable to



stop certain disasters, but more importantly, when he is confronted with Klan members, who see him as proof of white supremacy, a literal Übermensch, a living embodiment of the white master-race.

Lastly, there is the Klan themselves. Thankfully, Yang does not shy away from accurately depicting their slurs, violence, rhetoric, tactics, or philosophy, despite the book being published through DC's Young Adult imprint. By making two central characters Klan associated (one a literal grand wizard, the other the grand wizard's nephew, uncertain of the morality of their actions), Yang can investigate the Klan's philosophy of one race, one color, one religion and then *destroy it*, not only through Superman punching the bad guys, but through Roberta and the other kids' more everyday heroism.

Again, all of this goes back to Yang's expertise writing on issues of identity, racism, classism, bigotry and the like. *Superman Smashes the Klan* could have been preachy, dull and blunt, essentially repetitions of phrases like "racism is bad" or "the Klan is wrong" for every scene. But Yang adds nuance and depth to each and every encounter, creating a more detailed story of good triumphing over evil.

As for the art, Gurihiru lean into the 1940s style, with bright colors, neat lines, and clear stylistic inspiration from the 1940s animated Superman shorts by Fleischer Studios, minus the offensive racial stereotypes. As is their style, Gurihiru nail key poses, big facial expressions, and bright colorwork. Tense action and arguments play out in dynamic back-and-forths, with narrow stacked parallel panels. Overall, they make the whole story pop in fun, animated ways.

An unexpected, but wonderful addition is Yang's 12-page essay at the end of the book, "Superman and Me." It is poignant and impactful, discussing the history of the Klan in America, racism and the American government, especially during WWII, the origins of Superman and *The Adventures of Superman* radio broadcast and Yang's own experiences with racism growing up as a Chinese American. It's clear that Superman means a lot to Yang, and *Superman Smashes the Klan* certainly does him justice. 🍵





Salut! Welcome to this month's World Tour, grab some escargots, some wine and let's get started!

Lofofora

This one is less of a deep analysis (because my French is bad) and more of a quick recommendation, but *Lofofora* is a fantastic and fundamental French rap metal band. They've been going for over thirty years at this point and pretty much all of their extensive discography slaps. Their songs come with powerful repudiations of war, fascism and a wide variety of social issues in France. Also have you ever seen a band with a cooler name?

La Haine

This is a film about cycles of violence.

In *La Haine* we follow three young men in the deprived banlieues (suburbs) for the 24 hours after an uprising (aka riot) caused by police brutality. The immediately interesting thing here in Matthew Kassovitz's film is that all three of our protagonists are marginalized on the basis of their ethnicity, Vinz (Vincent Cassel) is Jewish, Hubert (Hubert Koundé) is Black and Said (Said Taghmaoui) is Arab. While this isn't the totality of their characters, it massively informs how they interact with the world. You are seeing France through the lens of the people it seeks to oppress and erase. Kassovitz also doesn't flatten the racial dynamics here into one singular narrative, instead, the varied oppressions are a key part of what informs their differences. The starkest example of this is Vinz's volatility in opposition to Hubert's constant calm. It

is never explicitly said, but you can see how Hubert is constantly trying to push against the vision of Black people (especially Black men) as violent beasts, which you can see in the repeated references to him as a Herculean figure. By contrast, Vinz is under no such restriction, his marginalization comes elsewhere and, if anything, he is constantly trying to prove his masculinity through the performance of violence.



This is a film about cycles of violence.

In *La Haine* we open on a montage of footage from modern uprisings in France to the sound of Bob Marley's "Burnin' and Lootin'." Then we shift to the aftermath of the most recent uprising in the banlieue of our protagonists. There are burned-out vehicles, smashed windows and a car that inexplicably turns up in the wrecked gym. These aren't the priority though, and we very quickly come to accept them as part of the normality of this place, instead we're focused on the community that forms here. It's a mishmash of different people who have been pushed to the bottom of French society. Many of them have mothers, fathers, brothers, sisters, children in the prison system and are just about struggling to get by. This place isn't solely defined by violence though. Kassovitz is sure to show us some beautifully shot scenes of kids playing, impromptu breakdancing and a barbecue on the rooftop. He takes his time to make sure we know that this is a community which exists outside of the violence that runs through it.

This is a film about cycles of violence.

In *La Haine* we see a lot of interpersonal violence. Playfighting, real fighting, rioting, police violence, vandalism, torture. There's even a moment where Hubert gives a cop a phenomenal sucker punch. Violence is frequently the medium by which men can express their emotions, whether that's love, hatred, or a cry of frustration at their material conditions. Most of it is clearly

just young men being boisterous rather than anything particularly callous. All of this feels reflective of a model of Western masculinity in which men (especially racialized men) can only express their emotions through violence. So you watch scenes where you wish these characters would just slow down and talk, but instead things spiral in increasingly frustrating ways – and that feels deliberate.



This is a film about cycles of violence – and they start with a police gun

The descent into violence which the film takes is kicked off by a cop losing his gun at the riot which precedes the events of *La Haine*. It's the acquisition of that gun which drives Vinz into taking increasingly reckless actions and gives his seething (and largely justified) rage a lethal edge. At pretty much every point in this film where violence becomes lethal (or at least brutal) the power of an oppressive system or structure is involved. The violence comes in cycles, but it is always clear that these structures get the wheel spinning.

Nowhere is this clearer than the actions of the police. They hound our central trio wherever they go, holding their monopoly on violence over the heads of everyone in the banlieue and using that power liberally. There's an immediate tension whenever they appear on screen which is all too familiar for those of us who are frequently their targets. It's like the joy and vibrancy of the neighborhood immediately stops. Everything becomes oppositional. A barbecue becomes a standoff. Even just walking with friends becomes anxiety inducing, dominated by the need not look 'suspicious', to not give them an excuse (as if they needed one).

You see this at its most cruel when Hubert and Said are taken into police custody and tortured by a trio of policemen. This scene is intense, but also has a grotesque psychosexuality to it. There is a clear and perverse enjoyment of using these systems of power to brutalize this pair of young, racialized men, to reinforce the hierarchy where the police as agents of the state stand on the backs of Black, Brown and working-class people. When the trio are later attacked

by neo-fascists, a similar tone persists. They also attack to support the same hierarchy, in which working class people of color will always be at the bottom. In fact, the actions of the neo-fascists and police are near indistinguishable and that is a reality which has existed for as long as the police have. You can see this in the how the groups cross over in membership. It's also clear in how in France, alongside most of the West, the police are completely unwilling to do anything about fascists – even when they are clearly identifiable. That's what makes the violence so terrifying here. It isn't that the perpetrators uniquely talented or organized – it's that you know that even the liberal institutions of the State will turn a blind eye. The victims will just be another notch in the millions of marginalized bodies these countries are built upon.

It's also important here to talk about the violences here which aren't as overt. As mentioned before, so many of the people in the banlieue have been in prison or have immediate relatives who are. Furthermore, these areas are consistently underinvested in and overpoliced by the French government. They create the conditions from which crime necessarily emerges, but instead of improving those conditions, the state incarcerates those who are struggling to survive. The reality of carceralism is that it leaves gaping holes in communities and intensifies the struggle of both the convict and the people they left behind. Improving things isn't the point. Just like the police, and just like the fascists, this is another method of violence through which hierarchy is asserted. As put by Said in the film he “feels like an ant lost in intergalactic space” – asserting that feeling of powerlessness is precisely the purpose of these systems.

In spite of the overwhelming nature of these oppressions, there is hope to be found. When we situate the origin point for this cycle in the police gun (as a representative of the racist, carceral capitalist state) then we know that none of this is natural. The titular hatred has a starting point – so we can cut it off at the source. 🗡️





Starring
Punished "Venom" Snake

From the Man Who Sold the World

I haven't forgotten what you told me, Boss. We have no tomorrow, but there's still hope for the future. In our struggle to survive the present, we push the future farther away. Will I see it in my lifetime? Probably not. Which means there's no time to waste. Someday the world will no longer need us. No need for the gun, or the hand to pull the trigger. I have to drive out this demon inside me – build a better future. That's what I – what we – will leave as our legacy.”

– Punished “Venom” Snake.

As the night was winding down in a pub in Brighton, a friend and I were talking about the group. He brought up something I had been trying to ignore throughout the years. How long can it last? How many of us will remain by then? The answer to these questions was bittersweet, but still underlined a hopeful message. He said that in 5 or 10 years not many of us will be in touch. Perhaps only half of the group will even be writing by then. But I should remain proud of what I have built, getting all these people together and helping them to form friendships that will endure beyond career changes and the pass of time.

When I set my mind to create the Discord server for Into The Spine, none of this was in my plans. I never thought it would grow beyond a small group for freelancers to talk about work on a casual basis. If anyone would have told me that we would be spending the next two and a half years chatting daily,

traveling across the world to meet one another, and slowly leaving our mark in the industry, I'm not sure I would have believed it.

This is the story about a private community where bonds seemed unbreakable. It's about the ups and downs, the lessons I learned, the people that took advantage of a safe place and how I found myself relating to *Metal Gear Solid V: The Phantom Pain* in the toughest moments of our time. It's also the story of how it came to an end in late 2020, and what followed afterwards.

Part One: Outer Heaven

Back in late 2017, a time in my life where I was still [trying to find my footing](#) in a foreign industry and make a name for myself, I stumbled upon an industry person who was thinking of starting a group for writers. Their idea was to share freelancing tips, general advice and help to workshop ideas primarily aimed at newcomers, just like me. I threw my name in the hat, downloaded Discord for the first time, and jumped in.

At first, it was as haunting and unfamiliar as logging onto Twitter but seeing a couple familiar names (even if they had no idea who I was back then) gave me comfort. I endured, asking for advice every now and then and reading the channels often. The next few weeks gave me hope about my future, and I started meeting lots of new people that weren't on my radar before.

This networking experience was fruitful, at least during the beginning, but I was still having a hard time trying to land pitches and pursue new bylines. There were many ideas that I just wanted to put on paper but couldn't find the proper place for, so I had to come up with an alternative. I would follow the common practice of creating a personal blog where I could put all of this stuff while simultaneously serving as a growing portfolio in order to increase my chances.

The name I pictured was "About Gaming" for some reason, completely oblivious of the implications of the word, but the domain was taken already. I had recently finished reading *Into The Wild*, which had left an impression on me that I couldn't shake, and I thought it would make for a great name. But it was still missing something. While looking for references, I searched through the songs of Supergiant Games' work, which not only were some of my favorites but also played around with meaning in thoughtful ways. Examining *Transistor's* soundtrack, I stumbled upon "The Spine." And that was the foundation for the site.

That could have been it. A personal blog amidst dozens of others with the occasional post that probably not many would have read. I don't remember

what lit the spark – perhaps it was the forums I used to run when I was younger, or my short experience as an editor of a UK volunteer publication that was dubious at best, or perhaps all the bad experiences I had working for local sites, conflicted about an enthusiast press I didn't want to take part of.

In retrospect, I see the spark coming from the desire to start giving back for all the help I was getting. Most importantly, I wanted to fill the gap for newcomers that don't have access to contacts, tools and information to get started. So I decided that Into The Spine would be a site open for people across the globe, where I would take pitches and pay a \$10 per contribution from my own pocket (which was a bit of a risk for a 20-year-old, considering [our local economy](#), even if I had a somewhat decent full time job to cover my expenses). But this was still low, so as a way to compensate for it I thought that having a Discord server where I could continue supporting folks in any way possible was the least I could do.



This new server became a necessity for me, and others. That first group I was part of lost its purpose: only a handful of people would send messages into a void with no responses. Advice became a classified knowledge that only the admins held, and some of their interactions with members who were people of color left me with a sour taste in my mouth.

From there, the idea was simple. Every time someone contributed to the site they would receive an open invite to the server, with the premise of being a private freelance community where folks could brainstorm ideas, help with drafts and pitches, and just hang out. There were only a handful members for a long time, mostly folks whom I had been interacting with beforehand and pitched the site. To my surprise, pretty much all of them accepted the invite.

The group slowly started to take form. Although everyone carried their

own experiences, we were all on a similar level – bylines in a couple small or volunteer sites, barely scratching a couple dozen followers. But we were eager to learn more about this job, and the industry – it was exactly the kind of people I wanted to surround myself with. Some initiatives helped to establish this: an internal spreadsheet with publications’ email addresses and rates, a document with helpful links and advice blurbs and probably too many pinned messages in each channel. The bulk of the server focused on pitching, writing, feedback, sharing our work and talks about freelancing in general. But there were also channels for off-topic chatter, multiplayer games and, eventually, event planning. Over time, as the group grew closer, we also made channels for venting and mental health.



I've been going back and forth on how to portray exactly what it was like to be in that server, and I think it's impossible to describe it in full. That initial small group maintained its numbers for a while, a time in which the collective bond strengthened greatly and friendships began to emerge. While I was still figuring out the logistics of the site and playing it by ear, the server became its own thing. A safe place where people could share their experiences and knowledge with others without any sort of push back or restraint, while also receiving the same support from the other end. A place where there were both talks about all sorts of silly topics until four in the morning and talks about difficult shit that folks were dealing with. There were no arguments, no hard feelings. At one point I started seeing daily activity on the server, mainly thanks to the diversity of people in terms of locations and time zones. From that moment, it never ceased. In over two years, there wasn't a single day in which I didn't check on the server. And there were always dozens of messages waiting to be read.

For me, it was key to preserve this as much as possible. There was something special happening, but it could quickly go sideways. I continued inviting people after working with them on the site, but I admittedly became more selective in the process. The support and open door to give advice to folks remained, of course. But the server was slowly turning from solely a work environment onto a group of close colleagues and friends. Plus, the site had gained some notoriety, and I didn't want for the server to become convoluted.

I started consulting with others about potential new members, and the search became somewhat different. I'd often receive a recommendation about someone who had been kind with a couple of us, or others, on social media, or perhaps a freelancer who expressed feeling aimless in their career, lacking support. But I always imposed the same rule: I would invite one person at a time, and then followed a period where they'd get acclimated with the group and vice versa. I also pushed for diversity and whenever the balance was in favor of cis-gendered white folks, I'd focus on addressing that.



By the end we were over 40 people in there. It might not sound like much considering some Discord servers, but remember that this was a close group, where inviting a new person felt like opening the doors to a house – it took us over two years to get there, gradually. I think around the 15 to 20 people mark was when there was an almost perfect balance, and many would argue that maybe that should have been the limit, but I can't blame anyone who suggested inviting more people. I would have missed out on meeting many people I count as friends today.

At one point we thought about giving the server a community focus, splitting everything in two different groups of channels, maintaining the private aspect of the group for those who weren't interested or preferred it

that way, and opening the door to all of those I was meeting through Spine or on social media. This never led anywhere, but honestly, the thought of making a super group contradicted what I wanted from it in the first place. Making it fully public was never in question for me and I'm glad that was the case – I'll go back to this later.

We became a group so united, so acclimated with one another. This was showing, both in our notoriety as individuals and as a collective force. If someone had questions about how to deal with a certain situation regarding work, there was always a person eager to help, regardless of time and day. Our internal knowledge was crafted from pure experience. There was a level of transparency that still amazes me to this day, especially since, well, we were all competing with each other. But we always punched up, not down. Whenever there was a job opening you'd see someone showcasing interest and another person replying, "Ah, that's fine, you should go for it." But the response was always, "We're both applying to this." If a site was late on payments, or an editor was being rude to one or more of us, we would take notice. In the most severe cases, that publication would suddenly stop receiving pitches from around 30 writers.

I recall very vividly how the people in charge of the first freelance group I took part in always mentioned hearing things from "whisper networks," a term employed as an excuse whenever someone asked for details on something, bragging about an unreachable access for us, the people at the bottom. Ironically, we ended up becoming one ourselves . . .

* * *

To be continued next month. U





Dear Mei,
“News stories don’t always have to be major, they just have to matter,” you told me, and it’s true.

For every major news story, there’s another story hidden under the radar that another writer put their heart and soul into. Not as many people might pay attention, but somewhere, there’s a reader wondering where that piece has been all their life.

Even when you think your writing doesn’t matter, someone cares about it – even if that person is you.

Stories aren’t always about the number of eyes that will lay upon them. Instead, they’re about finding those moments that make us human, whether they become a cause for celebration or a warning for the future.

So, keep looking for those moments, even if you have to write down everything by hand or draw your visuals. (Though, of course, I’m sure a printing press and camera won’t hurt.)

Get your feet on the ground and capture what matters to your friend, your neighbor or yourself. Make your voice heard and amplify the voices of those who need the support. Find that angle that pushes you to write.

Because a story doesn’t have to be major – it just has to matter.

– Melissa

P.S. There’s always a spot open for you at Team Unwinnable. 🏆



In Videogames, Everybody's Working for the Weekend

Prey is a videogame about having an extremely bad day at work. Sure, it's many other things too: a meditation on bioengineering and human ethics, an exceptional sci-fi drama set on an orbiting space station, a narrative first-person shooter built around complex roleplaying systems. But at heart, it's mostly about being a scientist who picked the wrong day to go into the office, and everything else surrounding that central conceit is well-designed window dressing intended to make you feel like you're on a space adventure. Which, technically, you are on a space adventure. Except at work.

If you're still reading this for some reason (thank you), then stick with me here (mild spoilers ahead). *Prey's* plot begins with its protagonist Dr. Morgan Yu, a scientist working for a corporation called TranStar Industries, waking up in their apartment. That apartment turns out to be part of a simulation on a space station named Talos I that becomes overrun by genetically modified shapeshifting lifeforms. Everything quickly turns to shit after that moment, as things sometimes do after your alarm clock goes off, and what starts as another day at work soon becomes a struggle for survival. *In space.*

Thanks to its masterful environmental storytelling, *Prey's* world tells you a lot about what it was like to work on Talos I before aliens, collectively known as the Typhon, staged a hostile takeover. For example, scanning workstations and computer terminals shows us TranStar Industries did not enforce the

use of a secure password management system, as evidenced by people just writing them down on Post-It Notes or whatever else they had laying around. Come on! Somewhere on the station, a despondent IT manager probably puts whiskey in their coffee, stares into the darkness of space and wonders where their career went wrong.



Hacking people's emails also tells us exactly who was pissed at who, which coworkers were semi-secretly dating one another and which engineers dicked around to build a mostly useless knock-off Nerf crossbow. Inappropriate workplace relationships, theft of company time and resources and petty backstabbing all over the place! Small-time problems are, well, small, but they're especially exasperating when they distract from the certain death that lurks around every corner. Somehow, even in extreme life-or-death situations, people will still bicker about who's really the bigger asshole.

Speaking of which, everyday office supplies on Talos I can kill you. That's because the shapeshifting Typhon can assume the form of any inanimate object in order to blend in. Thinking about "borrowing" your cubicle-mate's coffee cup? Not so fast! There's a non-trivial chance that thing is going to turn into a monster that will tear your face off, unlike Katelyn in accounting, who would just leave a passive-aggressive note about respecting private property or some shit that'd just make you wish you were dead. The malevolent shapeshifter sounds less annoying, but given the option, I think I'll choose life.

Somewhere around the halfway point through *Prey's* 40-hour runtime (ironically about the same as a solid week of work), the thought that the game is mostly a work simulator of sorts started to click in my head, which may be a byproduct of playing late at night when my neurons aren't firing on all cylinders. It's not totally fair to reduce *Prey* to little more than *The Shockingly*

Calm Scientist's Bad Day at Work, but I can't completely disentangle the game's workplace narrative and setting either. It's also not unique in that regard, and the longer I sat with that thought, the more I realized that nearly every game I play to relax and unwind ironically has some sort of connection to work.

As a case in point, the widely beloved indie hit *Umurangi Generation* (one of [Unwinnable's Best Games of 2020](#)) is literally about working as a courier with a camera in a walled-off police state. *Madden NFL 21*, probably my most-played title this year in terms of hours, is about controlling the fates of professional athletes. While it's never explicitly discussed, the Doom Guy in *Doom Eternal* must be drawing a paycheck from the Marines, right? The man's work certainly hasn't gotten any better since *Doom* (2016) and his mortgage back home isn't getting any cheaper either. Give the man a raise!



Sometimes the connection between game worlds and the working world is even more obvious. For example, the VR title *Job Simulator* is exactly what it sounds like. While I haven't played it myself, I did watch my wife (who runs a small vegetable farm) obsessively "go to the farm" in *Stardew Valley*. In a similar bout of a choice in game reflecting a choice in career, I recently pulled *The Occupation* from my backlog, which puts players in the shoes of an investigative reporter. I've never uncovered any actual conspiracies myself, but I do have a journalism degree and the game's time-based mechanics do invoke the feeling of working under a deadline (for the record, this column was, for once, filed on time).

Depending on how far you're willing to stretch the definition of work, games that don't emulate employment somehow may actually be in the minority. *Street Fighter*? Prize fighting. *Zelda*? World-saving mercenary. *Mario*? Exploring the imagination of a plumber who is doing shrooms instead of going to work. *Gran Turismo*? Pro race car driver.

Pokemon Go adds work as a monster trainer to your actual life in real time. *Tony Hawk's Pro Skater* has the word “pro” right in the title. Your protagonist in *Animal Crossing* has no formal profession but is somehow skilled in landscaping, interior design and archeology. Whatever it takes to get paid.

Notably, this is all without touching on esports of any sort, or what it means to play games while choosing a career in development, content creation, or another area of the industry. The more the games business matures, the more means it provides for people to turn their pastime into their profession.

There is certainly nothing wrong with work playing a prominent role in art and fiction, whether in videogames or any other medium. We spend most of our waking hours at work, and for those fortunate enough to pursue their passions on the job, that work can mean much more than just a paycheck. Employment is central to the functioning of our lives and society, and thus it should be no surprise that it factors so prominently into our creative expression, whether as a core theme or as something to be railed against.

But I'm also left with nagging questions about what it means to go to work all day, do more work around the house and then play games that essentially emulate someone else's job (and then to analyze and write about those games for this column, a hobby that is also a job). Surely there must be more to the imagination than this, and certainly there are plenty of games (and books and films and songs) that have nothing to do with either going to work or avoiding work or escaping the reality of having to go to work.

If I have any sort of gaming resolution in 2021, it might be to seek out more experiences that exist strictly as entertainment, disconnected from performing labor in exchange for compensation as a means of getting to live for another day. If I follow through on that resolution all the way though, you probably won't hear from me about those experiences in this space. Away from work, there are some things you need to do just for yourself. 🍷





More Songs About Bob and Judy

Because of Scott Aukerman and Adam Scott's podcast, *U Talkin' Talking Heads 2 My Talking Head*, I've been on a little bit of a – wait for it – Talking Heads kick lately.

I've been listening to my (admittedly limited) collection of Talking Heads songs, which for the most part I hadn't listened to in years.

They're great. Among the songs I've been playing most is a track that easily ranks near the top of the band's greatest hits: "Found a Job," from the band's 1978 album, "More Songs About Buildings and Food."

In the song, we are introduced to a couple bickering over television – one getting hot under the collar because there's nothing good on TV and the other lecturing that it's not worth making such a fuss over.

"Damn that television, what a bad picture!"

"Don't get upset, it's not a major disaster"

"There's nothing on tonight," he said, "I don't know what's the matter!"

"Nothing's ever on," she said, "so I don't know why you bother"

Fortunately, the wise-beyond-his-26-years David Byrne has sage advice for this couple – and for us all:

We've heard this little scene, we've heard it many times

*People fighting over little things and wasting precious time
They might be better off, I think, the way it seems to me
Making up their own shows, which might be better than TV*

So guess what? The couple does.

*Judy's in the bedroom, inventing situations
Bob is on the street today, scouting up locations
They've enlisted all their family
They've enlisted all their friends
It helped save their relationship
And made it work again*

It's so fun, so clever, so catchy – there's nothing not to love about this song. And so here is where I might ask, rhetorically, “What more could you want?”

But there *is* something more that I want. In the same way the Taking Heads song “Radio Head” gave the band Radiohead its name – and a mission statement – I want to believe that this song is, in fact, the origin story of an actual television show.

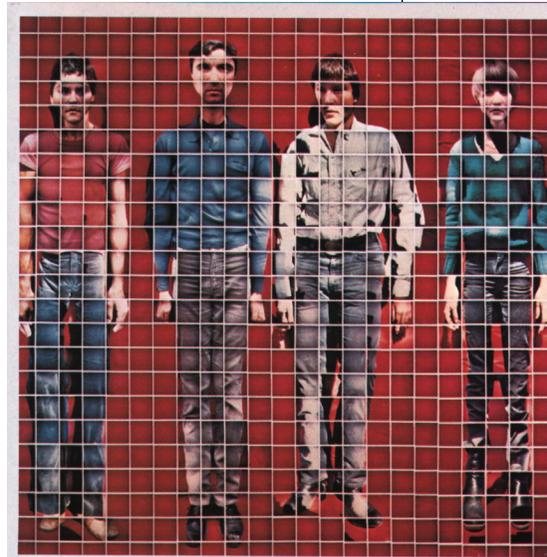
I want to believe “Found a Job” is the origin story of *Twin Peaks*.

On the most surface level, *Twin Peaks* revolutionized television. What we know

of today as Prestige TV can trace its roots back to the show that, if you've ever even glanced at this column before, you know is my favorite show of all time. (I'm also a senior writer for a *Twin Peaks* fanzine, called [The Blue Rose Magazine](#), which you should totally buy.)

But if that was my reason for wanting to believe it, I'd be on very shaky ground. While what I'm saying about *Twin Peaks*' place in history is undeniable, any superfan of any show could craft some kind of argument about how their favorite show-runners saw a chance to bring new color and charm to a desolate pop-culture landscape.

But I don't want to believe that “Found a Job” *describes* *Twin Peaks*, I want to believe this it *is* *Twin Peaks*.



Whether David Lynch and Mark Frost heard the song and made choices based on it is irrelevant to my wish. It's highly – highly – doubtful that they did, of course.

But if you've seen *Twin Peaks* – specifically season three – you know that the shows two greatest villains, the embodiment of evil in the world, are a man named Bob and a woman named Judy.

Whether they're a couple or a mother and son or simply timeless spirits without true form, what appears undeniable is that they are able to assume earthly form by taking possession of human hosts. Bob most famously takes possession of Leland Palmer. In season three, Judy is in possession of Leland's wife, Sarah.

Judy, more powerful than Bob, invents situations – in Part Eight of season three, she appears as the mother of all evil – and Bob, whom she vomits out as a maleficent orb, scouts out souls.

Once they become the Palmers, they enlist their family – tragically for Leland and Sarah but even more so for their daughter Laura and her cousin Maddie – and their friends – everyone they meet in the town of Twin Peaks, plus the woodsmen and the various denizens of the Red Room. By doing so, it indeed helps save their relationship and makes it work again – bringing trauma and death in its wake.

So think about this little scene, apply it to your life

If your work isn't what you love, then something isn't right

Just think of Bob and Judy, they're happy as can be

Is my version the happy ending David Byrne had in mind? Almost certainly not. But it's definitely the kind of ending David Lynch and Mark Frost might have imagined.

Since the show went off the air a few years ago – following a return after a quarter century – many fans of *Twin Peaks* have wished for a season four, while some have salivated over a potential season three prequel instead, what “Fire Walk With Me” was to the show's original run. Except one small issue: It already exists. It's a Talking Heads song. 🇺



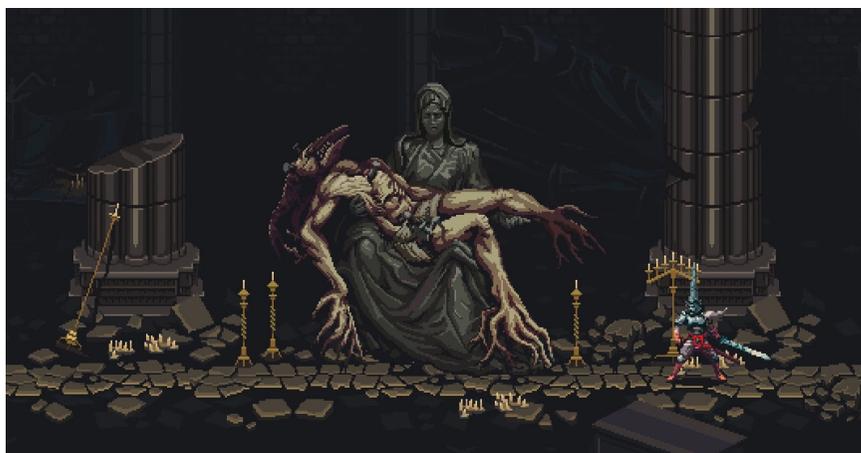


Heaven from the Other Side

Blasphemous, a 2019 metroidvania from Spanish studio, The Game Kitchen, takes place in a disturbing, tortured wasteland. The countryside your character – called “The Penitent One” – traverses is desolate, windy and plagued; full of long shadows cast by a weak sun. The few towns you come across are made up of dilapidated structures leaning against each other, windows and doors all boarded up, sand and dust piled high against their sides. You wouldn’t immediately think this was a game based, as it is, on Christian ideas, its fictional world extrapolated from biblical scripture, ranging from topics of faith to salvation. Yet in showing us the uglier, more distorted and terrifying side of religious faith, *Blasphemous* serves as a deeper aesthetic exploration of the mind of the devout than the more typically generated imagery of mainstream Christianity: the harps, the cherubic angels, the kind and bearded god.

In Umberto Eco’s *The Name of The Rose*, a murder mystery set in an Italian monastery in the Fourteenth century, Friar William of Baskerville, the novel’s protagonist, describes to his novice, Adso, the purpose of hellish imagery in inspiring faith: “. . . to stimulate piety and terror and fervor in the populace, and obedience to human and divine law, preachers have used distressing words, macabre threats.” He despairs that, “the Italians, thanks to their preachers,

risk returning to the ancient superstitions; and they no longer believe in the resurrection of the flesh, but have only a great fear of bodily injuries and misfortunes . . ." After all, what better incentive is there besides the gruesome images of demons torturing lost souls amid brimstone and flame, seemingly right below the feet of your intended audience, to convince them to stick around? Pure faith is a difficult thing; and games like *Blasphemous* show us its mirror: the stick employed to instill loyalty when the carrot alone seems not to suffice.



The living condition of Europe's population during the late Middle Ages was certainly helpful toward this end. The wealth that wasn't concentrated around monarchies (themselves an arm of religious authority) was on display in churches and other religious institutions. Built on the most ideal ground, often towering above the poor hamlets which surrounded them, wrought with gold, stained glass and elaborate frescoes, churches employed wealth to reinforce their sacred status in sharp contrast to the base conditions suffered by most everyone else. Next to these shining beacons, the towns of Europe didn't look much different than the exaggerated dilapidation of *Blasphemous'* setting: poor, mud-splattered hovels for the desperately poor and landless to momentarily shade their heads, in between shifts of backbreaking toil. The creaking, moldering habitations which make the game so memorably creepy to spend time in.

Blasphemous, in all its visual eccentricity is not, then, some groundless fabrication, but instead a quite plausible look into the inner life of a fervently religious person living in dreary times. How easy it might be to glance from your subsistence lifestyle to the royal splendor on display at even often the lowliest of churches, and see a beacon of heavenly salvation amid the squalor and grime of your earthly hell?

When the novice Adso, in *The Name of The Rose*, first approaches the monastery's church, he is so overwhelmed by the sculptural relief over its main door depicting saints and sinners alike that he is drawn into a hallucinatory stupor: “. . . stunned (almost) by that sight, uncertain at this point whether I was in a friendly place or in the valley of the last judgment, I was terrified and could hardly restrain my tears, and I seemed to hear (or did I really hear?) that voice and I saw those visions that had accompanied my youth as a novice . . .”

The confusing nature of this encounter is very much by design: “. . . images are the literature of the layman,” Adso acknowledges later. These supernatural-seeming images make a powerful argument for loyalty and obedience, perhaps more than the written word ever could. In his book *Baroque & Rococo*, Gauvin Alexander Bailey writes: “Church interiors were calculated to overwhelm the faithful and exercise their emotions . . . using illusionism to encourage meditation and break down peoples’ defences.” The power of images was something well understood by the church and frequently employed with calculated precision.

Blasphemous similarly uses its imagery to draw the audience in, just from the other direction. In its representations of biblically-inspired horror: its howling, lightless cliffs; its dungeons crammed with the dripping corpses of low sinners; it gives us a glimpse into the kind of deep-seated fear of hell and damnation which has long supplied the fuel necessary for organized religion to endlessly self-propagate. In this way it serves as an inverted church, one which presents the same message as the chiaroscuro clouds and angels of positive religious art from its gnarly and unseemly underside. “. . . hell is heaven seen from the other side,” Adso thinks to himself in *The Name of The Rose*. Eco's story, along with games like *Blasphemous*, necessarily dwells in this haunting inversion, and is therefore useful in better understanding the sway of religion, and the fervor of its most loyal adherents. 🙏





Loxahatchee Boys

“Every love has its landscape.”

—Rebecca Solnit, *A Field Guide to Getting Lost*

The first cold morning of the season is an arrival. Each cold front settles in the evening before, always. The weather here is predictable like that. The temperatures drops with the sun and autumns curtain lifts. Winter is here.

The sky is a boundless blue on these mornings. As with the humidity, the clouds are gone. Coniferous trees begin to shed, their branches clinging to the sky at Earth’s horizons. Look up. The blue gets darker, deeper, as if in shadow at the top of a cupola. Or maybe it’s the bottom of a sea. And not just a reflection, you could fall forever in that blue. This is how I will remember each winter, every holiday. Not white, nor green, nor auburn. Blue.

I look down at the gravel trail. I haven’t fallen yet.

There is a queerness to winter in Florida. Cold without the dark. Light without the heat. Woman without the womb. The brilliance of the sun in the cold and dark season, the green treetops framed by sky blue. In the Everglades, Earth as mother is refigured by her topography and each winter she invites us back. Water drifts along the surface, never deep. (The average depth of Lake Okeechobee, her headwaters, is only nine feet.) Yet the shallows are vast, concealing gators and panthers and orchids and people. Endless sawgrass, winding sloughs, impenetrable cypress. Through ridge and swamp and prairie I find my way, along the imprint of a memory further north, another RIVER. In

her essay on moving water, poet Alison Townsend appraises these landscapes that “shape us by being so familiar that they seem a country we have always known.” Femininity fits me here. Unshaven blonde hairs. Blue veins beneath pale, softening skin. The endless stream of facial hair. A tangle of desiccated curls. RIVERS do not ask us our history, I sought refuge in this one summer on the other RIVER, but they do impress on us. They shape us. The stream parts but I know now it is wrapping around my skin, shaping me like the bends and curves I follow. (I will not retain all her shapes). Moving upstream, I confront her memories. How many thousands of years of whispered secrets has she known? The RIVER won't take, but she will keep.

I learned to love you last winter, but the cold season keeps. Replete harvests wane and I hunger for a feast I have not partaken of. I pine for the last autumn: The smell of wood smoke caught on hair kindles my craving, the indent of a mattress shapes my want, acrylic wool stokes the sticky heat of passion. In winter we slam the doors, burn the firs, *get inside each other*. In winter, all my ends are falling. 🍂





Marble Madness

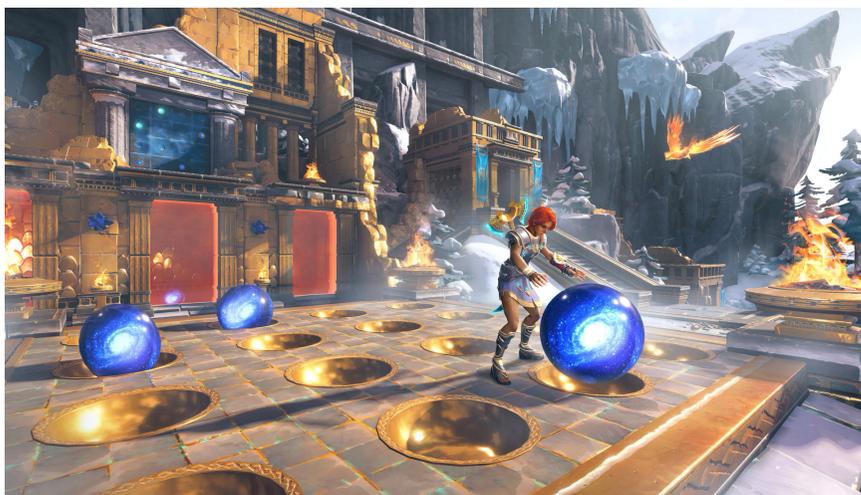
Take a look at some of the structures in *Immortals Fenyx Rising*. What stands out the most to you about these buildings? I see plenty of pillars made from sparkling marble, so I'm guessing that *Immortals Fenyx Rising* is meant to be set in ancient Greece. When it comes to architecture, what could possibly be more characteristic of ancient Greece than pillars made from sparkling marble? The answer to this question is actually color.

While marble was of course used in ancient Greece, the material was mostly appreciated because it was strong, so marble pillars were basically just the steel girders of their time. I can think of several exceptions like the Centre Pompidou, but steel girders are normally hidden behind another material as opposed to being left in plain sight. This tends to be drywall. I don't think that it should come as much of a surprise for you to learn that people did pretty similar stuff in ancient Greece. They were definitely made out of marble, but the pillars of the Parthenon for example weren't sparkling white. They were smeared with paint.

People have known about this practice of painting pillars for hundreds of years, but there's been a strong resistance to acknowledging that structures in ancient Greece were covered with color. You would have no idea by looking at them today because whatever traces of color were left after thousands of years underground have been removed over the course of what continues to be called restoration work. The result is of course that people today associate ancient Greece with sparkling marble. You can see this all the time in games.

The publisher behind *Immortals Fenyx Rising*, Ubisoft, knows all about such marble madness. This would be the same developer which made *Assassin's Creed: Origins* and *Odyssey*.

While the place is definitely Egypt, the time happens to be the Hellenistic period, so *Assassin's Creed: Origins* might as well be set in ancient Greece. The name of this period says it all in my personal opinion. Egypt started giving up its traditional culture at this particular point in time. In any case, you wouldn't think that you're supposed to be in ancient Egypt if you stroll through the streets of Alexandria in *Assassin's Creed: Origins*. This part of the game world is basically just a bunch of buildings made from sparkling marble. I should give credit where credit is due, so I'll point out that some parts of them are painted, but the fact of the matter is that most of the structures are plain to the point of parody. Take a walk around this part of the game world and you'll come across a little bit of color on the lintels and lattices. The pillars and pilasters for the most part are sparkling white, though. Look at the Lighthouse of Alexandria for long enough and you'll see what I mean. While the structure seems to shine at night, the building is absolutely blinding by day.

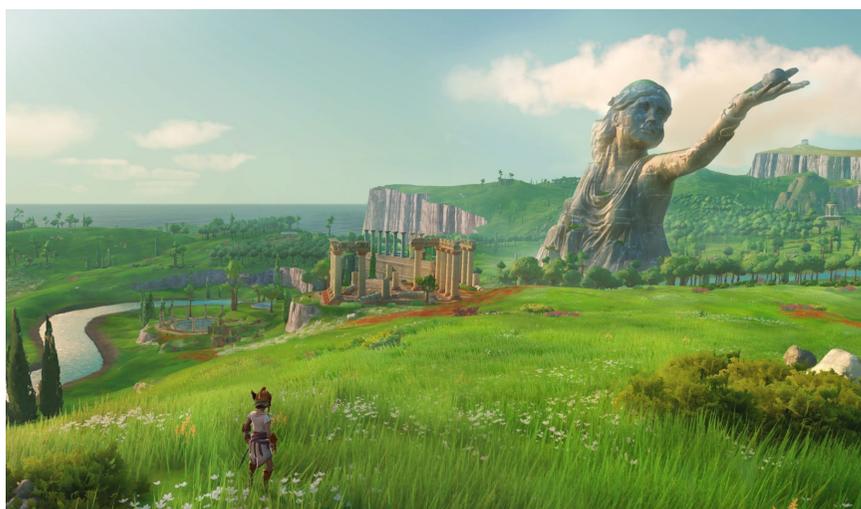


When it comes to color, the developer didn't make waves with *Assassin's Creed: Origins*, but Ubisoft made a little bit of a splash with *Odyssey*. Similar to *Assassin's Creed: Origins*, the game is set in ancient Greece. I don't mean Egypt, though. This time I really mean ancient Greece. Alexandria is basically just a bunch of buildings made out of sparkling marble, but Athens on the other hand is filled with structures which are covered with color. The place definitely isn't perfect. The structures in this part of the game world should really be smeared with a lot more paint. They seem tasteful when the reality was rather tasteless. The pillars and pilasters for example are mostly sparkling

white. In any case, Athens in *Assassin's Creed: Odyssey* represents a step in the right direction when it comes to historical accuracy. Take some time to explore this part of the game world and you'll come across plenty of painted marble. The statue of Athena in the Parthenon is even covered with color. You could say the same thing for the most part about the surrounding structure. The building doesn't blind you like the Lighthouse of Alexandria.

The developer depicted some sort of reality in *Assassin's Creed: Origins* and *Odyssey*, but Ubisoft walked things back a little bit when it came to *Immortals Fenyx Rising*. The structures in the game world are sparkling white. What you're seeing in *Immortals Fenyx Rising* is marble madness. What exactly is the deal with this? The answer is a matter of history.

People have perceived painted marble to be an attack on their aesthetic sensibilities for hundreds of years. The idea that structures in ancient Greece could have been covered with color is pretty shocking. The place is supposed to be the birthplace of western civilization, so shouldn't Alexandria or Athens have looked like New York or London? In my personal opinion, this gets at the heart of why the structures in *Immortals Fenyx Rising* are sparkling white. People have never been able to accept that most of their perspectives about ancient Greece aren't historically accurate. When it comes to architecture, the reason for this would have to be the orientalist idea that smearing stuff with color is a part of eastern as opposed to western civilization. The problem is that if people were to accept that structures in the place were covered with color, they would have to accept that ancient Greece had more in common with Persia than Britain. The fact of the matter is that people in the place were looking east, though. They weren't looking west. 🇺





No Man's Sky vs. Cyberpunk 2077

So. *Cyberpunk 2077*. That sure was a shitshow, wasn't it? I could drone on about how the game was such a mess upon its release that people began alleging that CD Projekt Red outright lied about the state of the game, or even the lowest hanging and most obvious fruit of how the game was literally so much of a goddamn mess at launch that Sony actually pulled it off of the PSN marketplace and offered refunds to everyone who bought it on the platform. I could (and might still) do that, but instead I have a question for us all to ponder: "What the fuck?" Because a little over four years ago we had a similar situation with an equally hyped-up game that had a very disappointing launch that resulted in people demanding refunds and accusing the developers of lying. But here's the thing: people (read: The Gamers) were utterly *furious* about *No Man's Sky* to the point where Hello Games' Sean Murray – who had sort of become the face of the project – was getting death threats. And yet *Cyberpunk 2077's* very similar (arguably worse, in my opinion) transgressions seem to be regarded as more funny than infuriating.

I'm gonna tell you all upfront that I don't have any answers to any of this. The best I can offer is speculation and more questions, but I think these are things very much worth thinking about even if we can't find definitive causes or perfect solutions.

I remember people angrily digging into *No Man's Sky* to try and prove how Sean Murray was maliciously lying about the game during development in order to effectively steal money from innocent gamers (*gagging noises). People lost their fucking minds when they discovered two players could be in

the same location but not see each other or interact. It was a goddamn *scandal*. But CD Projekt Red supposedly lied about performance and stability on the PlayStation 4 and Xbox One, currently a much bigger install base than the PlayStation 5 or Xbox Series X that both just released a little over a month ago and are still proving difficult to get a hold of for a lot of people. Why is there not a bigger stink about a company (allegedly) misleading consumers to such a degree?

Granted, yes, stinks are definitely being made. Some people and some outlets are talking about the mess that is *Cyberpunk 2077* in a greater capacity than just reporting on Sony pulling the game off of PSN or the fact that OpenCritic is openly accusing the company of lying. This is good. But the masses by and large don't seem to care all that much. Or rather, they do care in the sense that they can post videos to Twitter about how goofy the game is when a car randomly decided to do a barrel roll or a player character gets punted so far into the air that the entire game world's map becomes a single pixel on a screen. Why is it okay that CD Projekt Red dropped the ball so spectacularly on a game that, supposedly, so many people were looking forward to more than any videogame ever? Why was it not okay when little indie studio Hello Games did the same thing with *No Man's Sky*?

I've got three theories that are based entirely on my own speculation, so, you know, don't try to interpret any of this as Definitely What Happened. But I'm going to share them anyway. First, maybe it was mostly the "edgelords" that were mad about *No Man's Sky*, and maybe because *Cyberpunk's* marketing and CDPR's social media accounts have made it a point to pander to "edgelords" they're far more willing to give *Cyberpunk 2077* a pass? Or second and far more likely but still just theoretical, maybe it's because for all its many, many, many faults, CD Projekt Red is highly regarded as a AAA game company while Hello Games was just "those folks that made *Joe Danger*" until Sean Murray became history's greatest monster because he . . . said something would be in the game that wasn't in the game when it came out? Third and also more likely, maybe it's because people had a face and a name to associate with *No Man's Sky* throughout its development, so they had a specific target rather than a nebulous brand to attack?

Look the point is it's not okay for a videogame developer to mislead customers. It's not okay for a company to lie about their intentions to not overwork their employees. It's not okay to celebrate a company or developer for doing either or both of those things (or celebrate them in spite of it). It's not okay for someone to threaten the life of another person because of a perceived slight. It's not okay. So why *is* it okay for some people? 🙄

Features





THE
THRILL
OF
BEING
THE
WORLD'S
ONLY ACTIVE
PLAYER

By Henry Ewins



The industry usually likes to talk about the games that have amassed large or at least dedicated communities, but there is something thrilling in the exclusivity of the inverse. We've been forced into such market-driven mindsets that it almost seems unthinkable. What, verily, is the point of a product that *chooses* to entertain less than the maximum audience for what it's "selling?" Why would you ever draw attention to the fact that no one is playing? Consumers and numbers are the be-all and end-all validation that what you've made has any value . . . aren't they?

On July 26, I set off on an adventure. Not your average videogame escapade wherein you walk a path trail-blazed by QA long ago – edges sanded down – and help an NPC spoken to by millions of other players. An actual virtual venture into the unknown. The sum of all active play-

ers. Player one of one in *This, Too, Shall Pass* by [Moth Loth](#).

Having a word to mean "alone" but with an emphasis on positive connotations feels like it should be one of those German words that has no direct translation. "Solitude" and "aleness" get us some of the way there. The one German word I can find is "Waldeinsamkeit," meaning "the feeling of being alone in the woods." Maybe that's even more apropos for my explorations of *This, Too, Shall Pass*, a game about a natural landscape personalized to your location evolving (or devolving?) over time against the background of the climate crisis.

So too have I been a lone player many times over in the "part memorial and part archive" experimental virtual space that is [DUSTNET](#), a game from brothers [Neilson](#) and [Milan Koerner-Safrata](#) that explores the impermanence of multi-

player servers within *Counter Strike's* famous *de_dust2* map. I'd minimize the game and idle in a server just to keep the previous night's player creations alive before giving in to the game's cruel entropy – letting the player count zero hit zero and resetting the server.

What if a game's artistic value was in fact expressed by leveraging a low playerbase? I spoke to the developers of *This, Too, Shall Pass* and *DUSTNET*, which uniquely effect artistic meaning in their distribution and design choices. I wanted to know how and why developers can be inspired to go so against the grain that they sacrifice what seems like the most fundamental of any creator's wants – having an audience.

"... this project wouldn't have been possible as a commercial game," said Neilson. "The design decisions in this project were very unbusinesslike." But with oversaturation comes an opportunity in itself as far as the brothers are concerned. "There are interesting niches to be explored in

the rich textures of video game engines we have now . . ." [From oversaturation] "the mundane becomes interesting." *DUSTNET* is a reflective piece in this way. A mechanical embrace of the noise and chaos of both a difficult commercial landscape and how preservation of any virtual space is impossible.

Moth conversely saw *This, Too, Shall Pass* as more of an active rejection of the homogeneous digital storefront marketplace of the day. "I feel quite strongly that the way that games are treated as hyper-commercialized products surrounded by toxic consumer culture is incredibly detrimental to creative expression in the medium," Moth told me. "My decision to originally release the game in a way that absolutely rejects all conventional wisdom on how you should release a game is my way of rebelling against the conditions that have created the never-ending indieapocalypse in the first place."

This is why I suspect I was alone in playing *This, Too, Shall Pass*. It's not be-



cause the game has gone completely [under the radar](#), but because Moth had an extremely creative approach to distribution. *This, Too, Shall Pass* had only five copies in circulation. Four left to [physically travel the world on USB sticks](#), whilst the last was awarded to the [biggest tree planter](#). “I wanted to indulge in a sense of physicality and foster a little bit of social interaction through people handing off the USB keys to each other,” said Moth. *This, Too, Shall Pass* was the unthinkable – a game made physical and artificially scarce to protest the digital format’s devaluing of games. Each key was even itself unique with the game set in a different climate zone. Anticipating people copying the game’s files off the USB, Moth created a publicly available “hollowed out anti-version of the main game” (called [This, Too, Has Passed](#)) that would launch in its stead. “I felt like simply not launching the game wasn’t very interesting,” said Moth.

So where did this experiment in physical distribution lead? “Most of the physical copies of the game didn’t have very long lives, one never even made it to its initial destination,” Moth admitted, but there was an upside. Attention. “What did surprise me is the amount of just cultural following the game got. The [@afleeting-world bot](#) has just broken 1000 followers, which is far more than I expected it to get . . . people approach me and tell me about their own projects which took some inspiration from *This, Too, Shall Pass*, which is an incredible legacy to have for a project like that.”



It’s that feature of in-game screenshots being uploaded by a bot to a [Twitter account](#) that allowed me to get the attention of Moth and the bot’s some 1,004 Followers. Within the antithesis of a commercial product, my adventure became an event. I was THE player charting and capturing for both an active audience and for posterity what my little slice of world’s terrain data looked like, how it evolved over hours, and where my adventure took me. Ironically, through being as alone in this venture as is possible, it made it social. The “communal” Twitter bot being the key. “When a game creates moments of meaningful social connection,” said Moth, “whether that’s through multiplayer, fandom or participating in an experimental distribution model, that’s an amazing thing.”

The same is true of *DUSTNET*. Finding yourself alone among vulnerable, ephemeral creations of strangers has an almost cultural resonance -- as if you’re uncovering the works of an old civiliza-



tion (if that civilization's creations were contained to a Tuesday evening). Wherein visiting an active *Minecraft* server wouldn't hold much significance day to day, observing *DUSTNET*'s creations is an event.

Is an experience really more meaningful for being temporary or exclusive?

Of course, we can all pick up any game made decades ago (or potentially this year) with no active players and try to get excited over that fact. The difference is *This, Too, Shall Pass* and *DUSTNET* weaponize player exclusivity to comment more meaningfully on impermanence and more importantly – sew community. While many online games die indignantly clawing for life. These two games live and die a thousand times over as part and parcel of their design. *This, Too, Shall Pass*'s virtual space, true to its name and message of ecological collapse, won't last forever as you play. Then there's its physical nature. “. . . the limited physical release plays into the game's theme of nothing being forever. Once a USB gets lost or breaks, that particular version of the game is gone forever,” Moth says.

“On the other hand, through the fact that the only way to keep people playing the game is to physically give it to someone else, it also plays into the [thematic] messages of community.”

DUSTNET is also fundamentally about community and game culture. “[Resetting servers] was a cruel way to bring more of the folk elements of multiplayer games to *DUSTNET* by enforcing players to do things like idling or filling the server to keep it alive.” The game was once even harsher. “. . . bunnyhop, admin, or edit mode were physical objects you would have to find and discover each time you joined the server to formalize the conventions of videogame servers.” The death of servers for the brothers was just another part of this online culture – the “folk Source engine multiplayer deconstructions” we understand games like *Counter Strike* by. Although Koerner believes [50 years from now](#) *DUSTNET* might exist as a bonafide archive for *de_dust2*, by dying a hundred times over with its original design, *DUSTNET* captured in microcosm the ephemerality of cultures and spaces. “I want to . . . continue exam-

ining our lived experiences of games and how these virtual spaces age or don't age with us," said Neilson.

Interestingly, given all the games' parallels, both have seen their designs evolve down similar lines too. Rejecting these past design decisions, *DUSTNET* now preserves its map changes upon hitting zero players and is more an additive creative space. *This, Too, Shall Pass* is now available to purchase digitally – freed of its physical ties. This is a curious twist in the tale given how significant these choices were to each game previously. Do the developers see their games in a new light given these changes? Is the meaning not lost?

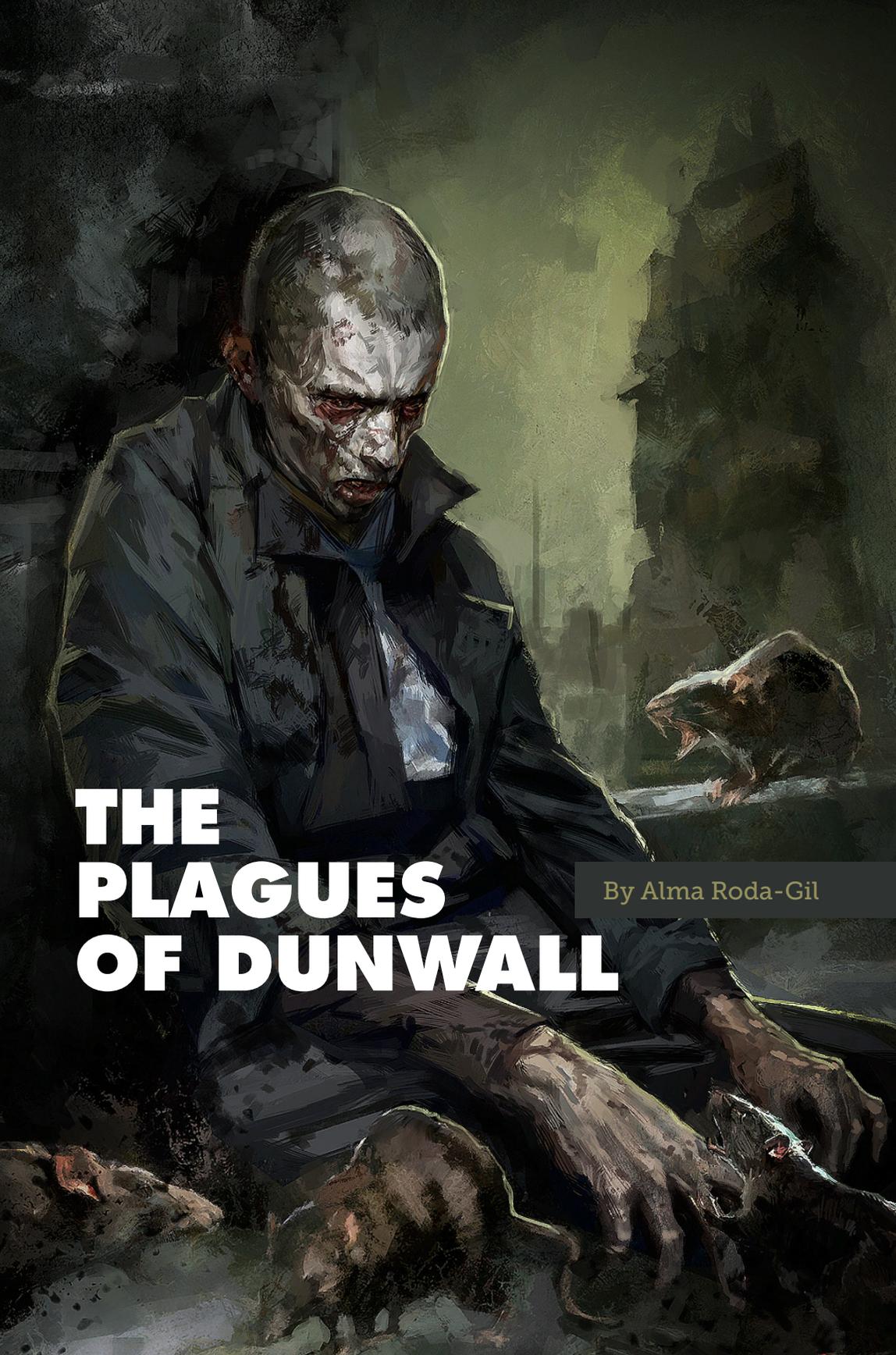
"The original versions of the game on the USB keys are still unique from the publicly released version of the game, so in a way I feel like a lot of the original intentions with those still hold up," says Moth. The digital version too, Moth tells me, conserves the spirit of the original distribution by tailoring different locations and climate zones based on the computer you run it on. ". . . it retains the communal aspect of the Twitter bot being a window into the totality of the game experience."

DUSTNET conversely tried to find a compromise. Although Neilson liked the "few beautiful moments when the server would collapse and rebuilding would

commence" the brothers recognized that they were leaving players overly-frustrated and only "exciting the initiated." "Since the game oscillates between single player and multiplayer, having the objects persist in the world became an obvious need for future players to find anything interesting left in the ruins." Better that a lone active player has a wealth of things to see than be left with a barren `de_dust2` they thought.

The latest admin message for *DUSTNET* reads: "In the likely case you find yourself in the server and it is empty please enjoy `de_dust2`, bhop around and keep *DUSTNET* company." What's clear from the design of both *DUSTNET* and *This, Too, Shall Pass*, however, is that far from just making you keep the game company, the loneliness from their distribution choices and design can be leveraged to cultivate community. When I set off on that July 26 *This, Too, Shall Pass* escapade, it was the exclusivity of the experience that I initially thought was thrilling. Yet, the most intoxicating thing about my isolation in *This, Too, Shall Pass* became sharing it. Observing *DUSTNET*'s creations alone whilst preserving them allows connection to others in a completely unique way. Both demonstrate that sometimes distance and space are key to connecting. 🍷





THE PLAGUES OF DUNWALL

By Alma Roda-Gil



On the surface, Arkane Studios' *Dishonored* is a game about revenge. The story's inciting incident is the protagonist Corvo Attano being framed for the assassination of his lover and boss, the Empress Jessamine Kaldwin; as Corvo, the player fights to clear their name and finds themselves at the center of a conspiracy to topple everything they know.

But at the real core of *Dishonored* is a story about the Rat Plague, ravaging the fictional city of Dunwall as the player sneaks around, teaching us that if a society's response to a Plague is to use it to profit off of the most vulnerable for personal gain rather than protecting them, then that means it's rotten to its very core and the whole system must go. It's there from the very start: the game opens with Corvo returning from a mission to seek aid for the Plague from other nations in the Empire as the Empress discusses her plans to save the people of Dunwall – a measure that will ultimately result in her being assassinated.

Throughout the game the Plague colors Corvo's actions, and vice versa, in a near-symbiotic relationship. If the player kills civilians and assassinates all of their targets in loud ways, the Plague gets worse and more obvious, with rats and sick people roaming the streets along with burning bodies in the distance, but if Corvo goes the non-lethal way of dealing with his targets instead, the Plague stays insidious while it burrows deep through the heart of the Empire. Gameplay-wise, the variations happen through Arkane Studios' "play your way" mechanic, where levels can be approached in different ways, all corresponding to a different level of Chaos.

The game's Chaos system can be read as a measure of morality, with Low Chaos being obtained by killing less people and High Chaos being the more violent road, but it's actually a measure of stability. There's no escape from the fact that Dunwall is rotten to its core either way – it's just a matter of whether or not that rotteness exists within the system the rich and powerful have built.

The absence of burning bodies and sick people, as obvious signs of the Plague in Low Chaos doesn't mean things aren't bad, it just means the corruption is happening behind closed doors and in small details.

The main way Low Chaos corruption manifests is in the fates of Corvo's targets if they are dealt with non-lethally. One example is how one of the targets is an Overseer (*Dishonored's* equivalent of priests) who can be rendered unconscious and branded as a heretic, causing him to be excommunicated and become an outlaw; if the player takes this approach, his Plague-ridden body can be found in a later mission. It's less obvious than the burning bodies and rats, but it sends a clear message: Dunwall is a place where people can't afford to break out of the corrupt roles they occupy in society, because the threat of ending up destitute and catching the plague is always hanging over their heads.

The rich and powerful are willing to look away as long as you don't upset their

status quo and spill blood on the carpet. In a mission where Corvo infiltrates a high-society party, you can overhear aristocrats talking about how the discovery of minerals used in the making of rat lamps – a special type of anti-Plague security – on their land means they'll continue to be rich for years to come.

As Corvo investigates the Empress' death, he finds out the man responsible for her assassination is Hiram Burrows, then her Spymaster and now the acting Lord Regent ruling over the Empire. In one of the game's last missions, the player is faced with a choice: kill Burrows and avenge Jessamine, or take the non-lethal route and expose his crimes.

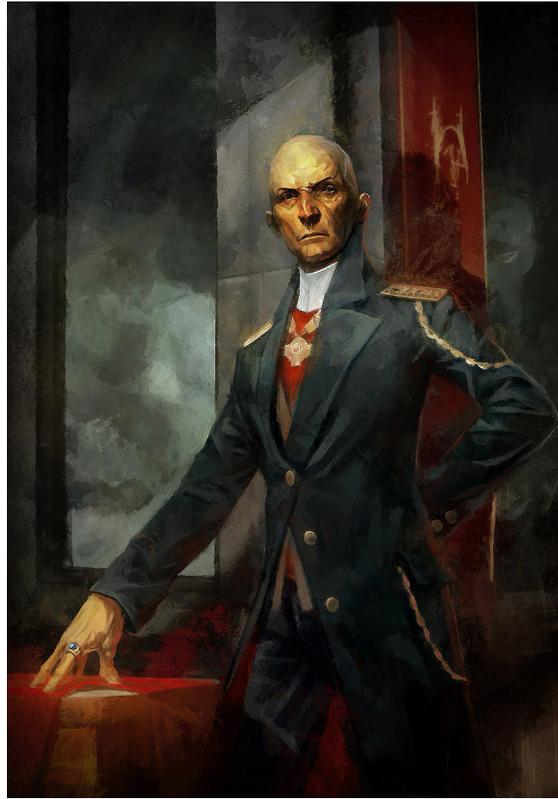
By this point, it's known no matter what that Burrows is responsible for the coup, but if you don't choose the harder, less gory option, you never find out a crucial piece of information that changes *Dishonored* completely: the people in power didn't just overthrow Jessamine Kaldwin. They also caused the Plague on purpose.



Burrows' office safe contains an audio note where he details his plan. "My Poverty Eradication Plan was meant to bring prosperity to the city, to rid us of those scoundrels who waste their days in filth and drink, without homes or occupations other than to beg for the coin for which the rest of us toil. And it was a simple plan: bring the disease bearing rats from the Pandysian continent, and let them take care of the poor for us. The plan worked perfectly." The canon outcome of the mission is that this recording is played for everyone to hear, exposing the plot.

Released in 2012, this first entry in the *Dishonored* series is almost a decade old, but the points it made then about how the handling of the Plague reflected society are eerily relevant to current times; while in real life no one is behind engineering the Plague and there is no conspiracy, *Dishonored's* thesis that rich people will watch pandemics tear through marginalized and vulnerable communities and be content to profit off of it until it reaches them mirrors COVID-19 exactly.

The rich and powerful never think that the problems of the common people will affect them, because they assume they are untouchable, and that is what eventually unmakes them in *Dishonored*; Burrows' recorded confession details how he never counted on the disease spreading to everyone. "The rats - it was as if they sought to undo me. They hid from the catchers, and bred at a sickening rate. Soon it didn't matter. Rich, poor, all were falling sick."



The greatest strength in the game's message lies in the fact it was written not as commentary on COVID-19 or any Plague before it, but rather as a story about corruption being a cycle where each part works to make sure the gears keep turning; companies like Amazon seeing record profits through a pandemic isn't proof of a system that's broken but a system that's working exactly as intended.

In *Dishonored*, the Plague is a tool used to keep the status quo from changing, both before and after the Empress is assassinated. And while a cure for the Plague is found at the end of the game, the aftermath is laden with consequences that ripple through time for years to

come, all the way to *Dishonored 2*, set fifteen years after the events of the first game.

In the sequel, Corvo and his now-adult daughter and new Empress Emily face another coup – ever since Jessamine Kaldwin was assassinated in *Dishonored*, her half-sister Delilah has been watching from the shadows and plotting to take the throne for herself. As either Emily or Corvo, *Dishonored 2* takes the player to places in the Empire beyond Dunwall like Karnaca, a mining city that was once referred to as the “Jewel of the South” but is now crumbling due to disease and war under Duke Luca Abele’s rule.

Karnaca, much like Dunwall, is a place where society is heavily stratified, where the rich and powerful have built their thrones from the bones of poor and immigrant workers and the picture gets uglier the closer you look – rather than a plague, the city is overrun by parasitic insects known as bloodflies and wracked by dust. Both of these problems aren’t just overt signs of corruption, they’re results of it: the only reason the bloodflies have proliferated so much is because the Duke refused to call the problem an epidemic and stopped funding smoke-flashing operations to reduce their spread, and the dust is caused by the overmining of silver ore.

Regardless of whether the player chooses Emily or Corvo, both characters are horrified to find out that this has been happening while Dunwall prospered after the Rat Plague; they receive a sobering reminder that the way the Empire is run

is what allowed things like this to happen in the first place. *Dishonored 2*’s message is that you can’t view something like a Plague as a singular event that comes and goes – you must consider the parameters in society that enabled it. Painting over wallpaper that’s been stained with mold might hide the problem for a time, but the mold is still present and eating away at the walls. Sooner or later it will reappear unless something is done.

Near the end of *Dishonored 2*, it’s revealed that Delilah’s anger is fueled by her upbringing as an illegitimate daughter of the Emperor, growing up in a debtor’s prison until her mother’s death at the hands of a prison guard. At first glance, Delilah’s attempt to take the throne seems to be about revenge, but just like the *Dishonored* series as a whole, it’s about her rage at a ruthless system where your birth determines whether you should starve or not. Delilah isn’t just corrupt, she’s a direct result of what the cycle of corruption does to people. By the end of the game, Corvo and Emily agree that the way they run the Empire must change; they finally understand that while not everything that has happened to them is directly their fault, their inaction against a rotten system contributed to the pieces falling into place.

At its very core, *Dishonored* is about this: Plague or no Plague, society is only as good as the way it treats the most vulnerable people within it. 🐁





RELIGHT THE TORCH

By Jason McMaster



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.

The ship crashes through the waves, crewed by sailors and peopled by that usual unsavory lot – those who want to disappear and those seeking fortune. You're in the latter category on this trip. When you hear the call of "land ho!" you stumble onto the deck, tired of the stench and endless rocking in the guts of the vessel. You think the call is mistaken until you see the glow through the fog. Trevail Point is under attack!

In your first moments on land, you are pressed into defense of the city, helping hold back a goblin invasion. Fortunately, among your fellow travellers there are some brave souls waiting to join the fight. With the help of an interesting assortment of allies, you manage to push back the horde.

Once the fighting is done, you meet General Graye and learn of the dangers in the countryside. Looks like there's a bunch of horrible monsters out there making life miserable for the world. It's time to go to work. Thus begins your latest adventures in the world of Novastraia.

* * *

Anthony Gallegos started his career in videogames working for IGN. So it wasn't a huge jump for him to go into game design. He bounced around to a few studios – "Such is the way of the industry, right?" After the last studio he worked at shut down, Gallegos found a new home at Echtra. "On a whim I applied, and quickly learned that not only were they a rad cultural fit for me, but they were also making the next game in the *Torchlight* franchise," he says. "It was a perfect fit for me, not only because they worked in Unreal 4 and I was familiar, but because they were making an action-RPG like my previous title, *Marvel Heroes*."

Other than the basic challenges of making a game, Echtra took on the task of making a new entry into an already established and

popular series of games. *Torchlight* and *Torchlight II* were developed by a different studio altogether – Runic. “I think if Runic Games still existed it might have felt bad. I mean, when I lived in Seattle I knew people at the studio working on *Hob*,” he says. *Hob* was an adventure game launched by Runic studios that, while praised by critics, would be the studio’s last game. “Since they closed, and since we had some employees who had formerly worked at Runic, it felt like we had the right blessings to take it on.”



Echtra, a newer studio headed by ex-members of Blizzard and several other companies, has developed and released *Torchlight III*. A number of people working on the new title were responsible for a little-known game called *Diablo*, so it seemed like a good fit. The *Torchlight* games show their *Diablo* DNA through dynamic hack and slash action and a neverending loot chase. Or, in Gallegos words, “*Torchlight III* is the sequel to *Torchlight II*, an action-RPG that challenges you to chase the two best things: loot and levels. It’s a game made for people who love to click until they break their mouse, slay monsters and collect all the things they drop.”

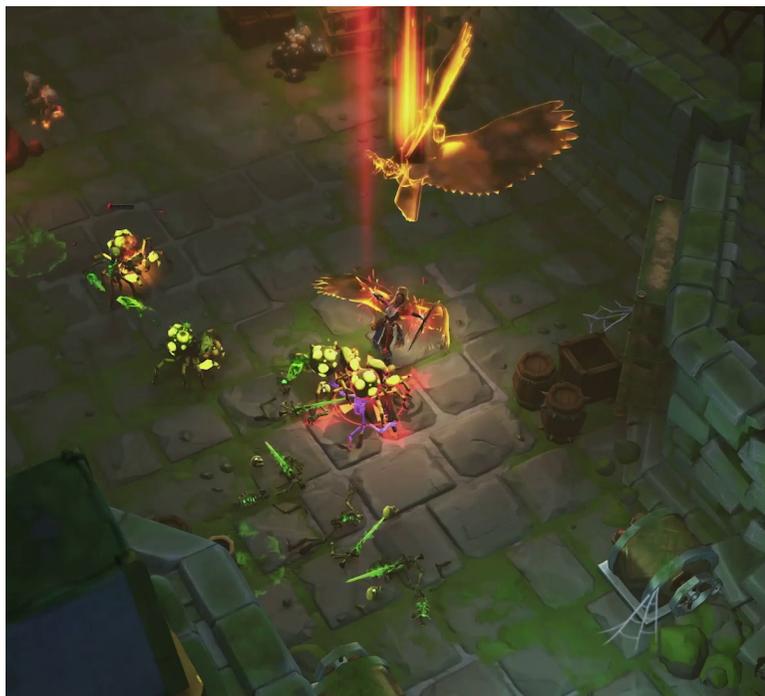
While wild clicking, colorful monsters and cool character classes are a big part of the *Torchlight* experience, where else did the team take inspiration? “*Torchlight III* was inspired by the previous *Torchlight* games, *Diablo* and countless other action-RPGs,” he says. “I would also

say that the team drew inspiration from all the games we have played and were playing during its development, if not overtly than at least in spirit.”

When adding different elements, the team was not afraid to reach outside of the traditional action-RPG world to find what would be the best fit of elements for their new game. “When we were designing how players could customize their personal spaces, which we call their Fort, we would look at *The Sims* franchise for how they did environment customization,” Gallegos says. “When we were experimenting with non-linear progression systems we looked at *Neverwinter* and *Star Trek Online*.”

* * *

Instead of working on a new IP, Echtra was formed to create a new *Torchlight* game with the IP from publisher Perfect World. There are, of course, ups and downs on working on a known property. You don’t have to come up with new lore, background or settings, but you do have to manage expectations of fans. “Working on an established



franchise is awesome because it means there are already a group of people with a vested interest in the series,” says Gallegos, “but it’s also really intimidating.”

Designing a game for an audience that already knows what it wants can lead to some difficult design situations. “We knew that there were many expectations people had,” he says. “Some of those were legitimate, but I also think a lot of people have an idea of how a game was versus how it is in reality, you know? So when we were in early access getting feedback, we had to do a lot of filtering of discussions to try and understand if people were wearing what I call ‘Nostalgia Goggles’ when comparing our game to the previous games.”



The lenses of rose-colored glasses paint everything in a kinder light when comparing now to the past. One example being the number of different weapon types that show up in the game. “People often said we didn’t have enough, and that the ones we had felt less meaningful than they were in *Torchlight II*,” he says. “However, on paper we had easily as many, and I felt we had many that were more significant. Now, that’s not to dump on *Torchlight II*, because it’s fantastic, but I think sometimes people’s memories are not congruent with reality. That’s OK, too, because we all do that. So we have to interpret it through that lens, try and figure out how much of it is correct and not let our own biases get in the way and figure out the effective changes we can make.”

After a certain point in development, the people making the game just have to be able to let it go and have it’s own life. After the work

is done, Gallegos' hope for people who end up playing his game is simple. "I hope that players have a single good playthrough, enjoying the various classes and sub-class systems we've introduced," he says. "I know a lot of other people would cry out about the endgame, but since so many players drop almost every game after playing only a small part of it, if any person plays through the game and rolls credits, I call that a huge win. If people love it enough to grind on it after completing the story than that's even better."

* * *

Torchlight, the original game, was released at the perfect time – in the dozen years between *Diablo II* and *Diablo III* – and oozed charm. With the simple design philosophy of boiling down the “fun” parts of the game experience to remove as much of the tedium as possible, such as adding a pet that can sell loot for you in town without you having to leave the dungeon. The innovations to the action-RPG style were a very welcome change from the norm. It had the simple appeal of *Diablo's* “You're in a town above a dangerous resource, and the randomized caves below are brimming with evil just for you to destroy.”



One of the biggest things missing from *Torchlight* was multiplayer, which was supposed to eventually come in the form of a *Torchlight* MMO. Though it never saw the light of day, the MMO led indirectly

to *Torchlight III*. Runic Games was closed when Perfect World shifted focus to “games as a service.” When ex-Runic studio founder Max Schaefer started Echtra, it was with the intent of making a *Torchlight* MMO called *Torchlight Frontiers*. That’s the game that became *Torchlight III*.

Torchlight II released with a much larger world, day/night cycles, weather effects and multiplayer support. Once again, the team struck gold, even though it launched against *Diablo III*. And then silence. As it goes in the world of games, time moves on and studios close.

So, in 2018, When Echtra announced a continuation of the series, the world of Novastraia got another shot of life and a chance at attracting new fans to the series. More than that, though, Gallegos and the team at Echtra get a chance to keep the torch lit and make their own mark in the memories of players going forward.

* * *

Torchlight III is available now for Windows, PlayStation 4, Xbox One and Nintendo Switch. 



Contributors

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Illustrations

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