

UNWINNABLE MONTHLY

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COSMIC RACISM • GOING UNDER • CAR CROONING

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Monthly

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This machine kills fascists.



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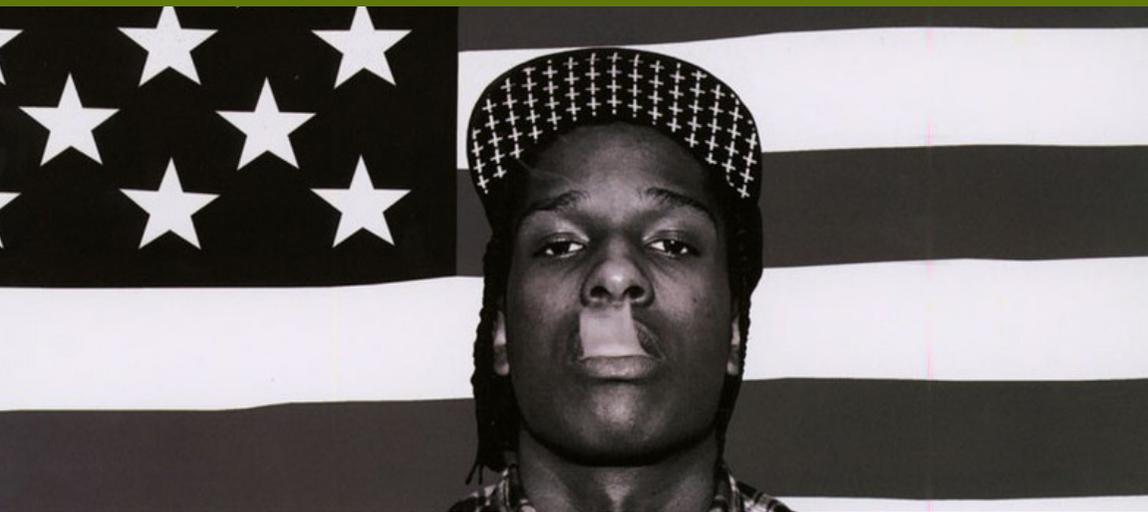
In New Jersey, this week, it has been open windows, crocuses and short sleeves. The day after this comes out, we'll probably have a blizzard, but right now it seems like spring is imminent and that feels all right.

Our cover features this month, by Noah Berlatsky, takes a look at the cosmic and the racist in the works of H.P. Lovecraft and H.G. Wells. It's a thinker for sure. Andrew Kiya follows with a look at the videogame *Going Under* and its message of worker solidarity. Christine M. Estel rounds out our regular features with a keen story about music and intergenerational connection. For our sponsored feature, Ben Sailer looks at the intriguing car-building game *Automation*.

In the columns, Noah Springer checks out some albums you can't find on the mainstream streaming services because of reasons. Oluwatayo Adewole's world tour continues with Spain and Pedro Almodóvar's *Law of Desire*. Amanda Hudgins insists Sheriff Stilinski's name is John. Diego Nicolás Argüello's epic three-parter about the *Into The Spine* Discord server wraps up. Melissa King salutes Lady Maria (sort of). Ben Sailer hits a homerun with the new *Bases Loaded Pocket Player*. Matt Marrone's kids have discovered the *Star Wars* universe. Autumn Wright is getting ready for the post-post-apocalypse (part one of two!). Justin Reeve examines the infestation of parasites in *Dishonored 2*. Rob Rich wraps it all up with a look at his gunpla collection.

And that's that! We'll see you on April Fool's Day for a deadly serious issue of *Exploits*.

Stu Horvath
Kearny, New Jersey
March 12, 2021



It's March 2021, and that means I've been writing this column every month for two years. This blows my mind in more than a few ways, but it also has me reflecting on the last couple years of hip hop I've been listening to, and the music I've been missing. I think one stumbling block I've run into is my reliance on Spotify. I remember back in the late '00s and early '10s where we were starting to catch the vibe that nearly everything would be streaming soon, but we were still downloading albums (and in some cases, buying *gasp* CDs). This was the peak of the blog era and mixtapes and I've recently been craving some of those vibes that you just can't find in the instant streaming era. I mean, you really can, but the albums I'm about to talk about still aren't available through the mainstream platforms like Spotify, Apple and Amazon. So, let's pull up our time machine and drop back a decade or two and spin some rare vibes.

Ratatat – *Remixes Vol. 1* and *Vol. 2*

Of all the albums I'm discussing this month, these two have the most obvious reason for not being on Spotify. If Ratatat got the rights to all of the verses they flipped on these two remix albums, they would have been bankrupt before the album dropped. But, through the magic of 21st-century production values and a little piracy, they were able to drop some of the best bangers of the '00s. Ratatat's trademark



psychedelic synth production, sliding guitars and crisp drums are pitch perfect for rapping, and when they slide them under classic verses from '90s hip hop royalty, including Missy Elliot, Jay-Z, 50 Cent, and Dirt McGirt himself.

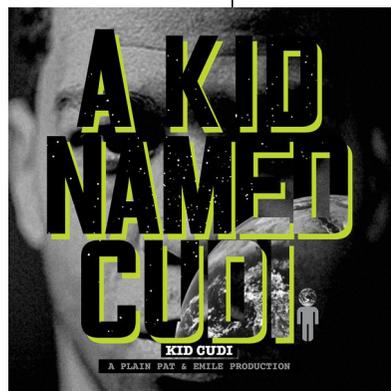
Looking at early reviews of the Ratatat albums was a funny little experiment, but I also found this gem from Pitchfork: “fans of Ratatat’s original material will naturally flock, but only a handful of Wu acolytes and radio-rap lemmings will catch whiff of the project, and of those that do, even fewer will find their way past the lack of trunk-bumping bombast to pick up the subtle gravity of Ratatat’s inspired revisions.” Now, with 15 years of hindsight, we can see that Ratatat’s subtle gravity not only expanded beyond a few Wu acolytes. In fact, I think you can argue that they have fundamentally influenced the current production landscape through their work with Kid Cudi.

Ratatat supplied the backing beats for two of Cudi’s earliest hits: “Heaven at Night” and “Pursuit of Happiness” (these also later appeared on his official label debut). They even played with Cudi on Letterman in 2009. Anybody following the contemporary hip hop scene knows that although Cudi’s newer work can be hit-or-miss, his early production styles and work with Kanye West influence the shift to auto-tune right around this era too, and I think it’s not hard to argue that Ratatat is ingrained in this transition.

Kid Cudi – *A Kid Named Cudi*

Speaking of Kid Cudi and Ratatat, it’s a shame that his debut mixtape *A Kid Named Cudi* has never made it to the biggest music platforms in the world. Front-to-back, this is one of my favorite albums of all time and still grips me in a way few other albums have, or probably will. Like the Ratatat albums, it’s clear why this isn’t available commercially: Cudi copped all of Outkast’s production for “Chonkyfire” and the whole melody of Paul Simon’s “50 Ways to Leave Your Lover” without license. But to be fair to both of these artists, I tend to think Cudi’s versions hold their own next to the classics. Cudi also drops one of my favorite runs off of any album on the back end of the tape, dropping five amazing tracks in a row to finish up. I could almost say the last eight tracks are seamless, but “Pillow Talk” unfortunately breaks the flow up a little bit. Regardless, if I could only listen to one stretch of five tracks for the rest of my life, this would probably be on the top of my list.

Despite my love of *A Kid Named Cudi* (and his first two albums), Kid Cudi’s career in the latter half of the 2010s will forever be a bit of a disappointment for me. In his recent music, he’s really dropped his staccato rapping style that dominated much of



his early music in favor of a more melodic moan. To be fair, he can do whatever he wants, and I still respect that he's out there doing his own thing, and I'll always have this mixtape – just not on Spotify.

A\$AP Rocky – *Live.Love.A\$AP*

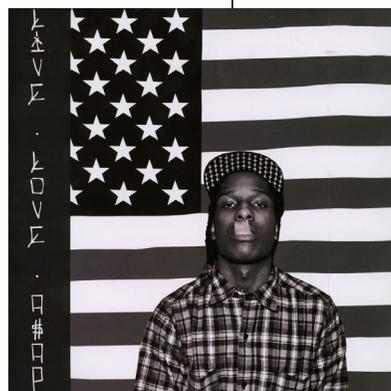
I physically remember the chills that ran down my spine when the bass dropped at the opening to “Palace” on *Live.Love.A\$AP*. My cousin recommended I check this up-and-coming NYC rapper out and, from the first beat to the last bar, I was hooked. Rocky's debut is peak cloud rap, but he does it all with a swagger matched by few to none. This album also represented a point in hip hop where barriers between geographic genres started to fade, and Rocky, a Harlemito to the core, was able to pick up sounds out of Houston and blend it into his own cultural stew. The results are so spectacular that I'm not really sure what the highlight of the album is: is it Rocky's consistently flawless flow, Clams Casino's heady smoked out beats, the ScHoolboy Q feature, that Wire sample, that “Out of This World” verse?

While some of the classics of the blog-era are now available through the mainstream platforms, it's a shame that it's not in wider circulation at this point. I would love to see a 10th anniversary edition of this with a wide release and all samples cleared, but with Rocky's continuing success, I'm not sure he's interested in a re-release. Fortunately, I still know where to find it.

Odd Future – *Radical*

Speaking of things that would be interesting to see re-released, I'd love to see Tyler the Creator's current fans respond to a re-release of *Radical*. I'm unclear to what extent people who found Tyler through his recent, Grammy-Award-winning music, are aware of his legacy with Odd Future (OF). His music has changed so much in the past decade, I'd be very interested to see if contemporary fans would like the early, aggressive, antagonistic Tyler of the late '00s and early '10s.

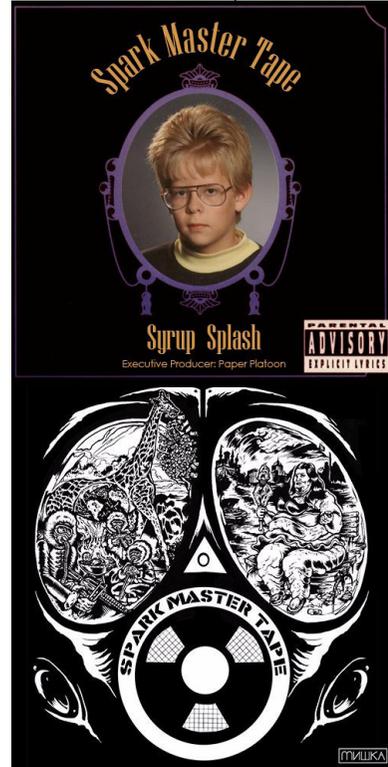
I'll come clean and say that I've liked OF's stuff since I first heard it. I even got to see them live a couple times. But at the same time, this is not music for everyone. Tyler, Earl Sweatshirt and the rest of the young crew made music that was purposefully offensive, full of rape jokes, homophobic slurs and casual references to pedophilia and murder. In some ways, this was a clear extension of horrorcore, even



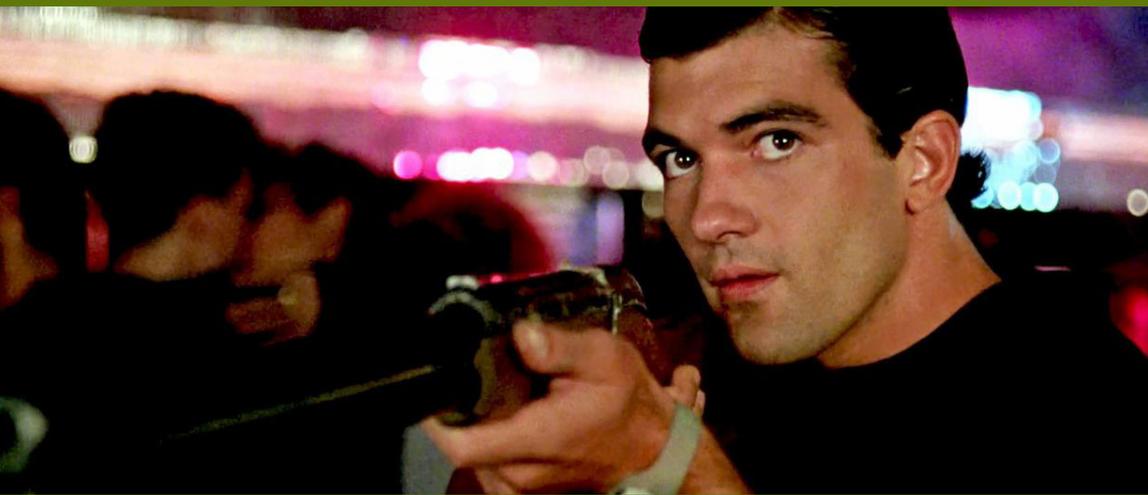
though the group denied the label. But I think their early work was more evidence of a bunch of experimental kids, trying to figure out their place in the world and the music scene. Odd Future feels like a time-bound experiment, and Tyler's recent mainstream success with a completely different aesthetic backs this idea up. But I'd still like to see a newer fan of Tyler stumble across "Splatter" on Spotify radio.

Spark Master Tape – *The 'Syrup Splash' Mixtape & The #SWOUP Serengeti Mixtape*

I stumbled across *The Syrup Splash Mixtape* back when I was a frequent participant in the HipHopHeads subreddit after one of the mods kept spamming it across the board. I didn't pick it up the first or second time I saw the strange cover art in my threads, but by the fourth or fifth time, I started to get interested. Then, when I plugged it in, I was immediately hooked. Masked and anonymous, Spark Master Tape and his production team, Paper Platoon, dropped two mixtapes in a row that still demand my attention when I put them on. Spark's pitched down vocals, the Platoon's heavy bass and synths and DJ Charlie's drops make the sonic aesthetic of Spark projects unique, but his verbal dexterity and impeccable flow keep these albums in my top tier. I'll save some space at the end of my column this month and just direct you to my blog [where I wrote more extensively about Spark](#), but I do wish these tapes were on Spotify so I could drop them into my playlists full of my favorite "legal" music.



Despite my complaining that these albums aren't available on mainstream streaming platforms, we all know that the internet is forever and none of these are hard to find – and that's not even taking straight piracy into account. As it has been for the last decade, SoundCloud continues to be a refuge to these albums and an inspiration for a new generation of rappers. With Spotify's notably sparse payment policies, SoundCloud is probably just as profitable a space for up-and-coming rappers as the major platforms, and it appears more influential. Nobody's talking about Spotify rappers or Amazon Music rappers. It's always "SoundCloud rappers are running the genre" this, or "SoundCloud rappers have no idea what the genre should actually be" that. But, when amazing albums like these are only available on SoundCloud, maybe that negative connotation feels a bit outdated.. 🍷



Welcome to World Tour, dig into your criadillas, listen out for the castanets and let's get started!

Law of Desire is a 1987 film by Pedro Almodóvar film about Pablo (Eusebio Poncela), a film director who's disappointed with his young lover Juan (Miguel Molina) and starts an affair with another younger man Antonio (Antonio Banderas). As Antonio becomes aware of Juan, he takes increasingly drastic measures to assure that Pablo will never leave him.

From start to finish this film is fantastic. Almodóvar has a real talent for taking what is functionally a soap opera plotline, and making it work as an entrancing feature film. The exaggerated characters and their associated performances are probably the best part. Banderas is incredible as the film's Evil Twink Antagonist, deftly manipulating and exaggerating both his perceived innocence and underlying malice. Carmen Maura is a powerhouse on the screen, always taking control of the scene and the rapport with her daughter Manuela Velasco is sweet and funny. Poncela does a great job of being deeply obnoxious but never unsympathetic.

What really makes this film stand out to me is the raw, unapologetic and deeply chaotic queerness. We casually open on a gay porn shoot. There's no moralizing, no attempt to paint it as degrading, or even any major plot relevance. The scene is a fun and silly way to open the film, be introduced to one of the characters and establish what to expect from the rest of it. I think there's a tendency in modern queer film to make every intimate scene feel like the Most Important Thing in the world and we don't do that here. They happen throughout the film, in both foreground and background. Some are defining

moments of fiery passion filled with intensity by Ángel Luis Fernández's cinematography and others just aren't – and that's fine.

Beyond the bedroom, *Law of Desire* continues to unabashedly bathe in its transgressiveness. The protagonists use cocaine frequently and casually. They swear and shout in the street, they wear phenomenal outrageous outfits. One of my favorite moments in the film is where the central queer found family of Tina (Maura), Ada (Velsaco) and Pablo (Poncela) are walking home on a muggy summer night and see a man hosing down the street. Without even really thinking about it, Tina jumps into the stream of water and there's a held moment of her really just enjoying herself in this impulsive and ridiculous act. This scene in particular speaks to the broader philosophy here in the film and of Almodóvar generally. Not everything is plot or character relevant, we can have these messy and silly character moments. Just like real life people can make weird or even bad decisions just because it feels good in the moment.



This freedom to embrace our “base” urges feels like something that is missing from modern queer film. There are lots of longing stares and almost-touches but where is the blood, sweat and spit? I do still love some of these films. For example, *Carol* is incredible, and *Moonlight* is easily one of my favorite films of all time and they both home in on that longing. However, that's not the entirety of what queer experience is and can be.

The key thing that Almodóvar does here is that instead of asking, “why is this here?” like so many of the circular online arguments about “vice” in film go – he asks, “why not?” The lives of a significant number of queer people contain copious amounts of sex, drugs and alcohol – so why pull away from that reality?

This approach runs in parallel to that of filmmakers like Isaac Julien and the late Derek Jarman, whose frenetic work doesn't feel trapped by any sort

of presumed straight observer who will chastise them for being too immoral. In Jarman's *Jubilee* the protagonists go around stealing, killing and causing chaos on the streets of their dystopian world. *Looking for Langston* leans into the poetic beauty of the Harlem Renaissance, but also the frenetic vibrancy of its queerness.

Now this isn't to say that these men and their work isn't without issues. In *Jubilee*, Jarman throws a lot of wild imagery at the screen and whilst most of it lands, there is definitely some grim stuff which doesn't. Julien's work isn't always perfect in terms of working as a cohesive film. Also, Almodóvar has a strange way of presenting both trans women and sexual abuse that is never mean-spirited but at times feels a little off kilter. It's also important to note that the people who have been able to make these irreverent films which have gotten any sort of attention have predominantly been cis gay men.

The imperfection is part and parcel of the experimentation though. A liberated queerness in film isn't flawless or uncomplicated. It also doesn't sit entirely in the rose-tinted past either. *Bonde*, a 2019 short film directed by Black non-binary Brazilian Aspah Luccas has this refreshing freedom from the need to be legible to straight people and instead embraces its flamboyance and ridiculousness. There's also Isabel Sandoval, whose most recent films *Lingua Franca* (2020) and *Shangri-La* (2021) possess a powerful eroticism which is sorely lacking from a lot of modern cinema and very deliberately doing that from the perspective of a trans Filipina woman.

As we slowly get more queer characters and stories on mainstream screens, it feels like the respectability politic has become deeply entrenched in the psyche – and we often don't notice. It's easy to pretend that the kind of cultural conservatism which marginalizes those on the outskirts is contained within particular people. Maybe the Bible-bashing pastor, or your old and dying grandad, or a Republican senator. The evil is contained within *their* minds, *their* bodies, *their* institutions. Reality is never that simple. To paraphrase Foucault, the power that these oppressive forces have doesn't just perform violence upon us, they also construct us in their image. Being well-intended, having radical politics, or even being queer doesn't stop that. At every moment we have to push back against the programming of respectability politics into our minds.

In short, to maintain a truly radical and subversive energy, queer characters need to be allowed to be messy. We need queers who drink. Queers who do drugs. Queers who steal, Queers who lie. Queers who cheat. Queers who will kill to keep their lover loyal. Queers who want to burn everything down. They can't co-opt the flames. 🍷

that stiles' dad's name is john), also Sheriff's name is John, El nombre del Sheriff es John, El sheriff se
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s, The Sheriffs name is Jonathan, The Sheriff's name is John, The Sheriff's name will always be John in
is john, yes his name is John!, You've all convinced me that the Sheriff's name is John

Sheriff Stilinski's Name is John

In 2011, MTV started airing a very loose adaptation of the 80's teen classic *Teen Wolf*. The opening episode "Wolf Moon," introduced most of the primary cast of *Teen Wolf*, like our teenage werewolf Scott McCall and his friend Stiles Stilinski. "Wolf Moon" also introduces Stiles' dad, small town Sheriff Stilinski. He is literally in the first episode of the series; he's actually the fourth most appearing actor in the series. He does not have a first name.

Well, that's not quite accurate. Sheriff Stilinski gets a first name in season 6, the final season of the show. Teen shows are often built on the absence of adult figures in their world, or at the very least their ignorance (as [Harry Mackin discussed, in part, in his pseudo-eulogy on Luke Perry and his dad character in Riverdale](#)), and to an extent Sheriff Stilinski fits this mold. But he's a recurring character - both as he becomes a series regular, and as his characters' law enforcement background puts him into direct contact with the supernatural happenings that define *Teen Wolf*. The Sheriff isn't actually alone in this "not having a first name" thing; his son Stiles' actual name (Stiles is a nickname) is also not revealed until the final season when his father reveals it to be Mieczyslaw.

The *Teen Wolf* fandom is relatively large, an impressive feat considering that the show stopped airing in 2017; the most popular ship in *Teen Wolf* is Derek Hale/Stiles Stilinski and it is [ranked third overall](#) in collected works. There is a lot of fan work and for years they ran into a recurring problem: what happens

when a character needs to refer to Sheriff Stilinski by his actual name? This is where fanon comes into play.

“Fanon” is a term for the creation of supplemental pieces of information to fill in the gaps in canon. These can sometimes be shared across a lot of works and effectively be canonized by fans – like [General Hux’s cat Millicent](#) – and in the case of Sheriff Stilinski’s first name you see that happening. It quickly became a sort of shared belief that Sheriff Stilinski’s first name was “John.” As with any sort of fanon, just because “John” is the most frequent contender doesn’t make it so both in the rest of fan work and also in canon. Other fan works use a variety of different names, from Steve and Tom to Szarafin and Genim (the Stilinski’s are Polish).

In Season 6, the creators of *Teen Wolf* finally gave Sheriff Stilinski a name: Noah. You can see the community divide that remains in the tags – fics will still occasionally reference this even though there is now a canon name for the Sheriff. Some are more accepting, and some have varying levels of aggravation with the new name change. A strong contender for best tag is probably “HE CAN PRY SHERIFF JANUSZ ‘JOHN’ STILINSKI FROM MY COLD DEAD HANDS.” 🍷





The Man Who Sold the World

We were the so-called clique, the Phantom Thieves, the Diamond Dogs, that one freelance server everyone wanted to be a part of. And it all crumbled before my eyes in ways I never could have imagined. It was a group so pure, filled with some of the most kind and talented people you see and read every day, one that held a bond that seemed like it would survive even the worst storms. I kept it open for a couple more weeks as I debated myself as to what to do with it. This period of my life got me out drinking my problems away, filling my days with [as much work as possible](#) to keep my head occupied, dealing with a pandemic and the [uncertainty of the future](#) and trying to cope with the fact that a person who had been [very dear to me](#) had ended things less than a year before, but didn't exactly set the distance we needed until I asked for it.

After months circling around my options and the future of the server, I decided to disband it on August 31st. During the weekend before I reached out to everyone who was still there privately to let them know, thanking them for making the space what it was and apologizing for how everything had turned out in the end. In the final hours, many people shared long, heartfelt messages saying how much this space had meant to them. I told them that regardless of where they end up in life, they will make that place a little bit brighter with their presence.

Metal Gear Solid V: The Phantom Pain doesn't have a proper ending. The third act of the game lives only in a leaked, incomplete video, alongside notes and concepts of what it could have been. The server didn't have the end I pictured for it, either. But there's no hidden tape, no B-side to this story. From the Into The Spine server, four separate private groups were born during the last few months and those are only the ones I'm aware of. The only remnant of better times can be found in the site's [freelancing guide](#), a testament of our commitment to not hide our knowledge behind a paywall or privileged access. And that's something I'll remain committed to as I continue working on the site. I've commissioned and given feedback to hundreds of people at this point, and I hope to be able to keep on helping many more in the coming years.



It's odd to think about how I've met enough new writers in the past year that I could basically do another server of the same size, if not bigger. And it has crossed my mind a number of times. But despite having healed, recollecting my memories for this piece, I don't think I have it in me yet. I don't wish anyone else in their early 20s a fraction of it. But the necessity remains, as much as the gatekeeping in the industry. I believe there should be more spaces like ours, but I don't think they should be public – some of the worst people in this industry will always find ways to return, or to mask their true intentions and can turn communities upside down. Leaving an open door to them in public servers where former or future victims are exposed is irresponsible.

What we do need is more solidarity, more transparency and willingness to help others. Sharing an email won't immediately end your career with the attached publication and responding to a DM can literally change people's

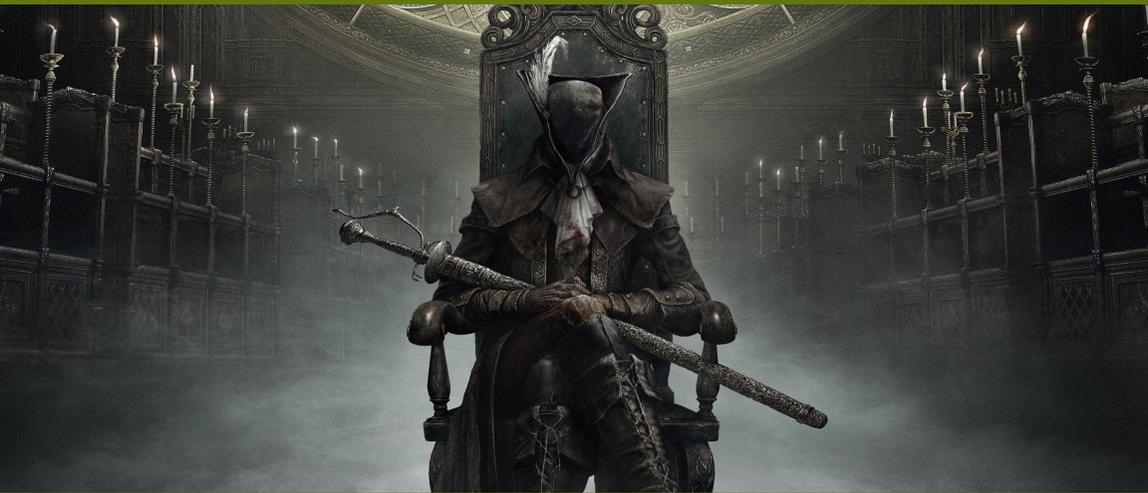
lives. The power imbalance between editors and freelancers is huge, a fact that is both overwhelming and unknown to newcomers. But spaces like this can help to spread the word around, even if it's done privately to a dozen people, and with curation in between – it makes a difference.

Right now, everyone is scattered doing their own thing, and I'm glad to see that most of us have been able to move on onto better things. 2020 was a transformative year for me in many ways, and I wish for nothing but the best to the kind and supportive people that were present during the toughest times as much as the happiest. Who knows what will happen in the next five or ten years. Perhaps not many of us will be in touch. Perhaps only half of the group will even be writing by then. But I'll treasure them forever.

I went deeper than hell to chase my demons, but I don't know what my phantoms will be. It was always hard to grasp the influence we had in the industry. I'm still unaware of it and will probably remain as is for years. I might have sold the world, but I really hope people can learn from my mistakes, and rebuild what I couldn't, using it as a foundation to help the coming generations. I'll continue working on my end to make that happen.

Until then, one thing is certain. This pain is ours, and no one else's. 🍷





Lady Maria. The Doll.

One of you lost your way and gave your humanity up for power. A corpse protecting another corpse to the undeath.

The other? Well, you had no shot at humanity in the first place. An object first and foremost, a servant second.

The man you both look up to views you two somewhere in between – a fond memory with every edge polished off. Clever Maria becomes the complacent Doll, who then gets thrown aside for failing to live up to the first woman's legacy. Both eventually abandoned to serve their duties in solitude.

Are you an outlet for curious mania? Are you a means to an end? What do you do when your fate doesn't satisfy someone else's whims? What do you do when you're held up to the impossible standard of being another woman?

You make your fate your own. But, did you sabotage others' to claim them for yourselves?

Maria, is it worth it if you gain independence through secrets that harm? How far will you go to close the truth off from those who can take action on it? Even if you show compassion on an individual level, does it matter if you cause greater damage through a self-serving mission?

Oh Plain Doll, are you actually that plain? Or are you the one working behind the scenes, whether at your own behest or another's?

You may have both found a path to freedom. But, how many have to suffer along the way?

– Melissa 



Controlling the Narrative

The classic NES baseball simulator *Bases Loaded* was hands down my favorite childhood videogame. While it doesn't have the legacy of *RBI Baseball* or *Baseball Stars 2*, its time-tested mechanics still hold up after three decades, and I'd argue it belongs on every list of classic sports titles. So, when I discovered that the entire *Bases Loaded* series is [now available on a handheld Pocket Player](#), I was blown away. Here's a cult classic franchise from my youth, one that few people seem to remember, now on a keychain. It seems like something that shouldn't exist, and yet, it does.

If an eight-year-old version of myself could see this thing today, it would be the one thing from the future that'd blow my mind the most. PS5? *Fuck the PS5* because this blocky-ass baseball bullshit *fitting in the palms of my hands and looking just like it does on TV* would take literally all my brain power to process.

However, there would be one detail that would fundamentally break everything about how I used to play the game. Something that's impossible to do on a handheld device without detachable controllers. Something that is *deeply weird* (probably).

I wouldn't be able to play two-player mode by myself.

Now, I know what you're thinking: "why the hell would you play two-player by yourself?" And if you haven't stopped reading because that sounds like the saddest idea you've ever read, I have an explanation.

As a child, I wasn't exactly good at videogames and the CPUs on sports games were usually too difficult for my limited skills. I'd get around this by either A) playing against my dad, who would let me win or B) selecting two-player

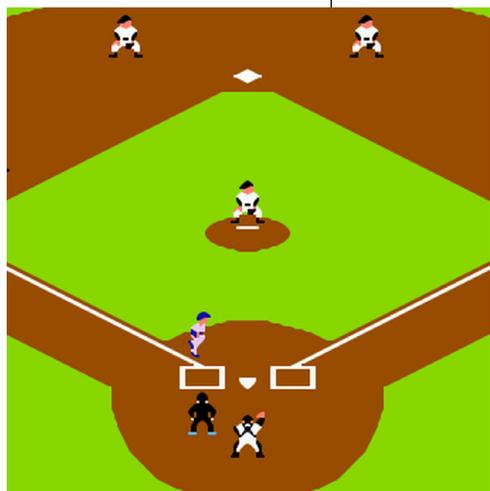
mode and switching between both controllers myself. In *Bases Loaded*, this would mean pitching with one controller, then quickly picking up the other controller to bat. In retrospect, this ironically sounds even more difficult than playing against the computer, but I made it work.

I'm not exactly sure where I picked up this method because I'm confident no one else in the entire world regularly played this way. But it's how I played pretty much every sports game in the 8-bit era, and I was happy playing those games on my own like that. Like I said, this was my favorite game from that time, in a close tie with *Tecmo Super Bowl* (in which I'd just control the offense on both sides of the ball). Notably, my parents watched me do this and it didn't register as strange to them. Probably because it seemed normal relative to everything else I did as a kid, and at least I was keeping myself occupied.

Beyond making these games playable without getting steamrolled by the computer, playing this way also let me control the story on the field. Since late 1980s and early 1990s sports games typically had very rudimentary season modes, I'd instead create my own tournament brackets on notebook paper, playing out each matchup myself. I could make the scrappy underdog pull out an upset, smash multiple in-the-park homeruns, or run up impossible scores. Old-school baseball nerds pissed about batflips and preserving the integrity of the game would hate everything about what I was doing.

There would be full color commentary in my imagination too, which frankly was probably about as intelligent as an average baseball broadcast (which means mostly off topic and devoid of actual insight). I wanted to be able to create the entire experience of watching the game on TV, but I also wanted to tell the entire story of what was happening in the game. In my head, the fictional baseball stars of the unlicensed *Bases Loaded* had lore that ran deep, clawing their way up from the minor leagues for a shot at bringing home the pennant (which couldn't be called the World Series because publisher Jaleco evidently did not have the express written permission of Major League Baseball).

Eventually I grew out of playing two-player sports games on my lonesome, and as new consoles came out, the NES was packed away. Something that has never changed though is that I'm still bad at sports games and I still don't

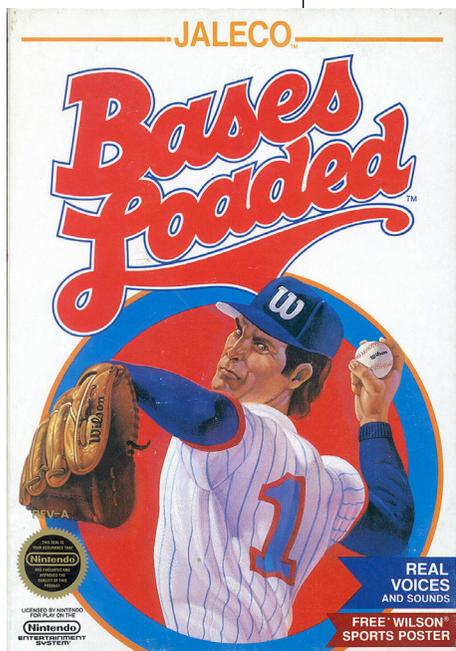


have the dedication to get good at them. It's tough to create a good simulation that also works as a good videogame, and I usually bounce off anything other than *Madden* because I don't understand the intricacies of sports (other than football) well enough to play them the right way. I'm sure *MLB: The Show* is fantastic, but it'll never beat *Bases Loaded* to me.

Sports games now have robust story modes, persistent franchise features, believable TV-style presentation and unlimited online competition against players of all skill levels. In other words, they have everything that I dreamed about having when I was a kid, but had to use my imagination to fill in. In theory, I should love this current era of sports games and I should love it a lot more than an antiquated baseball game on a lanyard.

Instead, I struggle to get into these games as much as I was ever into *Bases Loaded* (or *Tecmo Super Bowl*, *Joe Montana Football*, *Ice Hockey*, *Arch Rivals* and *NBA Jam*). There's something missing that's never felt as intuitive as playing both controllers myself, a thing that is, in fact, extremely counterintuitive and objectively nonsensical.

But at the same time, I think I've finally made some sense out of it. Sports are all about stories and the narratives that play out on and off the field, and maybe that was more interesting to me than their competitive aspects. Even though those games were too tough for me to play competitively, if I could dictate how things played out, then my imagination could run wild. *Bases Loaded* was like a blank slate for controlled chaos where anything could happen, and no matter how much effort EA, Sony or 2K Sports might put into their story modes, they'll never outdo the creativity of a little kid on a lazy afternoon, getting lost in a world of unlimited possibilities where no game was ever boring. 





Wookiee of the Year

Peter, 2, running around in circles: “Chew-bah-ca! Chew-bah-ca! Chew-bah-ca!”

Jacob, 5, eyes gleaming: “Do you know what kind of battle jets I like the most? TIE fighters!”

Peter: “Darth Vader! Light saber! Darth Vader! Light saber! Darth Vader! Bad guy! Light saber!”

Jacob: “I like Kylo Ren more than Darth Vader. Who’s your favorite bad guy from Star Wars, Dad?”

Welcome to my house, circa the past few weeks, where the Imperial March plays on a loop, where my wife now wears a pair of Princess Leia PJs, where the planet-themed night light has been replaced by a Darth Vader stand-up whose color you can change with a tiny remote, where we spent much of yesterday, in fact, trying in vain to find the missing head of a Darth Vader action figure – a missing head I finally found this morning in a bag of bibs.

Until just recently, Jacob had been terrified of movies. All movies. *Minions* once caused a tearful end to a pre-pandemic sleepover party. But he’d heard his friends in kindergarten speaking of Star Wars and, one day, he announced he was ready to watch it.

Which we did: *Episode IV, A New Hope*. He’s the same age I was when I saw *Return of the Jedi* in the theaters and it was a surprisingly emotional experience for me to watch it with him. I was worried heading into it, but he absolutely loved it. He declared the moment the Death Star was destroyed that Darth Vader was going to build a new one. As the credits rolled, he began peppering

me with questions and hasn't stopped since. The next day, we watched it again.

We've kept going, happily continuing through the original trilogy I grew up with – only Darth Vader's death was a little much for him to handle at first – and into the most recent trio. When we finish those, I'm sure titles like *Rogue One* and *Solo* and *The Mandalorian* will soon follow. (I'm steering him clear of *Episodes I-III* until we run out of other options.)

We watch when his little brother, Peter, is napping. Which means – beyond a few clips on YouTube when he insists on seeing Darth Vader – Peter hasn't watched a minute of the films. But he's heard all about them, and he just might be the biggest fan under our roof. His older brother loves it, which makes it the coolest. Now, every incoming tantrum can be diverted into joy by the mere mention of Darth Vader – though he likes to say Jacob is Darth Vader and he's Luke Skywalker. He goes from Darth Vader pajamas at night to a Darth Vader T-shirt in the morning. He brings Darth Vader to breakfast and tells us the Jedi, lured to the dark side by the evil Emperor, likes to drink beer like Dada. When I drop him off at daycare, they've started playing the Imperial March to get him pumped for learning.

We've had our individual obsessions around here before. Jacob and *Paw Patrol*. Peter and *Paw Patrol*. Me and *Twin Peaks*. But never has one fictional universe gripped all of us at once.

So welcome to my house, where the Starkiller Base and the Death Star are compared in breathless monologues. Where the differences between lightsabers are dissected and celebrated. Where brothers fight over Star Wars water bottles and action figures and which John Williams theme we're going to listen to next. Where we even watch bits of Chad Vader, Day Shift Manager to mix things up. Where mornings begin by deconstructing a Lego Star Wars poster, torn carefully from a magazine and taped to Jacob's door, as if we're art school grad students. Where afternoons bring packages of merch shipped by one Grandma or the other. Where at night there's still one more thing that just needs to be said about stormtroopers before the bedside lamp can be turned off. Where – say it with me – the Force is with us. Always. 🍷





Post-Post-Apocalyptic: Come Along with Me

A version of this paper was originally presented at the CUNY Graduate Center's English Student Association conference, End Times: Approaches to the Apocalypse on March 12, 2021. Its places will be recognizable to readers of the column. I hope you appreciate this opportunity to return before we take off on new paths beginning next month (or the month after part two is published).

Part 1

For the past couple of years, if you asked me for podcast recs, one of the first things I'd have offered you is Fall of Civilizations – a history podcast about the ends of many others' timelines. Hosted by author Paul M. M. Cooper, every episode is set in a different time and place, from the collapse of the first Sumerian cities, which are also some of the first cities, to the ends of the Roman empire . . . twice, to an apocalypse that took place on only 63 square miles (163 sq. km) of land, on Rapa Nui, in the same millennium I and most of you must've been born. The big questions connecting each episode are: "What did they have in common? Why did they fall? And what did it feel like to watch it happen?" They're questions we can ask about many times and many places, ones that we've even begun asking of ourselves.

These stories of apocalypse have accompanied me for the past years as my fear met certainty which turned to acceptance that, while I now know for

certain I am no longer of the last generation, I may still know The End. That all-encompassing grand closing that is everything we've said of it and that words could never justify, because it is all the words that come before "the end" that linger in us when a story we love ends. And yet knowing the apocalypse is only stories – many, many more stories than the 12 in Fall of Civilization's backlog – doesn't alleviate the contemporary sense that this end is not like the others. Whether you're a historian or theologian, "it has," as Mark O'Connell writes in *Notes from An Apocalypse*, "always been the end of the world." So, what is that instinct I, and I'm sure some of you have, that this isn't going to go like any of the stories we've been told?



I don't think it is impossible, given the development of apocalypticism as a belief and literature, that this moment – and its fictions – are drastically different from the nigh apocalypses of yore. In *The Sense of An Ending*, Frank Kermode writes "Apocalypse and the related themes are strikingly long-lived; and that is the first thing you can say about them, although the second is that they change." And how they have changed. St. Augustine writes that Christians three centuries before him were "consumed with apocalyptic fervor, [believing] themselves to be living in the 'last days' of creation." "And," he remarks, "if there were last days then . . . how much so more so now."

Apocalypticism – in whatever mode of fiction we want to call it – is intrinsically tied up with Christianity. [Roslyn Weaver](#) writes that, with its origins in an oppressed religious minority, the apocalypse was a critical framework that subverted oppression in its time. It imagined the collapse of what were unshakable systems. But, as no small number of critics and scholars have noted, the apocalypse's radical origins are, along with the original meaning of the word, antiquated. Weaver argues that "some secular narratives subvert the original context of apocalypse as a language for the oppressed to

instead use apocalyptic rhetoric to dominate and justify the persecution of minority groups.” And I would disagree with her on two accounts. While the interdisciplinary field of apocalypse criticism (apoc crit, if you may) maintains a distinction between Biblical and secular apocalypse, I don’t think this is such a useful distinction, at least not now. Which is my second point, that not only is the contemporary understanding of apocalypse different, but apocalypse itself may also be something else. And so, in criticism of apocalypse fiction written outside of academia in the past decade, the generic and subversive are reversed. And why should we think not? Have you seen what every man with the power to make a blockbuster movie or AAA game thinks, or rather hopes, the collapse of civilization [will look like](#)? Games critic Grace Benfell, with the Biblical apocalypse in mind, [describes the state of the genre in the current millennium](#): “apocalypses are often a product of our inability to create a better world . . . All communities will eventually decay. Even if they don’t, they must fight off invasion from all sides. The collapse of society brings out who we really are and it is monstrous. The end of western civilization is the end of everything.”



Or almost everything. The fulcrum of my thinking around apocalypse fiction since last fall has been Marxism. Specifically, the first chapter of Mark Fisher’s 2009 book [Capitalist Realism: Is There No Alternative?](#) Fisher introduces the eponymous theory with film criticism, literally amending its definition:

‘capitalist realism’: the widespread sense that not only is capitalism the only viable political and economic system, but also that it is now impossible to imagine a coherent alternative to it. Once, dystopian films and novels were exercises in such acts of imagination – the disasters they depicted acting as narrative pretext for the emergence of different ways of living.

But no more. Even the films that speak against capital are still reeling in a tired, decrepit future with no history of its own. And I think Fisher was onto something with this particular mode of critique. The apocalypse can be quite persuasive. Rhetorician [Stephen O'Leary](#) even suggested that the apocalypse is a rhetoric of its own, of time, evil and authority. And Weaver explains that apocalyptic fiction “must convince its hearers that they are, indeed, living at the end of history.” Which is its own apocalypse that we don't have time for.

* * *

Though it was as painfully true in the last century, it's only now that we seem to identify America itself as the urtext of its own apocalypse fiction. And I mean the ideal as much as the land itself, a place for new Christian minorities to seek salvation. Writer Heather Smith calls this a “post-apocalyptic dream America.” In her [influential criticism of *Adventure Time*](#), she writes: “Historian Paul Boyer has argued that this 17th century idea of America as a promised land lasted much longer than the Puritans themselves managed to. It persists as vague ideas that America is somehow a special place, with a redemptive role in world history.” America has always been in apocalypse but bereft of historical narrative in the ever present it is tempting to sensationalize our own experiences, to pretend that we discovered apocalypse when European's first imports were only apocalypses of diminishing sizes.

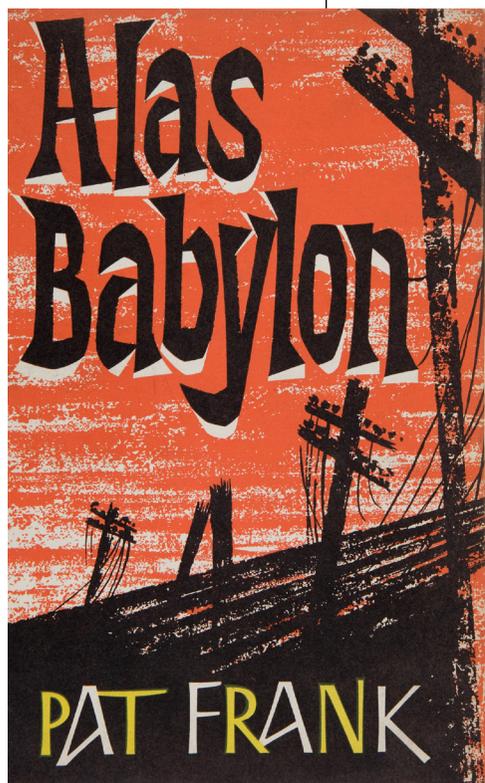


Lest we forget nuclear fiction. Nukes are everywhere when we talk apocalypse in America, to the point that they are no longer anywhere at all. (Well, hopefully someone knows.) But I think Smith puts it nicely: “America, it seemed, worked through the issue of having bombed Japan by generating

an endless number of stories were [sic] America was the bombed, not the bomber.” She claims that 20th century reality split into two separate timelines. An off timeline where people who could’ve use nuclear weapon continually did not, and a bizarre future where they did. Thus, the nuclear apocalypse, with its radioactive wastelands and mutant monsters became the preeminent realm of American futurity.

Written nearly a decade after what Smith cites as the first nuclear novel (*Shadow on the Hearth*), Pat Frank’s *Alas, Babylon* is perhaps the most enduring of those seminal texts. Published in 1959, the novel is about if America won the Cold War – and mutually assured destruction. It’s set in a fictional central Florida town called Fort Repose, which is based off of the nonfictional central Florida town Mount Dora, which is less than an hour away from where I went to school (though where I went to school is, in this timeline, a crater).

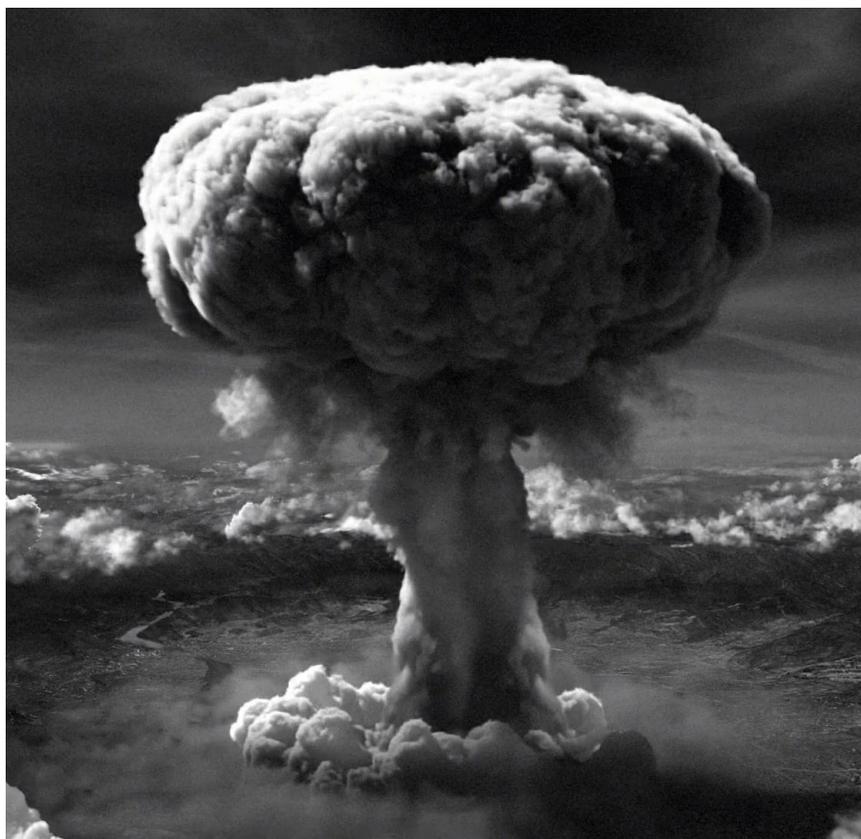
When I first read *Alas, Babylon*, the way I envisioned this particular future looked a lot like what I remember from high school of early seasons of *The Walking Dead*. The main character and what often feels like a painful, painful self-insert, Randy, is a gruff veteran and alcoholic living on the land a great-something of his settled. And the rest of the cast is, well, the book opens on Florence, who lives alone at her age only because she is unmarried and will remain that way. Her main character traits are that she’s gossipy and because Frank really wants you to remember, fat. There’s the Black family that Randy apparently treats really well even though they’re only there because they can’t afford to live anywhere else since he won’t pay them more (and their use to the plot is that they are . . . useful Black people). There’s Elizabeth, an upstart, independent women who just becomes partnered and sidelined to Randy. The hysterical sister-in-law who is, like all the women, a natural caretaker. There’s a banker that completes suicide because all the money is worthless and a young fighter pilot who is so insecure about his masculinity that he accidentally bombs civilians and kicks off a nuclear war. But there is also a queer librarian in what seems like the oversight of a straight man.



Frank uses armchair analysis of the political landscape he adapted to make commentary on the Cold War and a wide cast of characters to critique consumerism, citizenship, gender roles (poorly), race (very poorly) and authority (extremely poorly). As an author insert, Randy's Catholic-tinged nobles oblige becomes the moral framework. And while the threat of nuclear annihilation can be called the first secular apocalypse, it still holds in its anxious narratives all the revelatory potential of a Biblical one (if we choose to maintain such a grey distinction). *Alas, Babylon* seeks salvation and finds it in a return to old ways of life. It is not an imagination of the world after capitalism or nations or borders, but a romanticization of the preindustrial. He's nostalgic for when the religious moral order was not threatened by marketing and, I don't know, shorts.

But what of another timeline, one where we remember bombs were used? We can't really talk about apocalypse fiction without talking about Japan . . .

To be concluded next issue. 🇺🇸





Parasites

The game world in *Dishonored 2* is filled with parasites. You can see these all over the place. The most obvious example are the bloodflies, but the biggest parasites in Karnaca aren't actually bugs. They have no wings on their back and only a single pair of legs. They won't suck your blood, but these parasites can still bleed you dry.

There are two social classes in Karnaca. You've got poor people on the one hand and rich people on the other. Workers and capitalists. Producers and profiteers. In other words, you've got prey on the one hand and predators on the other. Hosts and parasites. There are people like Mindy Blanchard who struggle to make a living and people like Luca Abele who live by exploiting the labor of other people. How does all of this work? You can trace it all back to the logic of capitalism.

Sociologist Erik Wright said that capitalism has two rules. These are "what you have determines what you get" and "what you have determines what you have to do to get what you get." The first rule describes how capitalists and workers use what they have to make money. The former use a means of production to create commodities which they can sell at a profit. The latter have only one thing which they can bring to the market. This would be their labor. The second rule describes how capitalists and workers follow a logic of action which is imposed upon them by their position. The former compete with each other by increasing productivity and lowering cost. The latter compete with each other by working harder for less money. The result is that capitalists get more and more money for their commodities, but workers get

less and less money for their labor. The rich get richer and the poor get poorer.

The social inequality which you can see in Karnaca is materially manifested in the architecture. Mindy Blanchard peddles potions on the street. Luca Abele holds parties in a palace. Explore the place and you'll find plenty of poverty, but you'll come across a lot of wealth, too. The two are often side by side. Stroll through the streets of Karnaca and you'll go from rags to riches in a matter of minutes. You can see this in three particular parts of the game world: the Aventa, Dust and Palace Districts.

While it isn't supposed to be the poorest part of Karnaca, the Aventa District is hardly made of money. There are broken windows all over the place. You'll come across plenty of peeling paint and wilting wallpaper. The signs of water damage in the form of moss and mold are pretty unmistakable. Some of the structures have squatters in them, but many of the buildings in the Aventa District are clearly supposed to be abandoned. They're filled with all sorts of dirt, dust and debris. There are wooden boards on a lot of the windows and metal sheets on a few of the doors. You can even see coverings on a couple of buildings with "seized" or "keep out" written on them.

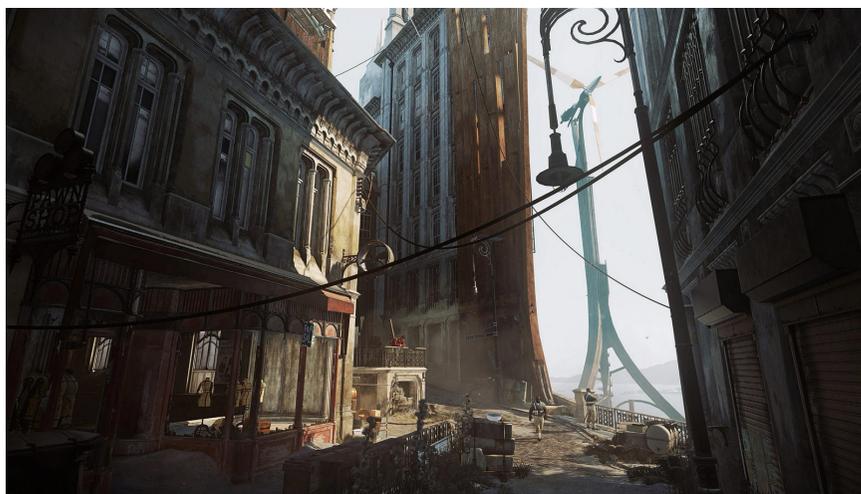
Looming large over the Aventa District is the Clockwork Mansion. This belongs to a wealthy inventor by the name of Kirin Jindosh. The structure consists of two stories with decorative stone walls and a curved roof made of metal and glass. Take a look at the Clockwork Mansion from across the chasm that separates it from the Aventa District and you'll see a separate rotunda which is connected to the main building by a covered bridge. The richness of the exterior is matched by the interior. The place is filled with wonderful woodwork on the ceilings, walls and floors. Hidden mechanisms even allow these to change shape at the push of a button.

Similar to the Clockwork Mansion, the Stilton Manor dominates the Dust District. The structure belongs to a mining baron called Aramis Stilton. This person is apparently popular in Karnaca, but the fact of the matter is that he made his fortune on the backs of his miners. You can tell that a lot of the wealth wound up going into the Stilton Manor. The masonry on the exterior picks up on some of the forms and patterns which appear in the trees, bushes and



flowers of the surrounding garden. These are also reflected on the interior. The gentle curves of the crown moldings provide a pretty good example. These resemble a forest canopy. You could say the same thing about the ceiling in the courtyard. The result is a highly refined structure.

The poorest part of Karnaca is apparently the Dust District. This comes through loud and clear in the architecture. You can see squatters in a few of the structures, but most of the buildings look like they've been abandoned for a long time. They seem ready to collapse at any moment. Some of them are missing walls on the exterior, so you have to be careful not to slip and fall to your death from a second or third story. This part of Karnaca happens to be on the side of a mountain, too. The interiors aren't much better. You'll come across a lot of dust, dirt and debris that have blown down from the mines. There's plenty of moss and mold, too.

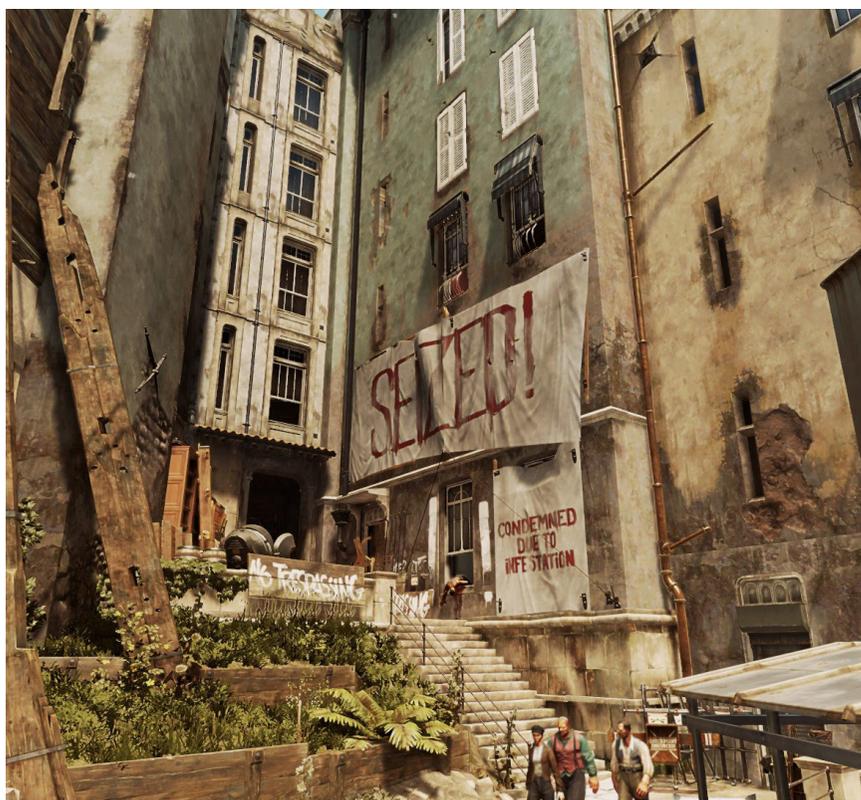


The name definitely suggests wealth, but the Palace District is far from wealthy. The place has plenty of peeling paint and wilting wallpaper. You'll find bloodflies and rats around every corner. Stroll through the streets of the Palace District and you'll see all sorts of sprouts and shoots growing between the paving stones. The back alleys are filled with weeds and wild grasses. The walls are covered with graffiti along the lines of "taxes" and "keep out." Some of them have been seized, so a lot of the buildings are basically empty. They just have a little bit of broken furniture in them.

The most beautiful building in Karnaca is definitely the Grand Palace. The structure belongs to the powerful aristocrat, Luca Abele. Similar to the Stilton Manor, the Grand Palace picks up on many of the forms and patterns in the surrounding garden. The source of inspiration is clearly the sea, though. Step into the dining room for example and you'll feel as though you've been

swallowed by some sort of sea monster. This part of the building features curved columns which look a lot like ribs. You could say the same thing about the roof beams. The verandas extend outward like tentacles. When you look at the structure from the right spot, the highest floor even looks a little bit like a fin. The design is undeniably sophisticated.

The architecture in Karnaca conveys a strong sense of social inequality. What should you be taking away from all of this? Karnaca is filled with bloodflies, but these aren't the only parasites in the game world. There are two social classes in Karnaca. You've got poor people on the one hand and rich people on the other. Hosts and parasites. The problem is that you could say the same thing about the real world. I think that what you're supposed to be taking away from *Dishonored 2* is a consciousness of the fact that social inequality is all around you and getting worse by the minute. Things aren't as bad in the real world as they are in the game world, but they definitely could be in the future. The wrongs can't be made right by somebody like Emily Kaldwin or Corvo Attano, though. This would be where *Dishonored 2* runs off the rails in my opinion. They're from the wrong social class. The only way to solve social inequality is for the hosts to get rid of the parasites. Poor people have to make it happen. 🗑️





Getting Back To Gunpla

When I was really young I fucking *loved* robots. It was an obsession. Any toy that looked like a robot, I wanted. Any movie or TV show with robots in it, I watched (if I my parents thought it was okay). I read Asimov because he had lots of robots in his novels. I would read Iron Man comics because the armor looked robotic. I even had a book on real robots and robot development kits that I flipped through over and over again, hoping I might one day be able to buy and build an RB5X of my own. And, of course, I also built robot model kits.

I had several Gundam models (or “gunpla” for short) that I’d convinced my parents to buy me, and I did build them all, but young me lacked the patience for regular model-making and I was also pretty rough with my toys, so I always felt like I had to treat these kits like egg shells, unlike the much more robust Transformers toys I had at the time. As you’d probably expect by now, that means I stopped building gunpla in favor of hoarding toys I felt like I could actually play with. Here’s the thing: a *lot* has changed since I gave up on the hobby roughly 25 years ago. My interests and priorities; my standards; my level of patience; even the technology behind the model kits themselves.

It’s funny how, after getting back into collecting transforming robot toys roughly five years ago, what I want for my collection has slowly shifted. First it was just inexpensive official Transformers toys, then I started dabbling in Japanese imports from Takara, then I found out about the unofficial third-party scene and so on. Right up until I realized that my favorite thing was to customize what I had in order to make it look or function the way I wanted. At this point I’d

be surprised if less than half of my entire collection hasn't been painted, panel lined or otherwise altered in some way. In particular, I've really gotten into customizing, which sort of makes gunpla a no-brainer but for some reason I was completely oblivious to the idea until only a few months ago.

Now, as someone who's really taken a shine to painting and detailing and joint adjustments, gunpla feels like an obvious progression. Almost a necessary evolution, really. I can add more detail to the internals easily because with gunpla I'm building the figure myself rather than buying a completed toy and having to disassemble it to reach certain areas. Having so many individual parts also makes painting way easier due to the natural separation making accidentally painting an area I want to avoid virtually impossible.

Comparatively speaking, it's also a money saver because gunpla kits (for the most part) are very affordable - likely in part because you have to put in the work to build them yourself - and each box represents an actual project rather than a ready-to-go toy. So, the \$15-\$50 per kit (depending on the grade and whether or not I'm willing to pay aftermarket prices on older releases) leads to a few days of construction and detailing instead of a few minutes of unboxing and posing before tossing it on a shelf for display. And because I built *and* detailed the kits myself, I feel pride in what I've created and am far more likely to take them off the shelf just to mess around and take photos.



It also helps that the technology behind gunpla kits has improved so much since the 80s and 90s. Granted, as a child, I wasn't paying attention to things like High Grade, Master Grade, scale or any of that stuff. I just saw a robot that I thought looked cool and asked my parents to get it for me. And sometimes they did (love you, mom and dad!). Anyway, my point is, the kits I built back then, compared to what's available now, were garbage.

They were very simple, which meant they tended to not look much like the box art and photos at all, plus they tended to be pretty limited in their articulation and the plastics weren't all that durable. Now, though? Fuck. Modern kits are absolutely brilliant engineering marvels compared to the stuff I was trying to build before. I'm particularly fond of Master Grade kits, where the actual act of putting them together is a pretty big part of the fun. They have so many parts that cleverly overlap and interlock to not only create something that looks cohesive but is also extremely solid without the need for

adhesives of any kind. I cannot properly express how fascinated I was with the construction of my first ever Master Grade build, the MG Barbatos.

I really like building and customizing Gundam model kits. For a fairly modest price (compared to a lot of the Transformers toys I've been buying), I get a box of robot that I can enjoy building over the course of a few days, take my time to add more paint or detailing if I want, maybe use some of the stickers for even more detail and by the time I'm done I have a really cool and extremely well-articulated robot action figure. And I made it myself! 🙌



Features



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**EUGENICS
FROM
MORLOCKS TO
SHOGGOTHS**

The Origins
of Cosmic
Racism

By Noah Berlatsky

Editor's Note: This feature contains a racial slur used within a direct quote from one of the texts being discussed.

Cosmic horror is thought of as horror that focuses on the unknown, Cyclopean incomprehensibility of the universe. "Cosmic horror stories draw upon the power of the sublime to make us feel small, inconsequential and totally helpless against something vast and natural," according to Sarah S. Davis at [Book Riot](#). All pitiful humans are as one before the yawning tentacular orifice of the abominable abyss. What does skin color matter when we are all together infinitesimal specks in an uncaring, unblinking, universe-spanning eye?

To put it in slightly less ominously undulating prose, cosmic horror seems like it should be the type of horror least interested in human difference. The continent-sized appendage doesn't stop to check your skin color, ethnicity or religion before it crushes you.

And yet, the man most often credited with creating cosmic horror, H.P. Lovecraft, was a virulent racist, whose hatred and bigotry permeates and powers all of his writing. For example, in his 1927 short story, "[The Horror at Red Hook](#)," Lovecraft creates a mood of disgust and terror by channeling his racist loathing of the immigrants he lived beside in his Brooklyn neighborhood:

Red Hook is a maze of hybrid squalor...The population is a hopeless tangle and enigma; Syrian, Spanish, Italian, and negro

elements impinging upon one another, and fragments of Scandinavian and American belts lying not far distant. It is a babel of sound and filth, and sends out strange cries to answer the lapping of oily waves at its grimy piers and the monstrous organitanies of the harbour whistles.

"The Horror at Red Hook" is unusually direct and virulent. But Lovecraft regularly links "hybrid squalor" to his cosmic monstrosities. The great underwater squid thing that rises from the ocean deep in "[The Call of Cthulhu](#)" is obscurely worshipped and venerated by "Esquimau diabolists and mongrel Louisianans."

The terror in "The Shadow Over Innsmouth" is that the upright, white narrator finds himself sliding down the evolutionary ladder to become one of the vile fish-creatures who infest the waters around Innsmouth. When the narrator sees those fish-spawn "flopping, hopping, croaking, bleating - surging inhumanly through the spectral moonlight in a grotesque, malignant saraband of fantastic nightmare" Lovecraft is channeling the same ugly racist imagery he uses to describe the real-life inhabitants of Red Hook.

Cosmic horror for Lovecraft isn't just a universe indifferent to humans, in general. It's a universe indifferent to the striving and virtue of white men in particular. The cosmos Lovecraft fears is a Darwinian cosmos, in which evolution hops and slithers blindly down the eons, just as it hops and slithers through Red Hook and Inns-

mouth. The bleak idea that haunts Lovecraft's work is the recognition that there is no force guiding mankind towards ever greater and whiter heights. In short, the meaninglessness of the universe for Lovecraft is specifically a Darwinian meaninglessness. There is no god guiding white man every upward. There is only a blind watchmaker crafting protoplasmic abominations with clumsy, mottled fingers.

Darwin's Degenerating Time Machine

Cosmic horror in Lovecraft is eugenic degeneration. But maybe that is just Lovecraft. Cosmic horror could, in theory, separate out the racist terror from the terror of an uncaring universe. In that case the racism would be a removable appendage, rather than the central fleshy mass of the genre itself.

The problem with delinking racism and cosmic horror, though, is both are both present in one of Lovecraft's most important and influential cosmic horror predecessors – H.G. Wells.

Lovecraft's unspeakably clotted prose is often traced to Poe, and there's no doubt that H.P. borrowed a great deal there. But Wells' influence, though less remarked upon, is also vital. Wells' 1895 *The Time Machine*, in particular, is the start of cosmic horror. The story (which Lovecraft called "thoroughly entertaining in every detail") draws its sense of eerie dread from a confrontation with an uncaring universe. That universe proves it does not care by inflicting upon human beings a bleak Darwinian degeneracy.

The Time Machine is told by a character known only as the Time Traveler. Astride his machine, the Time Traveler says he visited an era far beyond the pinnacle



achievement of humanity. Humans in this far future have devolved into Eloi – tiny, child-like, foolish creatures, fit only to gather flowers and laugh. Such a devolution, the Traveler argues, is inevitable on Darwinian principles.

Humanity had conquered need and want, and the effect was to remove the harsh pressures of natural selection which made humanity great. Humankind solved all its problems, and then there was no pressure to select for competent, vigorous individuals. This is the same strand of eugenic argument that Nazis and American racists used to argue for the sterilization or extermination of the weak and unfit. Humans must remain strong and pure, or the race will wither.

For Wells, the vision of humanity turned to useless weakness is only half of the horror. The Time Traveler eventually discovers that there are other descendants of homo sapiens. In tunnels and passages under the earth of the future dwell the Morlocks – lemur-like nocturnal creatures, who emerge at night and feed on the hapless Eloi. The Time Traveler speculates that the Morlocks are the descendants of the lower classes, who were once tasked with running the machinery of the far future world. The Eloi, in contrast, are the decadent aristocrats,



artists and proto-hippies of the upper-classes.

The animalistic features of the Morlocks, and their cannibalism, links them to Black and African stereotypes of pulp fiction. They provoke a kind of racist fury. “Instinctively I loathed them,” the Traveler says. He fantasizes about hitting, crushing and mauling them. Similarly, in “The Call of Cthulhu,” the noble Norwegian sailor Johansen is seized with righteous murderous rage when faced with a shipload of Cthulhu’s non-white followers. “There was some peculiarly abominable quality about them which made their destruction seem almost a duty.” Wells is mapping the violent prejudices of racism onto class conflict.

Wells’ transformation of class into race is also simply a reiteration of long-held European prejudices linking wealth and power to biological or innate differences. In his 1983 study *Black Marxism*, Cedric Robinson argued that the lowest strata of European workers were often drawn from other nationalities or ethnic groups – from the Irish and Scots in England, for example. Europeans used these differences to justify exploitation; the ruling classes cemented their power by “exaggerate[ing] regional, subcultural and dialectical differences into ‘racial’ ones,” Robinson writes.



Wells in *The Time Machine* is not so much creating a future in which class becomes race as he is recapitulating past processes of racialization. The novel itself more than half acknowledges this when it sets a good portion of its action in a giant future natural history museum; the Traveler fights Morlocks near the bones of a brontosaur. The future is the past is the present. In all of these the lower classes are savage non-white monsters. In all of these, the savage non-white monsters must be exterminated when they rebel against their masters.

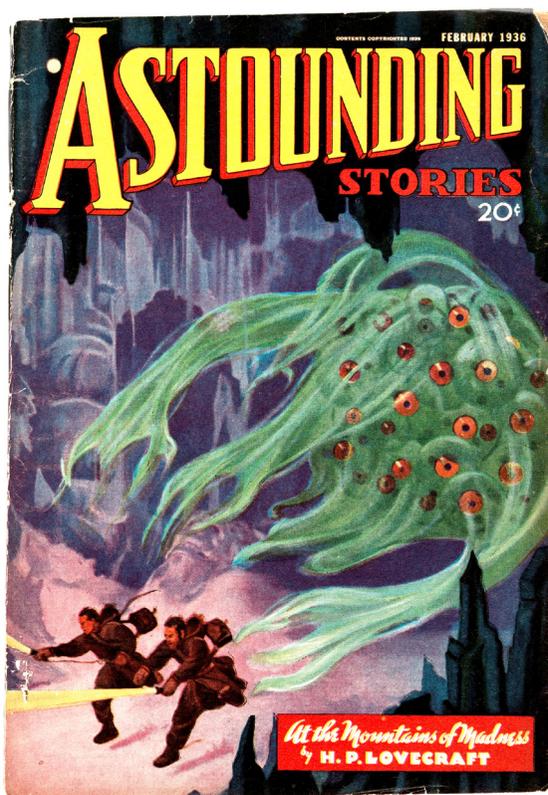
The sense of dread and oppression in *The Time Machine* is the dread and oppression of Darwin; the terrifying weight of the future is derived from the terrifying weight of a past which Darwin showed was not brief and designed for

human triumph, but was instead incomprehensibly ancient, and produced humans through indifferent processes. The unendurable wheeling of the centuries indistinguishably through past or future makes humanity dwindle and shrink, reducing them to animals. Thus, degeneracy serves as a metaphor for humanity's Darwinian displacement from the center of the universe. In the same way, cosmic insignificance of man serves as a metaphor for loss of white prerogatives and power. The transformation of man to Eloi is unsettling. But the real terror is in the rise of the Morlocks—the triumph of the lower class, which is also the triumph of Black people, which is also the triumph of a chaotic, godless and uncaring world.

In a passage that Wells excised on re-printing, the Traveler rides even further into the future and sees humanity's even more distant descendants. Humanity's children, he finds, are small, grey, rodent-like hopping things, which appear to be the main prey of a giant, centipede-like insect. The creeping things humanity crushed in their hands now feed upon us. The low have crawled from their holes and conquered the high. That is cosmic horror.

The Madness of Slave Revolt

Another, even more definitive illustration of the link between cosmic horror and nightmares of disturbed racial hierarchies is Lovecraft's 1936 novella "At the Mountains of Madness." This is essentially a more baroque and explicit reworking



of Wells' themes. The story is set in Antarctica, when a team of geologists and researchers from Miskatonic University uncover the remains of barrel-bodied, starfish-headed, not-as-dead-as-they-first-appear aliens, called Old Ones, and their enormous plateau city in the icy mountains.

Wandering through the maze of abandoned, Cyclopean architecture, the humans discover artwork and murals from which they deduce that the aliens had built a great civilization on earth hundreds of thousands of years before humans evolved. Much of the work of that building was done by shoggoths – cellular globs which the aliens had created with their superior technology. Over time, however, the Old Ones had lost their knowledge and advanced techniques, while the shoggoth had become more and more intelligent and rebellious.

Part of the awe and impact of the story comes, as in *The Time Machine*, from the sense of huge, unknowable histories and civilizations, before which humanity's achievements and existence fade into an

irrelevant footnote. But the real monstrosity in the story isn't the Old Ones. On the contrary, the human narrator, geologist William Dyer, finds the determination and achievements of these creatures inspirational and comprehensible. "Radiates, vegetables, monstrosities, star-spawn – whatever they had been, they were men!"

This seems on the surface like a refutation of xenophobia, and a complication of Lovecraft's own racism. If star-spawn Old Ones with starfish heads are men, then surely Black people, Jewish people, Asians and all the others Lovecraft spits upon in Red Hook are also human beings.

But it soon becomes apparent that Lovecraft, and Dyer, identify with the Old Ones specifically because they are *not* Black people. The Old Ones are men because they are slavers; it is their subjugation of other sentient beings that makes them admirable. The true horror in the novel is the triumph of the shoggoth, who are described as a kind of hideous eugenic nightmare: "Formless protoplasm able to mock and reflect all forms and organs and processes – viscous agglutinations of bubbling cells." Those ugly servants ominously learn from their betters; they are "more and more sullen, more and more intelligent, more and more amphibious, more and more imitative!"

Incapable of real art or achievement themselves, the shoggoth create crude, despicable imitations of their enslaver's art – "degenerate murals aping and mocking the things they had superseded." They even speak in a piping that is a hid-



eous imitation of the Old One's tongue. And when they kill, they eat their master's heads, leaving behind a brainless corpse and a trail of slime. Their success is the success of literal brainlessness, the devouring of reason and purpose.

The "madness" at the mountains of madness is a slave revolt; the terror is in the resistance and rebellion of a subjugated people. That terror is only more pointed because the novella suggests that humans themselves are a kind of descendent of the Old Ones' shoggoth experiments. We are all the genetic by-blow of racial inferiors. Lovecraft's nightmare vision is not just of an indifferent world, but of a world so indifferent that *there are no white people in it*. Darwin has shown Lovecraft, like Wells, a history in which there is no purity, but only the thrash and bubble of copulating, unstable flesh. For Lovecraft, the miscegenetic cesspit of Red Hook is an image of the universe.

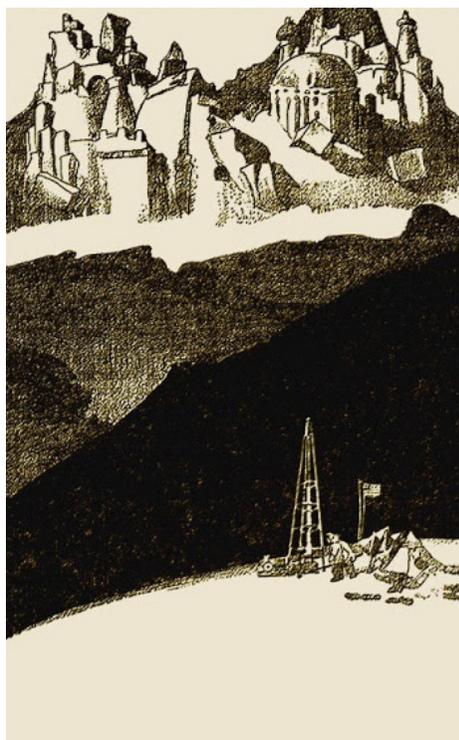
In the work of cosmic horror's most influential authors, then, racism is not an accidental and unfortunate imposition on the genre. Racism *is* the genre, in the sense that the horror in Wells and Lovecraft is specifically a horror of white displacement. The universe they imagine makes no sense specifically because white people are not victorious.

The End

The Time Traveler goes on and on into the future, reaching finally a point where the sun is old and dying, and the world is completely silent. "All the sounds of man,

the bleating of sheep, the cries of birds, the hum of insects, the stir that makes the background of our lives – all that was over." There, at the end of the world, he is seized again with the despair of eternity. "A horror of this great darkness came on me." And then he sees something moving in the red water; round, black, with tentacles trailing down. "...It was hopping fitfully about."

The hopping thing is an echo of the grey, rodent-like hopping human things that the Traveler saw further in the past. In the dying earth, he sees his own image; a bleak, featureless, tentacled monster. The white man, rightful master of the universe, stares into the mouth of the cosmos, and the cosmos shows him what his mastery has come to. Wells and Lovecraft think that's a horror. But maybe that football thing has it right when it hops with fitful scorn upon their dreams. 🇺





DUNGEONS & COMRADES

The Capitalism
Catharsis of
Going Under

By Andrew Kiya

Six months ago, I quit my job. I'd started off my career as a marketing intern for a company in college. Like many interns, I'd gone through the experience of being told to do work that wasn't exactly in my job description, be it translating press releases or planning company events. I took it in stride initially, partly because I didn't know any better, but also because the prospect of a promotion was dangled over my head.

At times, it almost felt like I was genuinely interested in the field, but all of that vanished by the time I left. The company culture, focused on "disrupting the industry" and "being a self-starter," had drained me. Like many newly-grads, I was miserable in a job that didn't seem to care about my well-being.

I had so much pent-up frustration by the time I quit; towards my coworkers who didn't care about workers' rights issues; towards my bosses who would happily work with monopolies and companies that made unnecessary garbage;

and towards myself, who still collected a paycheck at the end of the month.

This is when I started playing *Going Under*. A roguelike released in September 2020, the game was developed by Aggro Crab, an indie game studio based in Seattle. The story centers around Jackie, a marketing intern at a beverage startup that is tasked with clearing out the monsters that live in her company's basement. The trailer was punchy, chaotic and the dry satire was right down my lane. I'd never played roguelikes before, but I was unemployed with lots of time, so playing a game that was obviously taking the piss out of startup culture piqued my interest. In hindsight, the motto "Internships are Hell" probably helped too.

In a way, *Going Under* came at a perfect time. The game's destructiveness provided an avenue for me to release my frustration through destroying a shared office space that looked like mine. In the game, you're able to utilize a veritable cornucopia of elements and status effects





to defeat enemies, ranging from fire and explosives to ice and electricity. The use of enlarged weapons and flaming projectiles, both by yourself and by enemies, almost always result in the rooms you fight in becoming wrecked beyond recognition. And if you hate your job, nothing beats the feeling of absolutely trashing the videogame version of WeWork.

When I ask Caelan Pollock, the game's Creative Director, about the inherent destructiveness of the game, he says, "The first interaction that we did a real deep dive on was the act of smashing a succulent pot over the head of a basic Joblin, and how can we make this feel like bringing a pot down on someone's head, what does it sound like, what shards are there. And as soon as we got that feeling good, I think that's where we started to feel like we had something special in our hands."

The characters too, who treated Jackie the same way I was treated, made me thankful that I no longer had to deal with unfair work relationships anymore.

When Jackie defeated the dungeon bosses – themselves references to toxic working cultures – I felt like I was finally taking a stand against these things too.

Most of all, the game singled out the one thing that had pissed me off the most about working in marketing, the capitalist nature of it all. "I do think it's brought up discussions about capital, and where value is in society, and does a multibillion-dollar business add as much value as it claims it does," Pollock says, when I asked about how the game has been received so far. "It's brought some of those discussions to the forefront because it's really one of the core tenants of the game's satire. We make and design junk that we do not need, and it becomes profitable for the people who make it, because someone is willing to invest in it."

What is surprising is that for a game that critiques capitalism, *Going Under* hardly ever mentions it by name. In fact, the game is in a league of its own when you compare it to other left-leaning

games like Obsidian Entertainment's *The Outer Worlds*, or ZA/UM's *Disco Elysium*. The obvious difference is in tone; *Going Under* is line after line of satire and references to internet culture, whereas the games mentioned comparatively lean into more serious topics and dark humor.

Games like *Disco Elysium* and *The Outer Worlds* focus on suffering, and through its portrayal critique the systems that cause it. These games take serious topics like death, exploitation and the moral ambiguities that revolve around revolutionary ideals and force players to confront them. In them, players are often put into situations where they must make decisions that, regardless of their choice, end with someone being hurt or negatively impacted. Conflict, and the futility of resolving said conflict, is at the center of these stories.

The Outer Worlds, for example, forces you to choose between shutting off the power of a canning town or the community that deserted it. *Disco Elysium* in par-

ticular, through its inclusion of dice rolls, adds an element of randomness that can leave people unsatisfied with the choices that they've made. These choices, while in most cases adds depth and complexity to the narrative, nevertheless leaves the player with a sense of dissatisfaction.

I don't think that these games are "bad games." On the contrary, these games are intensely story-rich, dramatic pieces of media that tell compelling narratives that take you on a rollercoaster of emotions. Players are dragged through grime and gore, hopefully, to the light at the end of the tunnel. Between blasting alien creatures and rolling a natural 12, at times the gameplay can also be incredibly satisfying; however, while they are good at explaining the "hows" and "whys" of the downfalls of capitalism, I'd be hard-pressed to say that they offer an optimistic picture of the future. To put it bluntly, catharsis through narrative is very hard to come by in anti-capitalist games.





While by no means is *Going Under* a positive game – after all, it’s ultimately the story of an exploited intern who’s forced into dangerous situations by her bosses – it strikes a perfect balance between the soul-crushing realities of modern work culture, and the hopefulness of a better tomorrow. I posit that this is because rather than focusing on critique, it is instead focused on solidarity.

Going Under smartly assumes that people don’t need to be told how capitalism harms people. After all, it was released during a deadly pandemic where people deemed “essential workers” were forced to risk their lives, all while the country’s richest [continued to add millions to their bank accounts](#). It takes this time to focus instead on how the characters are affected in day-to-day work. Tasks pile up due to horrible management, their bosses force them to work harder and *that’s why they ask for Jackie’s help*.

[Spoiler Warning for the events of *Going Under*]

The latter half of the game takes a sharp turn in narrative. Where your co-workers were seen talking to you with thinly-veiled politeness, after Fizzle “goes under” and everyone becomes unemployed, the characters finally break and their true feelings are revealed. Kara, who had rolled out unrealistic project proposals by herself without hiring any additional employees, is sick of no one listening to her; Tappi, who had to deal with the CEO’s constant reckless spending while being paid pennies herself, finally snaps at Ray and storms off; even Ray, the irritatingly charismatic founder of Fizzle, mentions that he became an entrepreneur at the behest of his father and genuinely believed that he was doing good for the world. Everyone loses. (Except for Swamp. Swamp always wins.)

This is where the game’s true strengths lie. Though Jackie is forced by her co-workers to do grueling tasks time and time again, the game never strays from the narrative that your coworkers are

just as miserable under capitalism; that you have a shared struggle. It allows for a story that can spend more time on building relationships and fleshing out characters, instead of the standard open-world individualist approach. And in the final level of the game, Jackie teams up with her coworkers and even some of the employees of the dungeons she plundered in order to take down the monopoly that put them all under.

“I would say more than anything else, it’s a theme of solidarity in the workplace.” Pollock says. “It’s not a ‘this is how society should be run,’ it’s a ‘hey, have empathy for people that are in, by all intents and purposes, a similar situation to you. Even though your society and your workplace and capitalism is going to try to convince you that they are beneath you, or above you.” *Going Under* is anti-capitalist, but not actively so. It doesn’t say “tear it down,” but rather “it’s going to fall apart, and we need to be there for each other when it does.”

This is what makes the game so cathartic. *Going Under*’s intentional focus on character development and empathy – how they feel, what their aspirations are and, ultimately, how we can all help each other – is what changes its message from being about rebelling against a system to a realization that we *are* the system. These

characters are not actively ignoring your own struggles because they are bad people, or part of a capitalist conspiracy to exploit workers; it’s because *they have to deal with struggles of their own*.

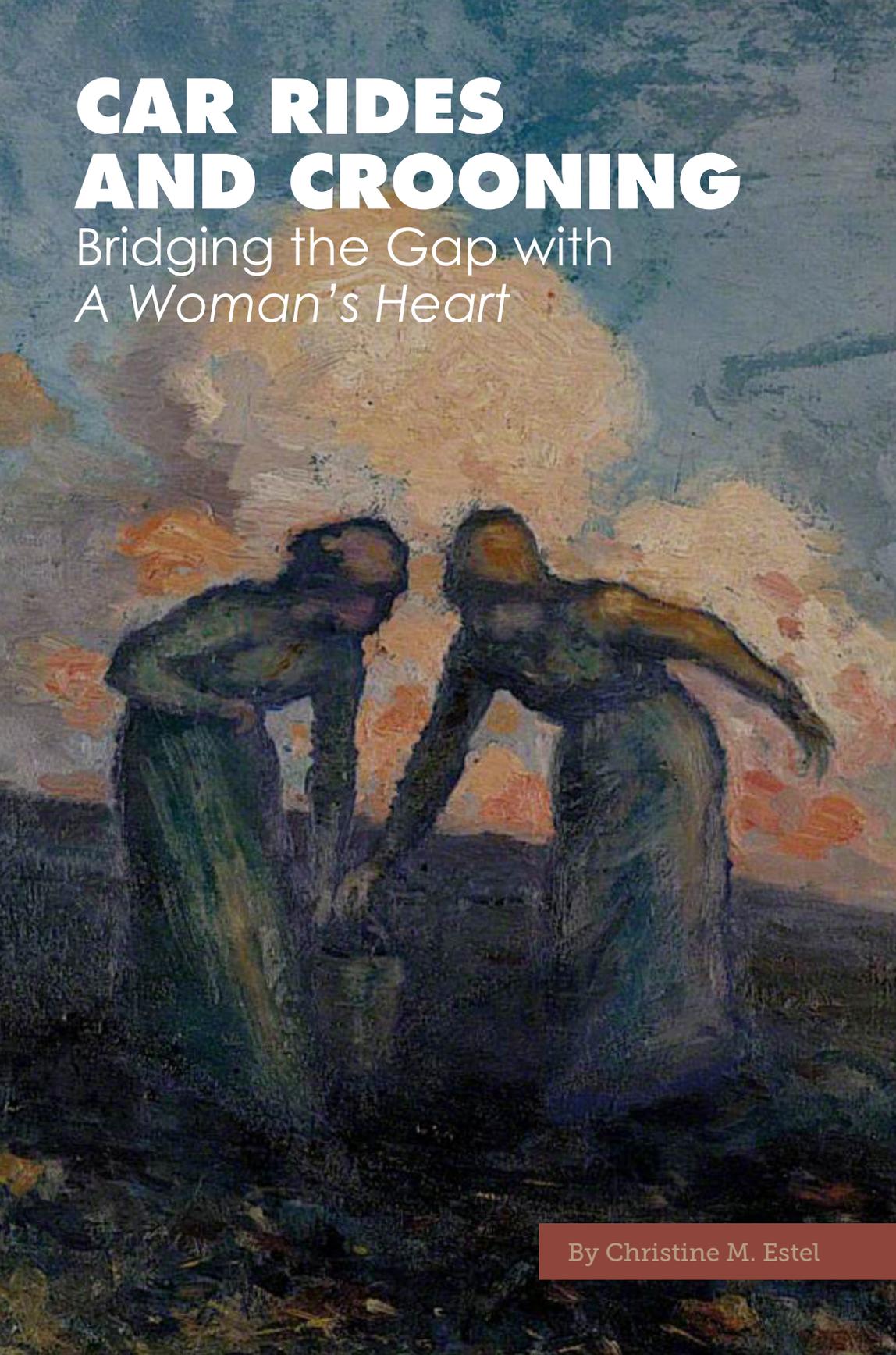
In his “[Top 10 Games of 2020](#)” piece for Giantbomb (in which *Going Under* is also included), Scott Benson wrote a paragraph about disasters that has been stuck in my head while writing this: “What happens afterwards is you bury what you’ve lost, and build again. You have to do this as a community. You have to have solidarity in it, or everything is lost. Solidarity is seeing your struggles in the struggles of others, and seeing theirs in yours, and holding yourself and each other to your common purpose.”

It’s six months later, and I no longer hate my former coworkers. I look back on my previous occupation, disappointed in myself more than anything. I ask myself, *maybe I could have convinced my coworkers to form a union? Asked them about their own problems?* Obviously, there’s nothing much I can do now. But if *Going Under* has taught me anything, it’s that even the most annoying, self-serving coworker is still a comrade. And when the entire world collapses under the weight of an unsustainable system, solidarity is what will get us through its downfall. 🕒



CAR RIDES AND CROONING

Bridging the Gap with
A Woman's Heart



By Christine M. Estel



Butterfly clips adorning girls' hair; AIM conversations with friends late at night; the 9/11 attacks and the aftermath: my adolescence – a special time that straddled the line between the late 1990s and the early 2000s. Though I couldn't participate fully in all of the "it" things of the time (ahem, my mother's restrictions), I consumed as much of the popular singers and bands of that era, including, but not limited to, the Backstreet Boys, Britney Spears and Destiny's Child.

From as young as I could remember, music was one of my passions. In elementary school, I played the cello in my school's orchestra and I took private lessons. Plus, I sang in the main chorus and in the selection groups, and I continued doing so through my middle school years. After a few years of voice lessons, I'd earned myself a vocal scholarship to my private high school; the scholarship covered the cost of my weekly lunch pe-

riod voice lessons, as well as additional instruments. Though initially I picked up piano and the cello (again), I eventually replaced them with additional voice lessons. And, for each of the four years of high school, I participated in the two plays staged by our brother school. Performing was a top hobby for me, which I did wherever I could: in my room, at school, in front of friends using my karaoke machine, in the shower and in car rides with my grandparents.

For his November 7, 2019 [article](#) in *The Saturday Evening Post*, Troy Brownfield explores the idea that there's a "generational rift over what's good and what's garbage" in popular music. He says, "Tastes change radically between generations, with new genres appearing and disappearing in a never-ending cycle." As such, it's common – expected, even – for older generations to misunderstand or underappreciate younger generations' music. As an adolescent, I often

felt that same musical disconnect with my elders, especially my grandmother.

When it came to my generation's music, the beats, volume and overall intensity didn't appease my grandmother, but what she disliked the most was the language. She vilified the overtly sensual, innuendo-filled and vulgar lyrics, and she was horrified by the dancing in the music videos, not that she purposely watched them. She preferred that I'd listen to "nice" music, songs with soft, gentle melodies and God-approved lyrics, so singing songs like "Baby One More Time," "Genie in a Bottle," or any other sexually-progressive tunes in front of or to her simply wasn't an option. But she cherished when I sang for her on our car rides to lunch, to go shopping or to visit her sister who lived an hour away, so I'd force myself to select neutral, safe options, like

songs from Disney films and Broadway shows. If I declined her request to sing, she'd tune in to a benign radio talk show station or the classical station that played Bach and Beethoven. We'd also listen to the all-female Irish compilation album she'd been gifted, called *A Woman's Heart*, an album that, although far from mainstream, bonded us and bridged the gap between our musical tastes.

Granny, my maternal grandmother of Italian heritage, and I were driving back to her house from Pizza Hut, our most common lunch spot on our days out together, when she reached into the dash console and pulled out a new cassette I'd never seen before. Turning it towards me so I could see the Kelly green face, she asked if I wanted to listen to some Irish music. I hesitated, mouth slightly parted as though I was ready to speak, and





then flashed my best fake smile and said, “Sure.” Then I quickly turned my head out the front passenger side window, rolled my eyes and turned up my lip. As someone who woke up each morning to Billboard hits blaring on my clock radio, and who’d listen to Sarah McLachlan’s *Mirrorball Tour* album, as well as my favorite Savage Garden tracks, on repeat, each night after my homework was complete and on the weekends, I hated what I’d just agreed to.

In mere seconds, before she pushed the cassette all the way into the tape deck, I’d convinced myself that listening to instrumentalists banging on bodhráns and whistling their Celtic flutes and trying to decipher the words of vocalists with thick brogues, would be torturous. I hadn’t considered that maybe this was my grandmother’s attempt at finding

music sans inflammatory themes and words that would bond us in a new way.

I was born just over two weeks before my grandmother’s 43rd birthday; in other words, she was a young first-time grandmother. My mother and I lived with her, my grandfather, Pop, and my uncles until I was over two years old, and even after moving out on our own, I’d spend countless days at their house, cooking that evening’s dinner with my grandmother; playing cards, the piano or old records; reading books; sitting and talking with both of them while muffled dialogue from syndicated episodes of *Columbo*, or golf tournament or horse race announcers, occupied the television screen. Connecting with my grandparents was easy. Natural.

Over time, however, my childhood and teenage interests and responsibili-

ties shifted, which meant that my time with my grandparents and how we spent that time had to shift, too. While I certainly still visited their house regularly, our visits tended to be in cars. My grandfather took me for rides in and around Philadelphia, as well as taught me how to drive during my permit days before passing my driving exam. On many Saturdays, my grandmother chauffeured me from my house to lunch, then to the mall or other standalone stores, and then back to her house to prepare and eat dinner. These various car rides housed our conversations about which friend or relative she'd seen or talked to on the phone that week or who she and Pop had run into at Sunday Mass the weekend before, but mostly the floor was mine to discuss what I'd been learning in school,

how my babysitting jobs were going and the updates on my upcoming concerts or shows. These same car rides weren't just vehicles of transportation; they were vehicles of connection, through conversation and crooning.

In her July 2009 [article](#) for AARP, music therapist Amy Goyer says, "music is a tool of unparalleled dimensions that can be used to connect the generations." She later suggests that if people don't feel connected with members of their own bloodlines they should "try listening to [that family member's] favorite music. Chances are [everyone] can find some common ground." I couldn't, through my own resistance, see how an Irish album could be shared and enjoyed by people separated by two generations. I couldn't believe or trust that music out of my rep-

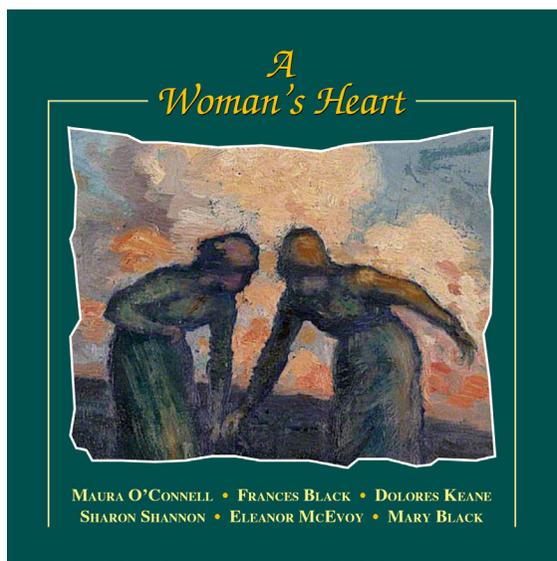


ertoire could be so powerful, moving, or effective in keeping our bond fresh. I failed to realize that maybe it was *I* who needed to expand my horizons, that it wasn't she who needed to "get with the times" and learn to love my generation's music. Yet she was unknowingly making an effort I was not yet ready to make.

As a result, I missed the opening tracks that first time my grandmother played *A Woman's Heart*. I zoned out, everything in sight a blur, and heard only indistinguishable sounds. I didn't immediately absorb any of the lyrics or appreciate the instruments, but I do remember that my initial assumptions about bodhráns, flutes and brogues were unfounded. I remember feeling pleasantly surprised about this realization.

The next few times I saw my grandmother, she played the cassette again, sometimes picking up from where she'd left off the previous time, sometimes from the beginning. Little by little, I noticed the tempo variations in each song, the singers' smooth tones and the depth of the lyrics, filled with imagery and emotional appeal. Best of all, I registered that these songs fit well within my alto range. So, I started listening. Really listening. And with that, over the next several months and years, I grew a deep appreciation for what my grandmother had shared with me.

When I recently spoke with Alecia Meila, a board-certified music therapist from New Jersey who currently works as a contractor for a private practice, she told me, "Music is an immensely personal ex-



perience and [its] impact can have can be quite varied and profound. [I]f two people can appreciate something in a piece of music, whether it's the sound or the message, they can bond over it." For us, *A Woman's Heart*, a collection of songs that covered themes of connection, love, and loss – not all too different from mainstream music – in memorable melodies and words, became an unexpected connection point.

I practiced on my own at home and eventually started singing along to the songs during our car rides. Sometimes I suggested we play the tape before she asked, and sometimes I'd even sing my favorite tracks a cappella for her. When we later ditched the cassette and replaced it with the CD version, our enjoyment never waned.

We weren't the only listeners positively impacted by this album. *A Woman's Heart*, which later expanded to two additional albums, including a 20th anniversary al-

bum, “is the best-selling indigenous Irish CD series of all time,” because of both the artists and the songs themselves. In fact, Kiara Murphy, maker of the documentary *Our Women’s Hearts*, which explores the impact of *A Woman’s Heart* on three generations of women, notes, “The songs and the music [...] they’re as alive now as they were then.”

Frances Black, singer of “Wall of Tears” (*A Woman’s Heart*, track 5), shares about the album’s success, “[W]hen a song came on, everybody knew the words [...] There’s a great feeling of camaraderie with music.” In the case of me and my grandmother, we’d developed that connection, that camaraderie, even with years of time and experiences separating us.

Several years into adulthood, I realized that I’d never shared with anyone this connection with my grandmother. I suppose I was too afraid of what my friends would think or that I’d be perceived as

even stranger than I already thought I was. Now, even more years later, as I listen to the album on [YouTube](#), it takes just the first few notes of the title song, “Only a Woman’s Heart” (*A Woman’s Heart*, track 1), written by Eleanor McEvoy, for me to be transported back to the car rides with my grandmother, bonding over music, the language of connection between generations.

At this juncture in my life, the ABCs, “Five Little Speckled Frogs” and “You Are My Sunshine” (and similar ditties) play on repeat as I raise my two small children, but I suppose one day we’ll all inevitably disagree on what constitutes “good” music. Both sides will likely try to convince the other of “better” or “cooler” choices. But hopefully when I introduce them to that very special album, *A Woman’s Heart*, they, too, will be captivated and share in the multi-generational connection my grandmother and I began all those years ago. 🍷



UNDER THE HOOD



By Ben Sailer



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Car aficionados have no shortage of top-tier racing titles to choose from. Ever since formative franchises like *Ridge Racer* and *Need for Speed* brought believable driving experiences to home consoles in the mid-90s (relative to what was possible in the 16-bit era), the genre's evolution has branched in numerous directions. From driving sims such as *Forza* to hardcore esports platforms like *iRacing*, there are myriad ways for players to burn digital rubber.

Yet few games allow gear heads to immerse themselves in other areas of the automotive world. What about games that allow you to, say, design your own engine? Or build an entire vehicle from the ground up? Run an entire automotive manufacturer, perhaps? When it comes to games that explore how cars fundamentally work, whether from a technical or business perspective, the road to the market is wide open.

Enter New Zealand-based Camshaft Software's *Automation - The Car Company Tycoon Game*. The brainchild of studio cofounder and art director Andrew Lamb, he calls the game "an assorted playground of fun things for car nerds." Sure, as the name implies, it's somewhat like popular tycoon-style games. Yet it offers much more than such comparisons would imply, combining business simulation with *Dreams*-esque capabilities for creation.

"It's definitely inspired by things like *Car Tycoon* and *Detroit*," Lamb says. "But as a kid who read engineering papers about car engine design for fun, those never really hit the itch for full-on technical nerdery that I craved, and there was really nothing out there for that."

Automation has been a pet project for Lamb since he was around ten years old in the 1990s. Since no one was making the kind of car game he wanted to play, the would-be gearhead began building a rudimentary engine building tool himself, applying what he knew about engine mechanics and programming to bring his vision to

fruition. Somewhere, he thinks, he still has a Windows 3.1-era prototype he built as a child.

The development timeline for *Automation* as players know it today began in earnest on one dull afternoon in 2009. While playing multiplayer *Railroad Tycoon* with his friend Caswel Parker, a games programming teacher and fellow auto enthusiast, they thought to look for a multiplayer car tycoon title instead. Their search ended in disappointment; the 2003 release *Car Tycoon* is strictly solo, and there were no other options available, years after Lamb began tinkering on his PC as a kid.



It's said that necessity is the mother of invention, and rather than giving up, Lamb and Parker took that maxim to heart. They decided to combine Lamb's 3D art skillset with Parker's deep coding knowledge to make their own game, beginning what would become Camshaft Software, *Automation*, and a growing community of like-minded gear heads that are helping to build something unlike anything else in the games industry.

Soon thereafter, the pair started doing some design experiments for the game. In 2011 they launched a small crowdfunding campaign on RocketHub (an Australian Kickstarter-style platform), which was successful enough to finance a playable build of an engine designer tool the following year. Their early efforts may have been basic, but they proved their idea had backing, and they could build it.

Camshaft continued work on the game. *Automation* hit Early Access on Steam in 2015, six years after Lamb and Parker turned

the key on the project. The game developed a passionate following, and as support grew, so did the company's ambitions. Eventually, this necessitated rebuilding the entire game using Unreal Engine in 2017, which provided more power than their previous in-house development tools.

Since then, the game has continued to grow into much more than an engine design simulator. It's challenging to succinctly summarize what's possible within the game's ever-expanding feature set, but when Lamb claims "you can do anything car-related that isn't driving," it isn't hyperbole. If players can dream it, then they can probably make it happen in *Automation* (especially if they have modding skills).



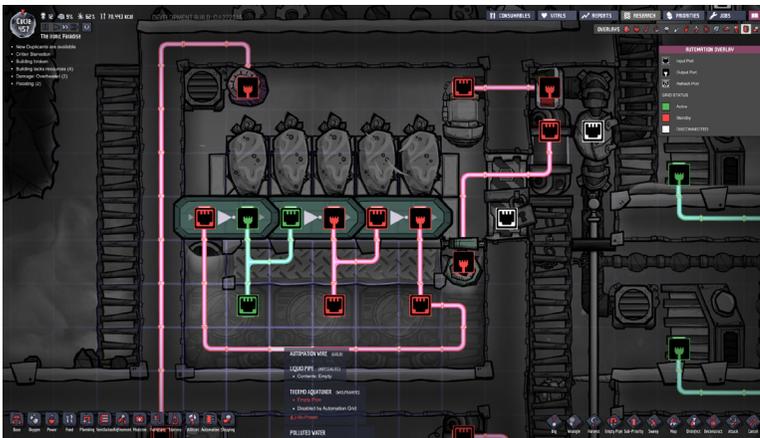
"Automation is a pretty many-faceted beast at this point," Lamb says. "At the core, it's a simulation of running a car manufacturer, and all that involves, from designing engines and cars, building factories, deciding on the best markets to target, managing R&D and all that."

Lamb could easily be protective of his vision for *Automation*; after all, it's his boyhood dream, and still the only videogame project he has ever worked on. Instead, the team at Camshaft have embraced player input from their passionate community. The company listens to feedback from its forums and actively encourages modders to contribute new designs, features and modes they want to see. In a way, they're providing a platform for players to build upon, which helps to expand what's possible within in its scope.

That openness has paid off. *Automation's* player base has played an integral role in its growth from a simple design gadget and into the

comprehensive car sandbox it is now. It has also provided Camshaft with an excellent talent pool to hire from too. Many of the studio's employees – including lead designer and current co-founder Robert Hoischen, who relocated from Germany to New Zealand to join the company – started as members of the game's modding community.

“Almost every artist we've ever worked with has started out as a modder,” Lamb says. “They end up with such a good balance of car knowledge, enthusiasm for the vision of the game, and technical skill that would be impossible to find elsewhere. Our core vehicle physics simulation that underlies the calculation of car performance was also written by a very skilled vehicle dynamics expert who is part of our community.”



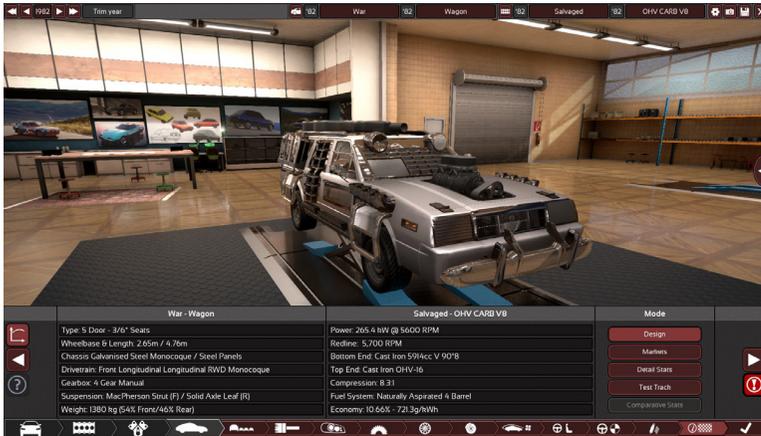
Once players start *Automation* for the first time, it's immediately evident that the game's community has diverse interests when it comes to cars, and its contributions are readily apparent. Whether you want to tinker with the core engine designer, build your own vehicle from the ground up, or prove you're smarter than a car company CEO, players can do it. Some focus on aesthetic design while others lean toward mechanical engineering and optimization, either trying to recreate real-world vehicles or craft entirely new machines suited to specific use bases.

While some even things players come up with seem to surprise even Lamb himself, he embraces everything they bring to the table.

“The community makes the game much more entertaining for the players,” Lamb says. “There is so much replayability thanks to the

design contests, company lore roleplay threads (seriously), screenshot contests and more run by the Discord and forum community. I can honestly say the game would not have happened at all without them. We love them to bits.”

While *Automation* stops short of letting players test drive their creations within the game, there’s an outside-the-box solution for this too. Thanks to an innovative integration with *BeamNG*, it’s possible to port your cars into the PC-based driving simulator and take them for a spin. Lamb believes porting content from one game to another entirely unrelated game may be a first for the industry. He asks whether this is true in the form of a question (rather than a declarative statement of fact), but if any other games have done something similar, that list would be extremely short.



Truly, *Automation* is a blank canvas for players to build their automotive dreams upon. As such, this also means it could quickly feel overwhelming. Camshaft recognizes this though, and just as they’ve delivered on their promise to provide the playground of every car nut’s dreams, they’ve also ensured the game makes automotive education accessible. Even would-be motorheads with minimal mechanical knowledge are welcome to explore *Automation*’s possibilities, without needing to know how to read engine schematics. If the desire to learn is there, the game will help with the rest.

“As long as you’re willing to be patient, do some tutorials, read some explanations and so on, we’ll teach you everything you’ll need to know, and you’ll come out knowing a lot about cars as well as how

to play the game,” Lamb says. “We’ve even had a few schools and universities use us for automotive courses, as *Automation* gives you more fun and clear feedback about how car design works than almost anything else you could name.”

Automation has come a long way from its unassuming beginnings as a pipe dream in a child’s imagination. It has benefited from its creator’s commitment to democratizing car design, allowing players to share in their vision and turn what can be an otherwise cost-prohibitive fascination into an accessible platform for automotive play and education. Perhaps the only thing that hasn’t changed, from its earliest prototypes to today, is that there’s still nothing else quite like it. No matter which direction it may take next, though, Camshaft’s core mission is likely to remain the same.

“We’d just like players to come away with a bunch more knowledge about how cars work and all the interesting compromises that go into designing them,” Lamb says. “I think we’ve done a pretty good job of that. We really try to skill the player up to understand real engineering concepts.”

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Learn more about *Automation* at the [official site](#),
or [buy it in Early Access on Steam](#). 



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