

# UNWINNABLE MONTHLY

*Volume 9, Issue 8 - August 2022*



**RETURN OF THE OBRA DINN • PATH OF EXILE**

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*Monthly*

154



*Publisher* | Stu Horvath

*Vice Publisher* | Sara Clemens

*Editor in Chief* | David Shimomura

*Managing Editor* | Levi Rubeck

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Unwinnable  
820 Chestnut Street  
Kearny, NJ 07032

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

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

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Dear Reader,

Welcome to a very normal issue this month. Still some treats and surprises but no theme, just the goods.

This month's cover feature (cover photo by Stu) is Daryl Li on the *Return of the Obra Dinn*. Our other feature this month is Andrei Filote on the *Path of the Exile*. I hope you'll enjoy reading as much as I did! Reviving our nascent interview series, I talk to our vice publisher, Sara Clemens. Finally, for Epic Games, we have Ben Sailer writing about *Unbound: Worlds Apart*.

Also, this month, I have a special surprise . . . Re-meet Maddi Chilton! Maddi is taking up a column here and everyone please be sure to say hi! Some of our longest serving readers may remember [Maddi from way back in 2017](#). I sure did!

As for our regular columnists I'd like to bring to you . . . Matt Marrone, continuing his descent into madness. Emily Price, who weaves a brilliant web of media. Justin Reeve, on the indelible nature of trade. Rob Rich, who *still* loves the Muppets. Levi Rubeck, who is doing a Noah Springer impersonation. Oh hey! Phil Russell is back! Hey Phil, and Phil writes about *The Bear*. Ben Sailer is here, lamenting a bygone age. Phoenix Simms talks to Javy Gwaltney. Noah Springer, who is doing a Noah Springer impersonation. Alyssa Wejebe on the legacy of one of the most iconic sharks of all time. And, of course, Autumn Wright with a statement of intent.

Stay safe, wear a mask and fight like hell to preserve the right to safe, affordable and equitable abortion services to all who want them! Thank you to all our readers in Kansas for voting!

See you all in a few weeks in Exploits!

David Shimomura  
Chicago, Illinois  
August 11, 2022

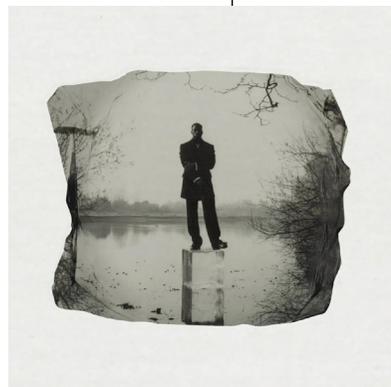


Well, it's August and boy is it hot!  
*How hot is it?*

So hot that you climate change denying assholes can yeet right off into the sun. But this column isn't about the heat that comes from the atmosphere, just the heat that comes off these fresh drops. Maybe I need to stop writing this intro and just get to the music.

### Lil Silva – *Yesterday is Heavy*

UK R&B isn't something that normally creeps onto my radar, and to be honest, I can't really remember why Lil Silva popped onto my list of stuff to listen to, but I'm sure glad it did. R&B maybe doesn't quite capture everything that is happening in the album either, as Silva draws from grime, dubstep, house, etc . . . The eclectic European sensibilities really shine through on this, but I also hear a lot of The Weeknd in here, and a little bit of that Frankie O, so for now, I'm going to throw Silva into that ever-growing basket of alt-R&B artists that are really making new and interesting sounds. *Yesterday is Heavy* is a complex album with thoughtful lyrics, beautiful vocals, deep grooves, and rich textures. A real treat for your ears!



### 070 Shake – *You Can't Kill Me*

I remember putting 070 Shake's last album, *Modus Vivendi*, on my list of things to listen to back in 2020, but apparently it slipped through the cracks. Now, having listened through Shake's second studio album, *You Can't Kill Me*, I can't believe I missed it. Once you hear her production, you won't be surprised to learn she's on Kanye's GOOD Music label and worked on some of his projects during the Wyoming session in 2018, but she's successfully taken the best of late-era Ye and excised the bullshit. You can also hear the clear Kid Cudi influence on her lyrics, focusing on introspective themes, often over synth-heavy beats and booming drums. But Shake is in her own lane, leaving her mentors behind her and leading the way into an exciting new avenue.



### Fatboi Sharif – *Cyber City Society*

It's always fun to see the experiments of one artist pay off years later with a new artist, and even cooler to see it happen for two generations. Don't get me wrong – Fatboi Sharif's new album stands by itself, but it feels like part of a generational project. It inherits a lineage that stems from the work of the GOAT, MF DOOM. DOOM's obscure samples that blended comics, multiple personalities and real life with hazy clouds of blunt smoke challenges the gangsta rap that dominated the late-90s, early 00s hip hop scene. Then, nearly a decade later, Flying Lotus broke the mold again with his Captain Murphy project, stealthily leaking out two albums that sampled Marshall Applewhite's monologues from Heaven's Gate. Now, the feeling of someone striking out into this style is here again. *Cyber City Society* is an esoteric, lyrically complex project tapping into psychedelic multitudes. Plus, that artwork!



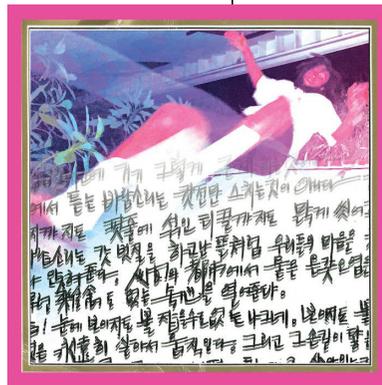
### The Koreatown Oddity – *ISTHISFORREAL?*

As someone with a pretty decent case of misophonia (“when repeated sounds can become so annoying that you feel enraged, triggered by specific sounds like eating, breathing, typing and coughing”), I think I should probably hate this album. On *ISTHISFORREAL?*, the Koreatown Oddity devotes two tracks to the condition, talking about how he loves triggering his partner who suffers from the same problem as me. And yes, the second track does suck, but the LA-

based rapper makes up for it with the rest of the album, full of intricate word-play, considerate lyrics and unique beats full of obscure samples and weird sounds. And yes, they are weird and normally, these sounds would be driving me up a wall, but for some reason (*unlike someone eating pretzels on the mic while playing an RPG*), when packaged together with a talented rapper, the odd production doesn't end up bothering me. In fact, I think I kind of like it!

### Sinitus Tempo – *Summer Solace 2*

*Summer Solace 2* is a perfect instrumental album for someone who loves winter and is living through the hottest summer of their life, so far. Sinitus Tempo's clean break beats and smooth strings open up into jazzy pianos and dusty maracas, leaving a melancholic vibe. There seems to be something looming about the record, something ominous lurking in the background. Is this a swan song to the cold? An album for us to listen to in the coming perma-summer and take solace in? Maybe it's not that drastic of a tone, and there are certainly some more uplifting beats across it. Maybe I'm just getting tired of the heat. Don't be surprised if, as the world is melting in 25 years, this is the soundtrack playing across the dying speakers in the last functioning elevator. I, for one, wouldn't mind if it were. 





## Just Above the Noise

One of the first things a viewer might think when watching *The Bear* is just how similar it feels to the Safdie Brothers' film *Uncut Gems*. They're both chaotic, disorienting, claustrophobic and interested in how our own internal noise causes friction with the world and people we interact with on a daily basis. How, for most of us, life is hard not only because *living* is hard, but also because very few of us are good at actually saying what's on our minds.

The television series follows a young chef named Carmen (or "Carmy" as he's often called in the series) who has risen the ranks of the culinary world to work at some of the world's best restaurants. Shortly before the series opens, Carmy is forced to return home to run his family's Italian beef sandwich shop after his brother died by suicide. After hiring a young up-and-coming chef named Sidney to be his sous-chef, the duo attempts to create a different kind of restaurant than the decaying restaurant Carmy has inherited.

The series depicts the various ways Carmy attempts to keep the business afloat while navigating his own trauma, his relationship to his family, and the varied circumstances of the kitchen staff he's forced to lead. The show sidesteps the triumphant narratives you might associate with its premise. This isn't a story about a white male savior revitalizing a dying restaurant and showing his largely Black and brown staff the power of friendship and hard work. Carmy, just like the rest of his kitchen staff, is a man grappling with immense loss, and years of trauma not only from his own upbringing, but also the various workplaces he's spent the majority of his time in to survive.

*The Bear* succeeds for a variety of reasons, but what strikes me most is that it isn't a show interested in questions like: "how does one get over the death of a family member?" or "why did my loved one take their own life?" As Alex Sch says in his eloquent [video essay](#), this is a show about the traumas that our previous workplaces, managers and family members imprint on us and the struggles we face not only in trying to overcome them ourselves, but also create another way, a different system to break the chain that forever replicates the damaging environments that retraumatize us over and over again.

\* \* \*

Similar to *Uncut Gems*, a key differentiator with *The Bear* is its editing and sound design. The show doesn't linger long on any given moment, even the most dramatic of scenes are often cut short, left ambiguous, or interrupted by another plot element being thrown into the mix. In this way, the direction of the show seems to be interested in just how messy human connection can be, how our most impactful moments in life actually resonate because they are times where we're able to make ourselves heard about all of our world's noise.



Diegetic sound becomes a key character in scenes with variable sound mixing that often puts the kitchen clamor at odds with the character dialogue. The characters' interior lives become an element of dissonance and interference as they move through their realities. Carmy's nightmares interrupt not only how he navigates the world, but also the flow of the show itself. Instead of telling the viewer how to feel about all the static buzzing behind the character's ears, we're left to come to our own conclusions about what it all means.

This kind of editing makes the character relationships feel more dynamic. Seldomly do Carmy and his crew resolve conflicts completely in the moment,

emotions bubble over like an unwatched pot of pasta, and the characters are often ill-equipped to tackle their issues head-on. *The Bear* understands that people rarely say exactly how they feel, and that maybe it's even part of the human condition to get our lines a little crossed, to talk past each other in hopes that we align on the same frequency, if only for a moment.

Carmy and Sidney “get” each other on a molecular level. They both are highly skilled chefs who have complex relationships to food. They're loners, prodigies even, but where they find connection in the dishes they create, they also find isolation from those around them who don't aspire to the same levels of greatness as they do. These similarities bring the duo together, but also cause friction as Carmy must navigate being a practical restaurant owner who – to the restaurant's detriment – is trying to uphold some of the core systems that formed *The Beef's* identity.

While we're given glimpses of her own struggles climbing the restaurant ladder, Sidney, is still a young chef cutting her teeth in the industry. Unlike Carmy who has become jaded from his years in high-end dining, Sidney is still willing to ask: *why are we doing things this way? Why must we replicate these systems that destroy us?*



Sidney has yet to be torn down enough to give up on magical thinking all together. Carmy on the other hand is representative of many people my age, people who are in their 30s and have been beaten down by the oppressive systems that govern our lives. While many of us still resist and want for more, there's a prickly voice in the back of our heads making us wonder if another way is even possible anymore. With each new idea that Sidney brings to the table to make the restaurant a better place, Carmy is forced to grapple with what it *actually* means to do things differently.

Throughout most of the series, however, Carmy fails at seeing the value in Sidney's ideas. He regresses back to archetypes that he's experienced in previous kitchens, even the systems that traumatized him in the past seem like better implementations to him than trying something new. This is why capitalism is so insidious. This is *always* a tension for any form of activism or counterculture thinking isn't it? It's easier for most of us to fall back on the mechanisms we know "work," even to our detriment.

Outside of all the main elements of the show around suicide, I find the connection that Carmy and Sidney have to be the heart of the show. Specifically, the strained relationship they share in trying to change The Beef into a restaurant that's more than just a dive slowly eating them whole.

\* \* \*

From the beginning of the show *The Bear* presents the viewer with a smoking gun in the form of a letter left to Carmy from his brother. For the rest of the series, you're left to wonder when Carmy will find it and how he'll respond to whatever message is inside.



After the most stressful episode of the season which shows The Beef rapidly spiral out of control after Carmy takes Sidney's advice and opens up online ordering, we see Carmy become the very monster that haunts him in his nightmares – a toxic boss who runs his restaurant through anger and belittlement. Carmy's outburst that day sends a shockwave through the restaurant causing Sidney, as well as other members of his staff to quit. Shortly after this blow up (in the final episode) is when Carmy is given the letter from his brother.

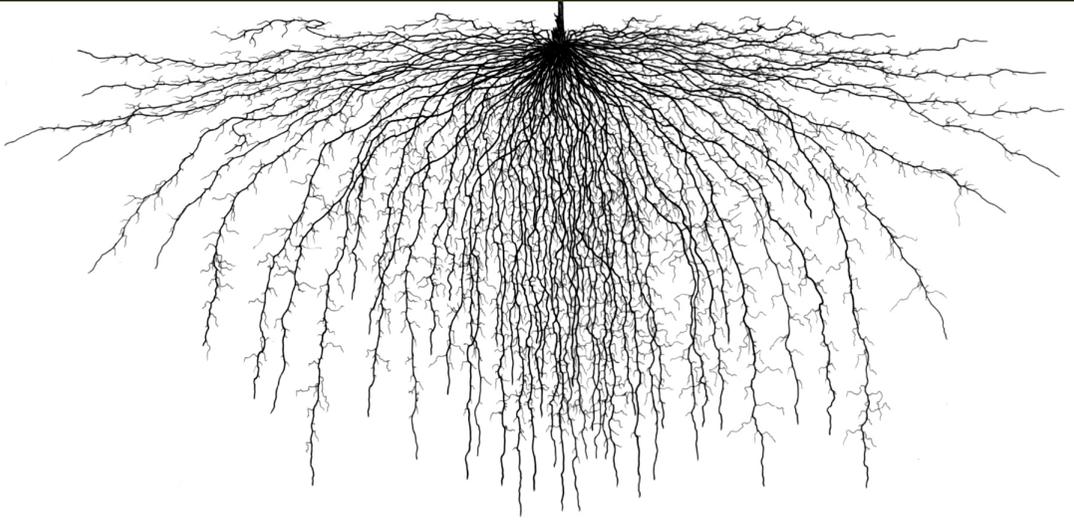
There's a weight to the moments that follows, you can feel the terror and anguish Carmy feels in receiving the letter. He takes a break and steps out into the alley outside the restaurant. The noise of the kitchen falls away and we

are left in silence. Despite the deadening quiet, we know that Carmy's world is louder in this moment than it's ever been. So loud that he might throw up, so loud that he may not be able to read the letter, so loud that it might consume him all together.

It's at this moment that he texts the only person he knows will understand him. Sidney. Carmy doesn't text Sidney asking for advice or to tell her that he found a letter from his brother or even that he needs support at this moment. Instead, he texts her that a dish she's been conceiving needs a bit of acid. In the prior episode, Carmy fucked up so bad with Sidney that you're left wondering if they'll ever be able to reconcile. This acknowledgement is a way for him to rise above all of the racket happening in his head, to ground and recenter himself in this moment of intense emotion. It's also a moment for him to say, "I see you," in the only way he can muster.

So much of our lives are spent throwing darts into the abyss and hoping they land on target. Human communication is challenging, messy and downright ugly most of the time, but that doesn't mean we shouldn't try. Carmy and Sidney's fight has nothing to do with this letter, but what *The Bear* understands is that all of these things are interfacing at the same time. That we're never able to fully remove ourselves from the noise of our lives, but maybe we can rise just above it, if only for a moment. 🍷





## Rehearsal

“This network of times which approached one another, forked, broke off, or were unaware of each other for centuries, embraces all possibilities of time . . . In the present one, which a favorable fate has granted me, you have arrived at my house; in another, while crossing the garden, you found me dead; in still another, I utter these same words, but I am a mistake, a ghost.”

– Borges, *The Garden of Forking Paths*

**I**n early July, I went to see the Whitney’s Biennial exhibit *Quiet As It’s Kept*. The exhibit is announced on the ground floor by a series of flags with proclamations I can’t remember stitched on in bright colors. The exhibit takes up two floors of the five-floor museum. The exhibit is nominally about the coronavirus. The curatorial statement reads:

*We began planning this Biennial in late 2019: before Covid and its reeling effects, before the uprisings demanding racial justice, before the widespread questioning of institutions and their structures, before the 2020 presidential election. Although underlying conditions are not new, their overlap, their intensity, and their sheer ubiquity created a context in which past, present, and future folded into one another.*

The exhibition is labyrinthine on purpose. The top floor, the one I visited first, is dark and contains several video pieces nestled around in hallways.

There was a sculpture made of glass and plastic that clung to the ceiling, in the form of a neural network. The pathways lit up every few seconds, which the plaque said had something to do with the levels of carbon dioxide in a particular place. Again, I've forgotten the details. You could lie down on a couch below the network and watch the lights flash, but the couches were crowded, and anyway I didn't want to look at it anymore.

After about an hour, I left without seeing the rest. I found the exhibit disorienting. It was odd to step back out into the 5pm sunshine and feel the clamminess and unrest dissolve. It did what it was supposed to do, at least I think it did; I was disturbed, provoked and interested. Time was flowing a little differently.

This week, I've been watching the new Nathan Fielder show *The Rehearsal*. In the first episode, Nathan meets a man named Kor from Brooklyn who goes to trivia every week at a bar called the Alligator Lounge. Kor has been lying to his friends for years about having an advanced degree, and now he's ready to come clean; in order to help him do so, Nathan builds an exact replica of the bar in a warehouse, implants trivia answers into his brain over the course of weeks and drives him through rehearsals of the same conversation over and over.



The show has been called manipulative, sociopathic and dangerous by people on the internet. All of these are obviously exaggerations and misnomers. I'm more receptive to the opinion that Nathan is a demonic genius, or an alien sent to school people on social norms and how to break them, or just a dorky guy touched by the power of prophecy. But both of these opinions miss how the show is actually trying to paint him: not as an analytical genius, but as a deeply anxious person struggling with being unable to control what's going

on. One conversation that shows this is at the end of episode one, when he is apologizing to the actor he hired to play Kor for deceiving him and ruining his streak of not cheating at trivia. Nathan (or what constitutes Nathan's character) can't actually have the real conversation: he can only bring himself to apologize to his subject's shadow.



By the time this column goes up, the whole season will have been released, but I've only watched the first three episodes. What I've seen so far reminds me so much of *How To With John Wilson*, which similarly dramatizes its host's interactions with [other people doing crazy things](#), and was produced by Fielder. *The Rehearsal*, though, is more focused on the mechanics of conversation. The second episode, which is about a woman named Angela practicing raising a child from birth to teenagerhood in eighteen months, involves her going on a series of dates that reveal the scaffolding underlying those constructed interactions (and also the eels guy).

Apart from the obvious comedy, it's compelling to watch people relive conversations over and over, return to the same missteps and mistakes, and try to gain a sense of certainty that it's impossible to ever actually get. Even in the final performance, the opportunity for mistakes is present, an issue which the participants themselves seem to frequently find sad. As Nathan says about the reconstructed bar in the first episode, "It was the only place where failure was impossible".

*The Rehearsal* made me think a lot about how we approach social failure, and how much it's possible to invest in trying not to fail. Structurally, it creates the closest thing to an unalterable scenario it's possible to make: constructed environments with a reality TV budget behind them, and an all-knowing

figure encouraging people to run it again. There's not just a darkness, but a sadness behind that imperative: both Nathan and his guests are so determined for things to go right, and so scared that they won't, and the more they invest in the former, the more the latter gets to them. The final conversations are haunted by their previous mistakes, so that even when things go smoothly, there's a clear sense of how exactly they could have gone wrong. Every time Nathan runs a conversation differently, he creates an alternate universe where his subject's life plays out differently, and then rewinds to try it again.



At least on the surface, this repetition can be uncomfortable, even perverse. This is why, even though it's billed as a comedy, *The Rehearsal* made me profoundly and strangely sad. That's not to say I don't like it. It is to say that it gives me a sense that I'm watching something private, a negotiation between two people who desperately want the situation they're practicing to come under their control, and will do almost anything to get it there. In one scene at the end of episode two, Nathan calls the parents of child actors to ask them to let their children participate in the parenthood experiment. He reads his answers off a flow chart that looks like the back end of a Twine game: if yes, proceed to response x; if no, proceed to y. It makes cause and effect visible and maps out all the disparate ways each choice can cascade out into a multitude of other choices. Change one variable and you could end up lying to a stranger about your grandmother or talking about wireless radiation levels in rural Oregon.

Mark Amerika's [GRAMMATRON](#) (once exhibited, as it turns out, at the Whitney) is widely considered one of the earliest digital versions of hypertext fiction, works that incorporate branching paths and reader/user choice. Textual versions include Julio Cortazar's work and (debatably) *Ulysses*.

Hypertext fiction, at least on its face, tries to share control of the text with the reader. It wants to at least give the illusion that the story you're reading is one you're helping to tell, or shaping your own experience of more than you could otherwise do.

GRAMMATRON describes itself as taking place in “a near-future world where stories are no longer conceived for book production but are instead created for a more immersive networked-narrative environment that, taking place on the Net, calls into question how a narrative is composed, published and distributed in the age of digital dissemination.” It takes the viewer through a shifting landscape of vaporware aesthetics that provide an intentional overstimulation, in line with [Amerika's interest](#) in the artist's struggle to remain coherent in the wake of internet advertising (“the mindless techno-spam of invasive technocapitalism”).

It's me, hello, yes, without italics, without boldness, without quotes clawing into my shoulders....just me...



*The Rehearsal* isn't hypertext fiction. It's a surrealist reality show that's at least partly scripted and is predetermined, without divergent user experiences. Importantly, it refuses to share control: we can't rewind and choose again. This is partly a limit of the medium, but partly also revealing of the kind of show this is: a mostly controlled experience about the experience of lacking, and wanting, control, and the fantasy of having the resources to achieve it.

The end of the show's third episode gestures directly at this artificiality. The child actor for Nathan and Angela's three-year-old is replaced with a six year old. Stagehands in headlamps bury store-bought vegetables in the dirt at night while Nathan's voiceover explains that this appearance of accelerated domesticity is necessary to pretend that the experiment is normal life: “Nature's timeline has to be accelerated, and your brain desperately tries to adapt to your new reality.”

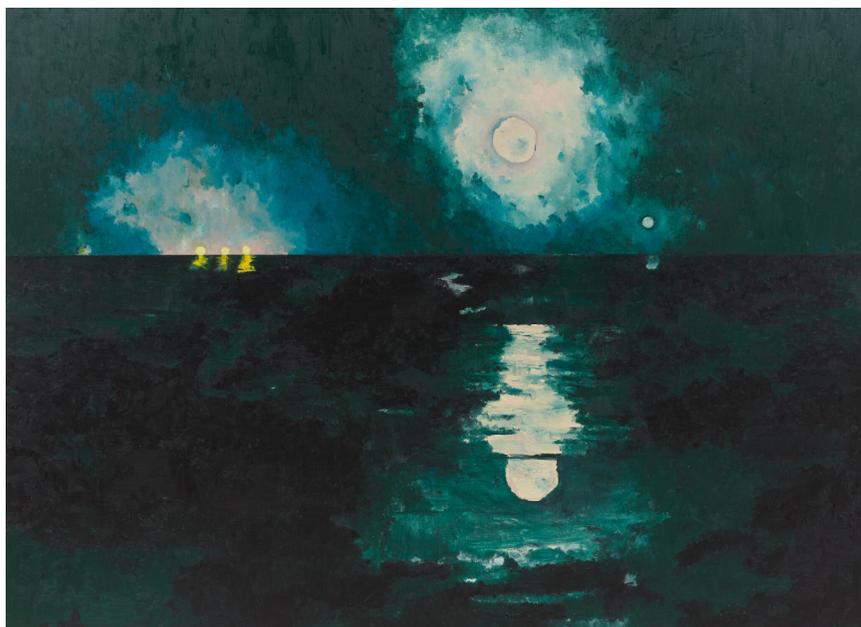
*The Rehearsal* might actually be anti-hypertextual: it provides you with one or two conversational branches, leaving you to guess how else it could have gone, but giving you only one answer. However, like hypertext fiction, it is

interested in overloading the viewer with options they can't pursue, whether because they have made their own choice already or because directorial control means there is no choice to be made. If GRAMMATRON is about an oversaturation of internet marketing blocking out the possibility for art, *The Rehearsal* is about an oversaturation of outcomes blocking out one's ability to make any step or construct any form of progress. It shows the inertia that considering all your options causes you to fall into, by giving the subjects – and, through limited repetition, the viewers – the illusion that all their questions will be answered, all their contingencies attended to. It's a promise: you will be prepared. Ultimately, it's a promise that can't be kept.

*We began planning this Biennial in late 2019.*

Because we don't live in an alternate reality, I can look up at a plastic replica of a brain and see all the deposits of CO2 in an active area and the way they change over the course of a minute, an hour, or a day. If I stay long enough, maybe I can even find a pattern. But it's tempting to think there's a world where the brain is not there, and where the exhibit hall is full of light.

*Past, present, and future folded into one another. 🍷*





**M**y dear reader:

Welcome in, new friend. How are you doing? How have you been? I'm fine, I believe, considering circumstances both historical and international, but there's a strange feeling in the air. Have you also found yourself transforming into a habitual overthinker? Do your fingers flutter, like mine, at the slightest stimulation? What is the current state of your Netflix queue? We have so much to talk about.

It is becoming more and more challenging to consume art, to use the current crass colloquialism. We just know too much. I wait a week for the new episode of a television show, then spend half of it subconsciously weighing if a fan theory posed by a teenager I don't know on Twitter could possibly be viable even though my gut said it was mostly stupid. I watch a tremendous movie, an artistic endeavor, unable to shake a chill that lasted since I googled it earlier that day and learned that the poisoned shooting location killed the lead actor, the director, and his wife. I itch for some sort of deprivation chamber, where I could be truly alone with the thing in front of me – or at least for the sterile, nostalgic falsehood of the evening news, a place where new knowledge was handed forth, in a neat little package, and then left to settle for the next twenty-four hours. Instead, I am here, in-between shifts at my retail job during the third year of a global pandemic, keeping up with *discourse*.

It's hard not to woe-is-me about the unique predicament of having unfettered access to infinite stimulation in the post-millennium. I can't imagine any participant in the last hundred years of human history didn't feel similarly overwhelmed. Modernization marches on; technology evolves; my

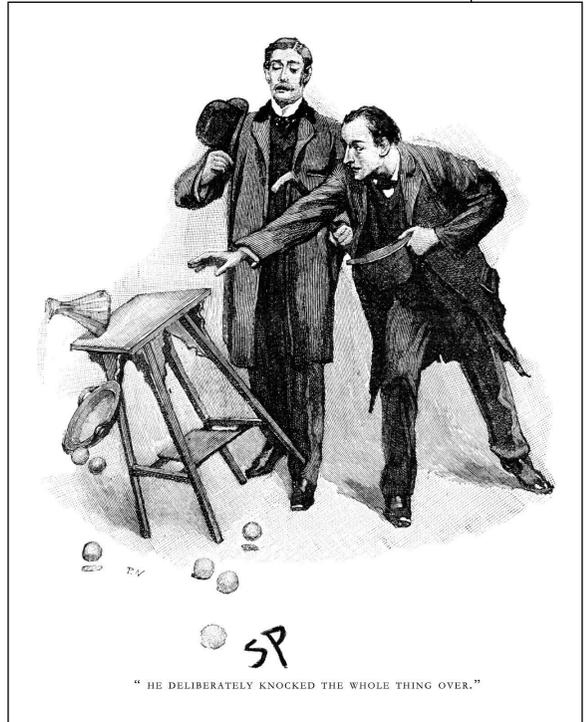
phone software updates. The human condition stays mostly the same – we’re little and confused.

The kicker here, of course, is that there is no cure to the new disease, no reset button to bring us back to a blank white page. You learn and you learn and you learn. By this point, Sherlock Holmes’ attic theory has been well disproven. You clicked on that trending topic, you dipshit: you *know*. And even if there was a magical mystery button somewhere, a way back to the innocent, vacuous alive state of our ancestors, we wouldn’t take it. We’re addicted to the churn of it; we want to know what’s happening; we don’t want to be alone. FOMO, as I have been reliably informed the kids say.

But it’s not all bad. How could it be? We live in an era of ill-gotten and ill-delivered abundance. If you have the five bucks and the internet connection to read this column, you’ve got it all: the search engines, the social medias, the Wikipedias and Discords and term-search-plus-Reddits that keep us all chewing. There is a genuine, material good done in our stretched-thin society when the everyman is able to do his own research and follow her own

interests and learn about the world independently and freely. There’s no way to argue otherwise without sounding like, at best, a luddite, and at worst some sort of cartoon villain who just invested heavily in one-room schoolhouses. Knowledge is power. We’ve got a lot of it right now.

What I (we) (the collective) have yet to come to terms with, and what I believe is a key aspect of the horror of being alive in the 21st century, is that not all knowledge is created equal. It’s not the “Self-Help/Business/Leadership” dividing line of productive vs. unproductive, either – there is plenty of knowledge that is enriching and engaging without being particularly useful. It’s more that a lot of stuff we know – a lot of stuff we *find out about*, to emphasize the receptive position through which a lot of us scroll social media – is just . . . empty calories. Content intake with no particular nutritional value,



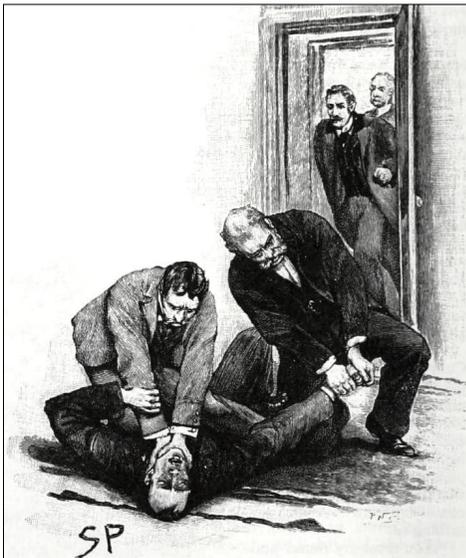
that we pick up and chew and digest because it's in front of us. And it's that tasteless filler, that Styrofoam-pellet breakfast cereal, that makes it so hard for us to really sink our teeth into the good stuff: our mouth is full of all this other shit.

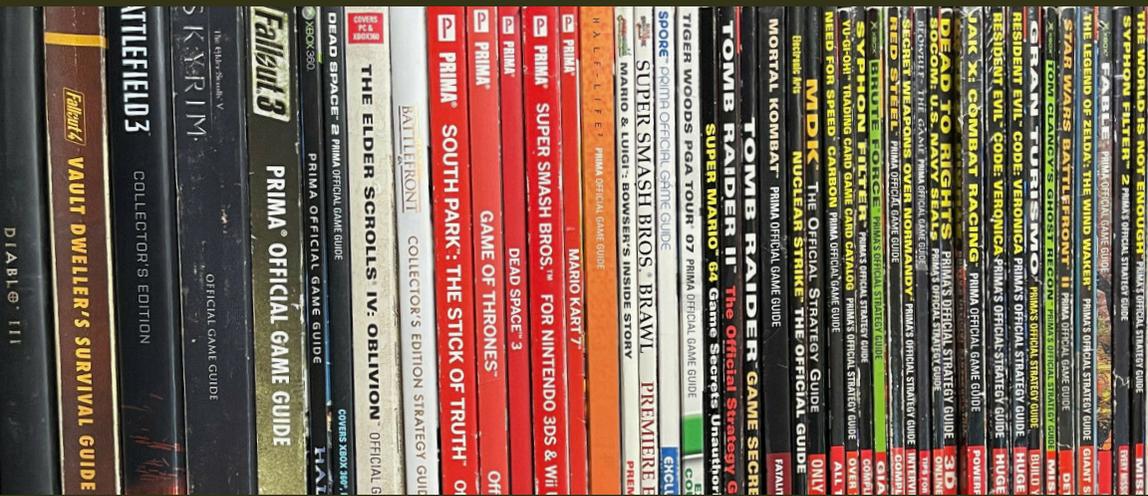
Here's the solution I have approximated thus far. I cast my net wide – geographically, chronologically, artistically – out of some desperate hope to find something pure, untainted, so obnoxiously obscure that no one I could ever have met over the course of my life will have heard a single thing about it. I build a dark tent around myself and my prize, and I don't bring my phone into it. I set the table for the meal.

And then, as it goes, I read the Wikipedia page. I pester my friends incessantly to partake, because I'm a talker. I watch the special features, and if that's not a possibility, I get the gist from early-aughts forum posters online. I have been known to buy a book. I do my damndest – I really, truly, try my best – to thoroughly ruin it for myself.

Then I pick the packing peanuts out of my teeth and go watch whatever people on the Internet are watching.

I hope you'll join me. 🍷





## Game Guides vs. the SEO Grind: Who Wins and Loses?

When I was in first grade, my dad surprised me with a book of tips and tricks for tons of popular NES games. He promised it would help us beat *Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles* (and its infamous underwater level) and other titles that I struggled with as a kid. It seemed hard to believe that this mysterious tome could grant us impossible powers; I had never beaten a game before because I lacked the patience and dexterity that was necessary for difficult 8-bit era games. Somehow, this book was going to show me the way, and I couldn't wait to finally see all the areas of my games that I couldn't reach.

I never did beat *Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles* and its stupid underwater level still haunts my dreams. In fact, the book never helped me beat any other game either. I loved it anyway, not only because it made me feel like I was in possession of secret knowledge (that I must have been misapplying), but because I liked flipping through it and reading about games that I wouldn't get the opportunity to play. It had value as a piece of media beyond its practical utility as a somewhat ineffective strategy guide.

The last physical strategy guide that I bought – and most likely the last physical strategy guide I will ever buy – was for *Metal Gear Solid V: The Phantom Pain*. As someone who has played every game in the series and struggled with each entry, it was an essential purchase. I'm better at games than I used to be

as a kid, but when a game essentially requires a Master's degree in espionage to play, I'm not above needing study material.

Even though I'm done playing *Metal Gear Solid V*, and I'm not likely to play it again any time soon, I still appreciate having the strategy guide on my shelf.

As a utilitarian guide to a complex game, it served its intended purpose. But it's also an interesting piece of games media on its own; from its introductory letter from Hideo Kojima to its in-depth explanations of the game's deepest secrets and lore, it's still fun to flip through from time to time. It feels like passion project that was crafted with thought and care.

There's something strange about looking back at the first and last times you'll ever do something specific that was once considered normal but has now been swept into the dust bin of history. Remembering when you could buy strategy guides at a store – much like remembering dial-up Internet, the dominance of compact discs and blowing the dust out of cartridges – feels like I'm

showing my age. Living long enough to watch technology change can be uncomfortable because it reminds of us our own mortality.

I'm not interested in clinging too tightly to the past. I prefer to embrace positive change when consumer technology makes meaningful improvements rather than succumb to nostalgia for its own sake. When it comes to the shift from physical to web-based game guides though, it feels like we've lost some things that had value, and those things may not be coming back any time soon. Part of this sentiment is rooted in the debate between digital and physical media writ large, but some of it is rooted in problems with how content and information are distributed and accessed on the modern open web.

Today, most major games websites publish high-quality guides, at least for major releases. Generally, these guides are useful and well-written, and are the product of days and weeks of hard work. Guides writers are often unsung heroes in games media, and they deserve more appreciation for doing difficult work on tight timelines. However, they can't cover everything, and mid-tier titles that once would have gotten a retail strategy guide are sometimes left uncovered.

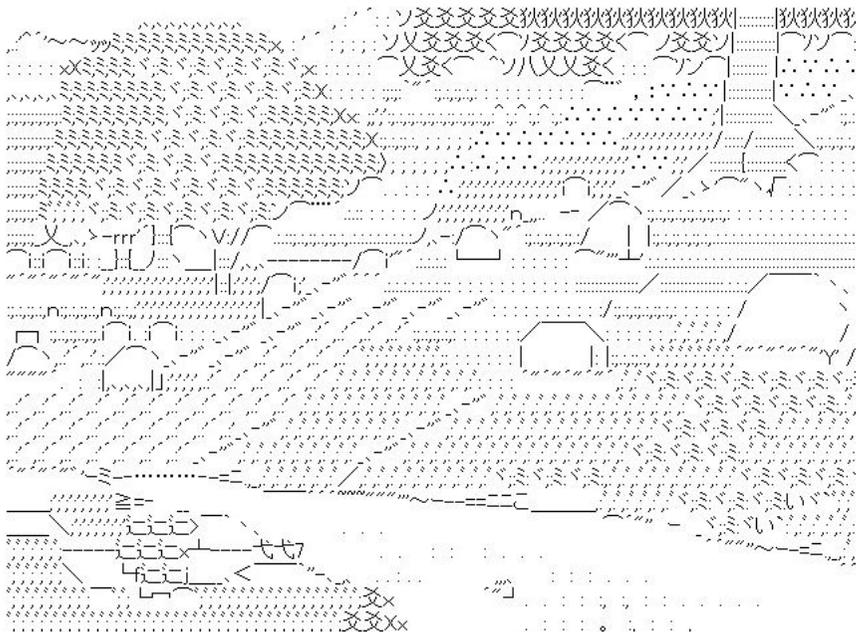




email is becoming increasingly competitive. This leaves Google as the most efficient means of driving traffic, but while the search giant does its best to rank useful websites over spam factories, anything that relies on algorithms will be prone to being gamed. Based both on anecdotal evidence and reports like this, it feels like spammers are winning.

Like a garden overrun with weeds, we're left in a position where good content gets choked out by cynical numbers-driven garbage. It makes something as simple as using the Internet to figure out how to solve a puzzle in a game feel much more difficult than it used to be. Your options are to either navigate directly to sites you trust (and hope they have a guide on the game you're playing) or buy a physical guide online from one of the few niche publishers that continue to print them. It almost makes me miss the days when salesclerks at GameStop would forcibly upsell strategy guides I didn't need.

This is reflective of the broader state of the open web in 2022, where the public's acceptance of an uneven trade between content cost, convenience and quality has yielded diminishing returns. As I wade through the third page of mostly useless Google search results for "gran turismo 7 guide," at least I can say I'm getting what I'm paying for, but I miss the days when guides couldn't be growth-hacked out of all their value. 🍷





## The Hopeful Disharmony of *Into the Doomed World*

We are often prone to characterizing hope as a cloying and intangible virtue, especially during times such as these. Hope (for me at least) is not a rosy concept, nor is it synonymous with optimism or nostalgia. On that last point, [I have previously explored](#) how even nostalgia can be pragmatic and distilled from feelings of disappointment. Feelings that are intense enough to galvanize us to enact positive change in the present. Hope is a similar driving force or state of being, one that's bittersweet because you persist with it in the face of inevitable or unconscionable facts. This is the kind of hopeful tone that Javy Gwaltney's new short-story collection, *Into the Doomed World (ITDW)*, gives not just a voice but a chorus to. I reached out to the creator of the acclaimed *The Terror Aboard the Speedwell* about his new short-story collection about 30 self-aware NPCs in a world that's been sentenced to a slow apocalypse by its player to find out what inspired him to write it.

Gwaltney cites two guiding inspirations for his collection, one literary and one ludic. The former is Edgar Lee Masters' *Spoon River Anthology*, which Gwaltney describes as: "a series of free verse poems that collectively tell a story about a fictional small town in Illinois. Essentially, it's a choir of dead voices confessing the gossip, the pain, despair and even small moments of joy in a community. It's beautifully written and, as someone who's always favored introspective stories about quiet suffering over grand sweeping dramas or

epics, I found it to be one of the primary guiding forces for how to write this collection, though stylistically they're very different." The latter is *The Elder Scrolls III: Morrowind* which "made it possible for you to kill essential quest-giving NPCs. Whenever you did that, you received the following message:

*With this character's death, the thread of prophecy is severed. Restore a saved game to restore the weave of fate, or persist in the doomed world you have created.*

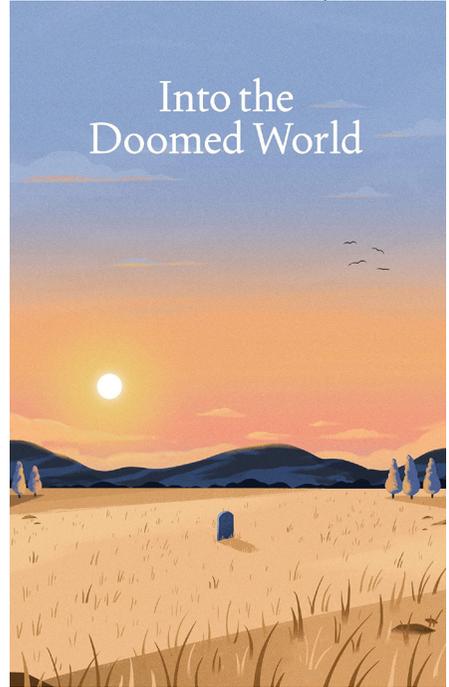
So, though the player had failed the quest, they were allowed to remain in the world they had damned alongside the countless little digital people they had damned with it." Gwaltney was fascinated by this concept because it was clearly relevant to the current zeitgeist we're contending with. In fact, this collection has been a way to grapple with his fears, many of which we all share of ongoing climate change ignorance and the rolling back of human rights (as we have seen with the overturning of Roe V. Wade last month).

Realizing the ineffectual and complicit nature of many figureheads in power, *Into the Doomed World* explores how the structural failures we experience in societies point to another important realization about collective action:

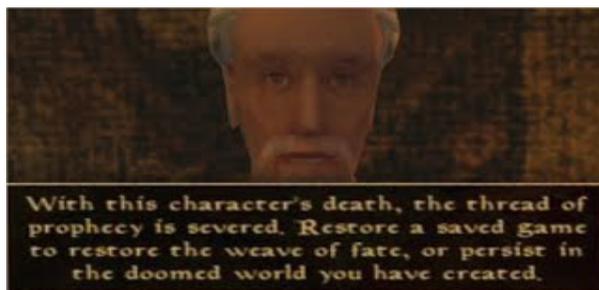
"To me the story collection is about grappling with the sort of realization that we're on our own. There's no cosmic or structural safeguard that's going to save us. We only have each other. And a lot of people do a lot of things with that realization and that sort of response, the variety and breadth of it, is what I wanted to explore in these stories."

In recent years the number of meta-narratives about games, their systems and what they can represent has been growing. From Kieron Gillen's *Die* project (via a comic series and a tabletop game), which navigates the dark side of escapism and how it estranges us from real-world concerns, to games like *Kentucky Route Zero*, *NORCO* and [Citizen Sleeper](#) that concern themselves with late Capitalist dissolution of environments, communities, human rights and bodies, it's safe to say that games and games criticism is well aware of civilization's current and ongoing crises.

Recent game criticism has become more vocal about gaming's role in politics and global impact as well as how games are not the answer to our



structural woes. We have also seen how games are often falsely conflated with activism and empowerment, when in truth they are often tools of imperial or colonialist-capitalist design, as [Meghna Jayanth delineated](#) in her Digital Games Research Association keynote last year. Arguably, the player in *Into the Doomed World*, Eric the Righteous, could be a prime example of the “model player” or “white protagonist” who’s pleasure is to make decisions on behalf of every other inhabitant in the world. It’ll be interesting to see how Eric’s role in this narrative about a global community is deconstructed via the 30 NPCs viewpoints. Making the NPCs self-aware and central to the collection also humanizes those who are usually dehumanized in heroic game narratives.



If you’re familiar with Gwaltney’s work, you know that he has a knack for portraying characters and scenarios that effortlessly mix bleak outlooks with undercurrents of hope and humor despite the odds. The banter-filled interactions between Meat, Nick, and potentially your chosen protagonist in *Speedwell* are exemplar of this. What helps them triumph, if they triumph by a knife’s edge in some playthroughs, is leaning more towards humane and cooperative options. Gwaltney’s player is swiftly and severely impacted by choices taken that are authoritarian or “lone savior”-esque, like when the protagonist is given the choice to euthanize an infected crew member before knowing their fate is certain. Gwaltney agrees with Jayanth’s model of the colonialist-capitalist protagonist, especially given that he’s stated that “a huge part of what the collection is about is power dynamics and the question of saviors” and whether such saviors are real or reliable.

I hesitate to call this collection hopepunk, although that genre and movement emphasizes similar aspects of resistance and life-affirmation in the face of bleak truths, as well as the importance of caring for a community. At once, *ITDW* actively rejects categories like Doomer Lit (rather self-explanatory) or Grimdark fantasy (read: Soulsborne). Gwaltney’s aim is to offer a nuanced take on apocalyptic fiction that pushes back against properties like *The Walking Dead* (especially the TV adaptation) which has amounted to little more than misery porn over the years. “I know some people love that sort of thing but I

just don't have the stomach for it – the perpetual eternity of it, I mean. That kind of despair is very boring to me” he says.

“With *ITDW*, I tried to write varied stories of the many responses that people could have to society crumbling around them. Those who have been oppressed or slighted by that societal structure would likely find joy instead of despair, for example. While another might mourn it. Another might observe it dispassionately because they're privileged enough to do so.”



But it's important to keep in mind that despite the epic fantasy framing of *ITDW*, the collection is not a fantasy epic. “Now, there are fantasy epic events and tropes happening – prophecies, chosen ones, obscure and dangerous magical arts – but those are mostly used as props to explore what these people are going through on an intellectual and emotional level,” Gwaltney emphasizes.

Some other significant influences for Gwaltney's multi-faceted exploration of power and living in a disastrous era are literary writers like James Joyce, William Faulkner, Raymond Carver, Giovanni Bocaccio and Geoffrey Chaucer. The idea for having 30 voices came specifically from Bocaccio's book about weathering the Black Plague. Gwaltney originally aimed to be a 1:1 ratio with Bocaccio's 100 viewpoints, but after workshopping found that quality over quantity was the best strategy. As he explains: “I love every single character and story in this collection as is. And taken as a whole, I think the spread here gives access to characters who hopefully feel substantially different from one another in terms of how they perceive, react, and exist to the world they inhabit.” I feel this was a fortuitous choice, as not only did the resulting 30-character cast end up being nearly 1:1 with Chaucer, 30 characters make for a similar number to a Greek chorus for an epic play. Throughout time such

choruses numbered anywhere from 1 to 50 people, and Masters' work on *Spoon River Anthology* also drew from this storytelling device in similar manner; allowing for both individualized voices within a recognized collective. Such narratives capture the nuanced disharmony of a community.

What I love about all these influences mentioned above is that it just goes to show that some writers and narrative designers are not just working within a siloed canon of games storytelling, they're working within broader, interconnected canons of storytelling as well. Modern literary writers and poets are more frequently [drawing on the language of play and game systems](#) to get at the 21st-century experience. Hannah Nicklin noted similar insights in her 2020 GDC talk on how drawing from ensemble narratives and interdisciplinary arts like theatre helped create Gutefabrik's award-winning game *Mutazione*, which also decenters the hero in favor of empowering a communal perspective. Games are commonplace enough now that the discourse is not as opaque and specialized as it was before.

Narratives that center on the collective don't let us off easy with regards to our individual responsibility to know and care for each other and our plural, interconnected realities. *Into the Doomed World* aptly gets at how life in the social media age is a complex navigation of being an individual that pivots between micro and macro perspectives. It focuses on the beauty of recognizing the disharmony within a community and how we can work together to reconcile it during times of crisis.

"I will say that when I write I tend to lean in the direction of hope even when the circumstances suggest that it's a foolish notion," Gwaltney states. "I have no idea if it's [the collection] going to work as well as I want it to, but I'd rather create interesting failures rather than competent and safe successes." 🍷





## I'm a Record Producer Now

To my faithful reader, I am a man of many hats. Columnist. Husband. Father. [Distinguished cemetery board member.](#)

Until now, though, my musical credits have amounted to little more than a [one-night-only metal taco performance](#) at Mercury Lounge.

But no more. It's time to add another hat to my ever-swelling head: record producer.

To be precise – ahem – I'm an *executive* producer. At least that is how I am listed in the liner notes of *The Great Awakening*, the new album by the rock band Shearwater.

Shearwater has long been among my favorite bands. They've never quite hit it big like I once thought they would, but they have a damn fine catalogue. So, when I had the chance to hop on board, to help shape the music that has meant so much to me over the years, I didn't let it slip by. I forked over my executive producer-tier Indiegogo payment and awaited my call to the recording studio.

After all, I had some thoughts. After the band's subtler, quieter "Island Arc" series, they'd taken a more aggressive approach with their two most recent albums, with a few mixtape-ready tracks that I again mistakenly thought might grab a more casual audience. Band leader Jonathan Meiburg then took some time away to do a couple records with his excellent side project, Loma, featuring lead singer Emily Cross. How about melding some of the stellar late-night groove of Loma with the brighter, hookier elements of recent Shearwater works? Maybe a duet with Cross? Or maybe throw away everything but the guitars and drums and make Shearwater's rockiest record yet – a full album's

worth of songs like “Century Eyes”?

In other words, I was ready to give Meiburg my notes with an open mind.

The call to the studio, naturally, never came. It was not part of the deal. And, it turns out, the record is somehow even subtler and quieter than the Island Arc, not at all the progression the band had been taking of late, but not a radical departure from their oeuvre, either. As an executive producer, I got an early copy, but I still need time to let it all sink in.

At least it’s not a hot pile of steaming garbage, because, as I said, MY NAME IS IN THE LINER NOTES. This record reflects on me. When Pitchfork recently gave it a 6.8, I felt as if Pitchfork was giving *me* a 6.8.

I can’t say I don’t deserve it. There are many days when I feel like a 6.8, and there are still others when I *wish* I felt like a 6.8.

So would it be all that weird, really, if I were to substitute my own name for Meiburg’s in [Ian Cohen’s review](#)?

Let’s try it.

“In his authorial and musical pursuits, Marrone is unafraid to practice patience to document a beauty that can’t be forced.”

Gorgeous. Maybe a little too long for my headstone? Then again, remember: Besides being an executive producer, I do help run that cemetery.

I can see it now:

MATT MARRONE

Columnist. Husband. Father. Distinguished cemetery board member.

“Unafraid to practice patience to document a beauty that can’t be forced.”

6.8

{via iPhone} 🍏

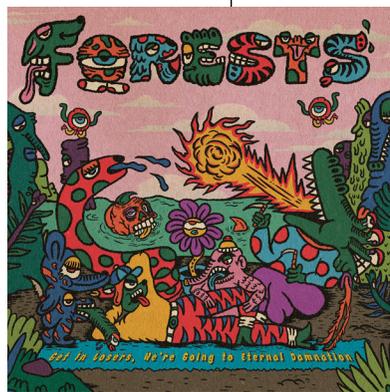


## The Meat Box: Four Quick Bites

### **Forests: *Get In Losers, We're Going to Eternal Damnation***

This trio from Singapore has enough single-coil jangle to soundtrack a century of break-up tiktoks. My patience for finger-picking fireworks depends almost entirely on how taut the background BPMs are, and Forests are keeping some real tension on the line. It's celebration emo though, refusing to wallow or wander from song to song, keeping each meticulously wound in terms of structure but still just raw and ragged enough so as to feel chained to a Capitol Records high-dollar producer.

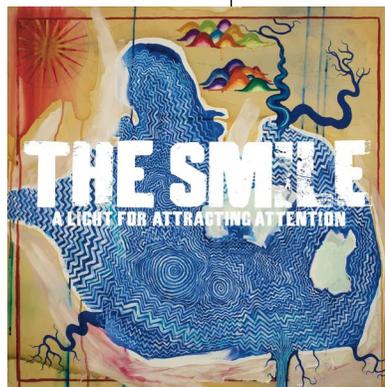
Because sometimes these bands are too skilled, feels like they're just slumming it on this side of punk until they can all crack off and produce for the hitmakers or show off their beat-programming skills. Forests play with grit though, and a sense of humor to dull any accusations of self-seriousness, as if obvious from a title like *Get In Losers, We're Going to Eternal Damnation*. They've already outpaced obscurity but hopefully they can grind out a few more albums before they suffer the fate of all emo bands.



### **The Smile: *A Light for Attracting Attention***

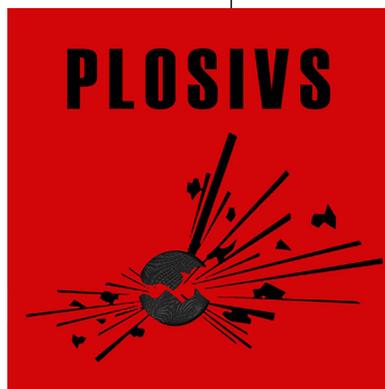
I think a lot about the limitations on creativity. Can that energy be recharged like a battery, or are folks born with a reserve that they spend throughout

their life? Probably changes from person to person, from year to minute, fighting the tide of one project dropping, same as the last thirty or even one. You probably know who the players behind The Smile are, or at least 2/3rds of them, but maybe you don't, which would be a plum little way of stumbling across this album. It shifts and swirls like a tidepool, but at the same time feels like a full-band effort at fully self-contained songs. The kind of microcosms that Radiohead has been oscillating out from for the bulk of their career at this point. "A Light for Attracting Attention" isn't a regression in this way, I'm not sure it's possible for these musicians to regress, rather it's a return to core instrumentation with elevated dalliances, a surprising amount of "motherfuckers" and another case for jazz drummers expanding the consciousness of rock n roll. In the end creativity serves a personal impulse and measurement of innovation, and The Smile serves only to satisfy themselves. Luckily we are allowed a peek.



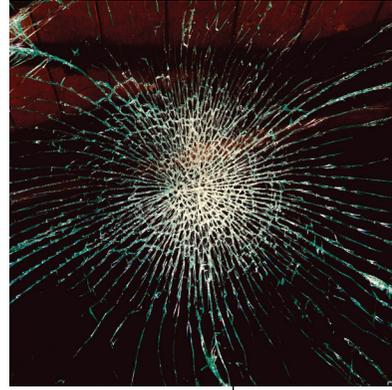
### **Plosivs: Plosivs**

Summer was never my favorite season, even before we noticed that we were the frogs in the pot. But Plosivs, which reunites (in a way) guitar savant John Reis with indie statesman Rob Crow, has me praying for it. The first songs I heard from this album left me thirsty, but I always give Reis extra spins with what he's involved in, and I'm glad I did. Something about hearing these songs lined up really slakes one's hydration for riffs and crooning cut complete with heavy drumsticks and false stumbles. Rarely in 4/4 time but still inhabiting a 4/4 state of mind, these are just perfectly squeezed songs that writhe all over each other. Pinback never really set me on fire but clearly I owe Crow as many chances as I dole out to Reis, because he really delivers a complimentary sweetness to Reis's overdriven acidity. Despite a soft pass on first listen the album at large keeps creeping in and I suspect it will continue to do so until summer is all we have left.



### **Blind Girls: *The Weight of Everything***

Between Zegema Beach Records, Tomb Tree Tapes, Dog Knights and all the other cassette-labels and imprints of imprints, it's a real screamo smorgasbord out there. It's too much for me despite the fact that I am regularly scooping it up, but I'm at the point once again where I must be a little more discerning. One of the more recent survivors of my slotted spoon are Blind Girls, a band from the Queen's continental prison that's been kicking up dust for a decade at least. I don't know much more than that and I don't need to: this record is clear without being clean, utilizing the best elements of the genre without devolving into unkempt sassiness or boombox production. Which is to say that it's very sonically listenable, but you must still make comfort out of lockstep guitarlines and phlegm-wrapping howls as a way to exorcise extreme pain. This isn't to paint a picture of punishment, but catharsis and healing, as per screamo's foundational texts, but in a more elegant and civilized way, using methods building on punk and emo and hardcore and all the rest and then smashing the atoms all together. Long live Blind Girls, and long live screamo, I will keep up until the very last squall of feedback. 🍷





## Realism, Reality and the Real

**T**atsuki Fujimoto and Oto Toda’s “Just Listen to the Song” is a short story about the mortifying coil of interpretation. It’s brief for a one-shot from the mangaka of *Chainsaw Man* at just 18 pages in length and its subject matter is far less spectacular than anything he has written yet. The premise is simple: a high school boy records a love song, his crush shares it with their class and soon the world is watching, looking, seeing things that weren’t there, or perhaps . . .

It’s utterly tame. There is no sense of unease from each turn of the page, it’s thrilling friction an all-consuming, yet ephemeral virality that is undercut by the protagonist’s apathetic relation to the spotlight. Rather, what we as reader come to see through the nameless protagonist is a grand misdirection. From his perspective we understand that the audience is not really looking towards him, his song, nor even his performance. What draws them in are all these things he didn’t do, couldn’t have even known: the cat that runs off the bed, the ghosts that apparently haunt his room, the meaning of the song when translated, the lyrics themselves when played in reverse, indulgent misinterpretations. It’s all the things in the Real.

The complete removal of the creator from the life of the work is emphasized by his namelessness, a reverse Frankenstein’s monster. Though his video’s reception is met with exclamations of genius, his only appellation to both readers and the world is a channel name that he feel’s stuck with. There is

no accomplishment in this creation, which doesn't even achieve his one true purpose. At the end of "Just Listen to the Song," the boy's crush sits next to him on their commute to school. She shares her headphones and plays a downloaded copy of the song he has now taken offline. Unlike everyone else at least she knows what he's singing about. The lyrics reference a shared memory, the time he drew her in their middle school portrait class. "So cringey," she says.

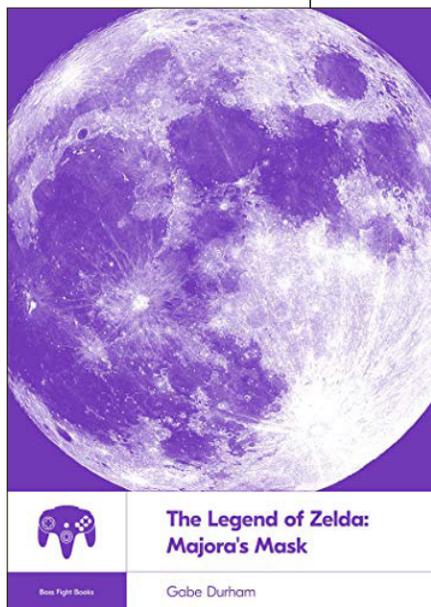
His head drops in the manga's final full-page panel, concealing his face while she stares at her phone unamused. A wire connects the two through song, but they don't hear the same thing. It finally devastates him; to be heard, or to be heard like this. Unable to reach her, or anyone else. The manga's final scene is a depiction of a latent mirror phase as it relates to artistic creation, and the life of the work itself portrayed as a modern Prometheus. Unheard; unreachable; true meaning unsuccessfully mediated through the symbolic, forever separating the self and other. For an artist or "creator" in the present, this is the horror of interpretation.

\* \* \*

In *The Legend of Zelda: Majora's Mask* (Boss Fight Books, 2020), Gabe Durham writes that in this moment, "there are those who refuse to do the work of interpretation and those who interpret obsessively." The book, a profile of development on *Ocarina of Time's* sequel, is framed by the competing narratives of our time – that of a text's creation and the audience's reception to it. This contestation over intention and interpretation is not itself a new locus of criticism, but the undercurrent compelling these forces has altered in the contemporary media landscape. Author and reader, developer and player, artist and critic; Behind both are alternate realities of meaning made. In Durham's own words, the parallel presentation of his book seeks to illuminate "the relationship between how *Majora* was created and how it was received – and shine a light on the strange

and tumultuous romance between art and fandom." Or so he intends to do so.

Just whether to take an artist's, developer's, or author's own words into consideration is itself a contested question in pop culture's current zeitgeist,



created by the polemical forces of fandom and auteur. Such is a statement of intention, which negates interpretation. (Though if [everything is text](#), then statements of intention are themselves open to interpretation, just another turn on Derrida's "detour of signs"). Regardless, overinterpretation and the refusal to engage in interpretation emerge from a fixation on authorial intent as a site meaning making.

In effect, "what both approaches share," Durham writes, "is the impulse to take a work teeming with meaning and attempt to reduce it down to something so easy to digest that the work itself no longer matters." Inquiry is shut down, and criticism becomes [ending explained](#) videos that, as Dan Olson writes, "approach plot as a problem to be unpacked and solved." Timeline continuity, canonicity and lore replace not just expression, but the realm of the symbolic. While "creators attempt to expand a work by highlighting/exaggerating elements so those elements can 'feel more real' than reality," Durham argues, "fans often fall into the trap of begging a work to remain tethered to reality (or a reality)."

This echoes writer Nathalie Olah's description of realism as "the appropriation of objects, or replication of events and experiences in as life-like terms as possible, so as to eliminate the need for active participation." This shift is noticeable: Under such a paradigm, "representation" has become inclusion somewhere in the alternate reality – in lore or canon – not the actual representation of images on the screen. That distance has become essential to the touristy gaze of presumed hegemonic audiences (see: Disney's '[first openly gay character](#)' trope), a [specter of realism](#) mediating storytelling beyond graphical fidelity.

And when we look for it, we can find intention is invoked, well, everywhere. Forsaking or deferring to intent as a crutch for analysis is even a meme that



seems to hallmark a certain stage of our critical development at some point in high school English class: the curtains, and their blueness. But look further, and you'll see intention invoked from artists, critics, commentators, trolls and the like, about just about anything that could possibly have divergent interpretations:

The ending of *The Sopranos*, Azula's character arc in *Avatar: The Last Airbender*, difficulty in *Dark Souls*, level design in *Elden Ring*, *The Matrix* as trans allegory, criticism of *I Spit On Your Grave*, autistic representation in *El Tigre*, the allegory of *Can't Help Myself*, "bad criticisms" of *Steven Universe*, queer representation in *Arcane*, supposedly controversial writing throughout *Gravity Falls*, pay to win mechanics in *Diablo Immortal*, philosophy in *Neon Genesis Evangelion*, and the end of *Annihilation* to name a few.

\* \* \*

This section, then, is my own statement of intent. I want to spend time thinking about works that complicate artistic intention, that reveal something about just where meaning is made. Hopefully, we'll learn something about the creative process while doing so too. We'll look at works that transform, explode and deconstruct intention, that point towards shaky grounds and make their own authoritative foundations less stable. And we'll find guides in artists and critics themselves.

We start next month with transformation as we begin to move against intention. 🏰





## Wheeling and Dealing

I started my professional career as a pilot. When I graduated from college, I figured that I was done with studying, so I went into what at the time was a rapidly growing industry, aviation. I heard a couple of years later that I was accepted into the best graduate program in the world for my particular subfield of archaeology, so I handed in my wings and headed over to the University of Chicago. You might say that I went from boring holes in the sky to digging ditches in the ground.

With my background in aviation, I decided to specialize in what remains to this day a frontier of science, remote sensing. I know this comes off really technical, but it's basically the study of aerial photography and satellite imagery. I actually spent several years working at the Oriental Institute just staring at pictures of desert landscapes. The first thing that I learned how to recognize are the huge mounds of dirt known as *hoyuks* or *tells* depending on whether you're talking about Turkey or pretty much any other part of the Near East. These are effectively accumulations of stratified debris from a succession of consecutive settlements, massive piles of building rubble and whatever garbage the locals left behind. The next thing that I learned how to recognize are the ancient roads called hollow ways that branch out from these *hoyuks* and *tells* in pretty much every direction. These are completely invisible at ground level, but when seen from above, they look a little bit like spider webs. They connected what were once far flung settlements, meaning that hollow ways were almost certainly used for trade.

When it comes to videogames, trade typically takes the form of a camel or wagon train. Think along the lines of the *Civilization* franchise. You sign some sort of agreement with another faction that suddenly results in a continuous movement of goods and people. The moment you break the agreement, this immediately disappears, creating the impression that commercial activity takes place without any kind of impact. The reality however is that trade leaves a substantial trace in the material record. Hollow ways for example. I often refer to them as roads, but rather than something purposefully constructed, these were created as people made their way through a given landscape over an extended period of time, trampling over plants and pounding down dirt in the process. There were also trading colonies. While they were sometimes independent settlements, these frequently took the form of urban districts filled with what you might call resident aliens. Turns out that wheeling and dealing makes a mark after all.

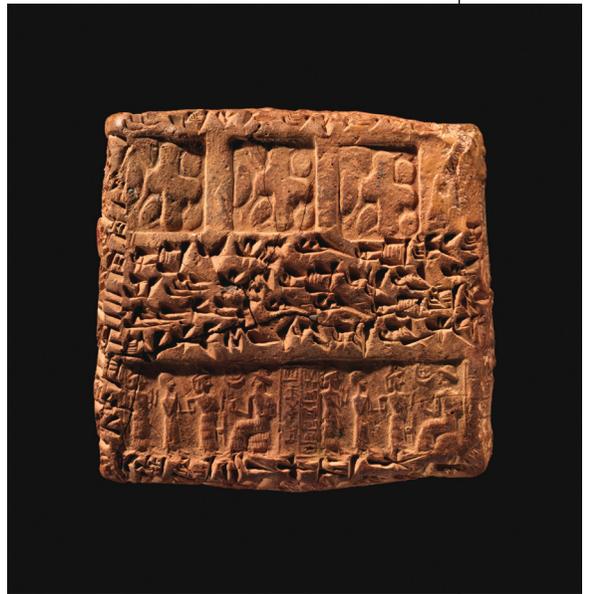


Trade was remarkably common back in the Bronze Age. In so far as the Near East is concerned, there were networks connecting practically every significant settlement, but the most remarkable single site was no doubt the city of Kanesh. This was located in what today is part of central Turkey. The settlement flourished between about 1950 and 1750 BCE on account of its close commercial connections to the distant seat of the Assyrian Empire, Assur. Kanesh consisted of an upper city where most of its residents lived and a lower city that was home to a large community of merchants from Assur seeking fame and especially fortune abroad. These merchants lived in Kanesh for periods of time stretching into the decades. We know this because of the letters they wrote. These consisted of clay tablets that were unintentionally fired when the city was burned to the ground, reducing the trading colony or *karum* to cinders. We've managed to recover thousands of these tablets, putting together one of the biggest archives of ancient literature in the process.

The merchants living in Kanesh really got around. We know quite a bit about them because their names turn up not only in the clay tablets found

at Kanesh but in letters discovered at sites all around the Near East. They discussed business deals and talked about their troubles, promised payments and complained about their neighbors. These letters are especially important because next to nothing distinguishes the merchants from anyone else in Kanesh. We often think of trading colonies in terms of imperial expansion, but these people weren't in a particularly privileged position. Kanesh in fact had a king who lived in a gleaming palace at the top of the *hoyuk* which made up most of the settlement. These merchants on the other hand lived a warren of winding streets and narrow alleys in much the same way as the nearly 30,000 other people in the city. They may have been foreigners in Kanesh, but these people interacted with the locals under fairly normal circumstances, frequently marrying into their families. When it comes to their houses, they were substantial structures made of mudbrick and broad wooden beams, many with a second story. These were mostly oriented towards the interior, consisting of large central courtyards paved with stone surrounded by storage spaces, bedrooms, kitchens and of course libraries. They probably had only a couple windows.

We have a good understanding of the circumstances under which the merchants in Kanesh lived because their letters provide us with a detailed portrait of their commercial activities. These for example reveal that most of them were in the business of exchanging tin and textile for gold and silver, almost all of which made its way back to Assur. The tin and textile may have passed through the city on its way to Kanesh, but these products came from what right now is Iraq and Iran, meaning that Assur was basically a trade hub. These were merchants rather than manufacturers. They bought low and sold high, making use of the mechanisms that most merchants rely on even today, credit for example. They also received economic incentives from the authorities in Kanesh and quite a bit of protection from the king of Assur who not only invested in their commercial activities but also signed a series of treaties on their behalf concerning import duties, caravan security, and loss protection.



There were of course no free markets at the time.

Broadly speaking, there was nothing particularly special about the merchants in Kanesh. Assur wasn't the only place to maintain a network of trading colonies in distant cities. The fact of the matter is that trade was a huge undertaking which left a lasting mark on the landscape in the form of hollow ways, but also transformed cities through the presence of trading colonies. The wheeling and dealing of merchants back in the Bronze Age was a lot more substantial than most of the *Civilization* games would have you believe. When it comes to the material record at least.

I learned a lot by working at the Oriental Institute. I mean, I'm sure that I learned a lot more by studying, but I still got plenty of practical experience from that job. The most important takeaway in retrospect is that archaeology as a field isn't just about what's in the ground. Sometimes you have to look down from on high to really get a handle on how much of an impact a given activity is having. This clearly holds true for the past, but I also think it holds up in the present. Trade for example continues to shape our environment. This time around, the stakes are a lot higher, though. These days, we're causing climate change instead of just leaving depressions in the desert or a few piles of dirt here and there. You can see all of this damage from space of course. The problem is just that nobody wants to look. 🇺🇸





## I Was Wrong About the Muppets

Six years ago (sheesh) I wrote about how unreasonable – and, frankly, unfair – the initial response to ABC's run of *The Muppets* in 2015 was. Since then I've recommended the show to anyone who will listen, brought it up in our monthly mini-magazine and worked it into a conversation about how relatable [Gonzo's artistic struggle](#) has been. I've loved that show for years, but never had the opportunity to sit down and watch through it a second time until very recently thanks to Disney+. Here's the thing: After all this I think I might have been wrong about it all. The show isn't great.

It's fucking amazing.

First of all, I apparently never actually finished watching it. At the time I was catching each episode as it aired, but for whatever reason (maybe it was canned before the run was finished?) I hadn't seen the back half of the first and only season before. So, I'm enjoying my rewatch and chuckling along with the bits I remembered finding funny before, getting teary-eyed at the genuine emotional moments all over again and so on, and then BOOM. Suddenly stuff's happening that I don't remember.

Now I know I've explained how well this show captures the classic *Muppet Show* while still reimagining it for more modern times. I also know I've talked about how refreshing it was for this new spin to give my favorite Muppet characters actual, well, *character*. But it managed to get even better as I charged past that halfway mark I hadn't originally realized was even there in

the first place. To the point where I genuinely can't decide if I'm more touched by Kermit and Ms. Piggy's evolving relationship (forever left on a cliffhanger thanks to whiny parents who can't brain good), or the episode about Piggy's tail that ends with an astonishingly sweet moment that I still get a bit misty just thinking about.

It's not just the grand sweeping gestures or big character development beats, either. There are also so, so many fantastic tiny moments that had me grinning ear-to-ear as well. Like, at one point Kermit accidentally ends up next to Jack White (of The White Stripes) while sitting at a stop light and they have this hilariously normal interaction before segueing into the two of them in the same car signing along with the radio at the top of their lungs. It's all just so goddamn good.

I may have thought that ABC's *The Muppets* was criminally underrated before, and have often said that it was unfairly cancelled way, way too soon but I was wrong. After watching it all over again – and unexpectedly seeing even more that I didn't realize I'd missed – I *know* it's criminally underrated and I *know* it's a fucking crime that it was shut down after only one season. But at least, I guess, we still have that one glorious season to look back on fondly. 🍷





## Tracking a Mechanical Shark

**T**he shark in *Jaws* is tied to a lot of bad things.

It's the terrifying villain of a blockbuster movie, so you'd think that would naturally come with the territory. But in a way, it's gotten out of hand as his negative connotations extend past the big screen and beyond the creative pursuit of horrifying audiences. The movie antagonist echoes the historical shark attacks in New Jersey and with the USS *Indianapolis*. His film is often held up as a factor in the poor reputation of sharks, making them more of a literal target for human hunters. Now he has some association with [COVID-19](#) given the observations and memes made about the mayor wanting to open the beaches and risk people's safety for the sake of profit, something that felt disturbingly echoed when the ongoing pandemic first started.

It's a bit much for what is ultimately a mechanical shark nicknamed Bruce.

Or [three mechanical sharks](#), as the creative team assembled a trio to make the film. While Bruce has had his share of real-world negativity in unexpected (*Jaws* could not have anticipated an argument to open beaches during a lethal pandemic) and expected ways (the movie clearly meant to take inspiration from the *Indianapolis* disaster for obvious reasons), he's also had his positives too in terms of areas like storytelling and art, not to mention inspiring a new generation of shark [scientists](#) and conservationists.

The special effects and craft behind the mechanical sharks of *Jaws* is fascinating. As mentioned before, three were made, each meant for different

filming angles—very literally so, since some looked half-built with mechanical guts exposed. So Bruce has interesting animatronics going for him too as another highlight, echoes of old automata like eighteenth-century [mechanical swans](#) and [tea-serving puppets](#).

The construction of something like buildings and automobiles honestly doesn't engage me much. But seeing people try to recreate real or craft imagined creatures with metal and more, and the crossover with automata in some shape – that captures my imagination.

Even when it doesn't quite work out, as happened with the Bruce trio in *Jaws*. Each of the mechanical sharks malfunctioned in some way. [Saltwater](#) messed with the motors. There was nightly maintenance that included scrubbing and repainting. Bruce sank as soon as filming started. But even in their flaws, the mechanical sharks fueled more creativity, and likely the most important showcase of it.



A photo taken by *Jaws* script supervisor Charlsie Bryant.

With the constructed sharks not meeting the intended vision, Steven Spielberg worked around that by minimizing Bruce's appearance, constructing terror over the unknown and in what couldn't be seen as he had learned from watching the films of [Alfred Hitchcock](#). Spielberg built up to the shark finally showing up, making direct sight of him a dramatic culmination after withholding his appearance and previously giving hints of it. He even included in-universe indicators of Bruce being present without actually showing him by having shark hunter Quint attach barrels to him via embedded harpoons. John Williams's signature theme for the shark in *Jaws* would declare his presence loud and clear. The iconic piece of music even subverted itself, luring the audience into a false sense of security and predictability – just when viewers are trained to expect the shark is nearby once the music kicks in, it's dead silence when Bruce bursts out of the water while Chief Brody's back is turned. No melodic warning this time.

Yet during production, Bruce was maligned enough that all three versions of him were just thrown away – something that proved to be an incredibly impulsive and poor judgment call when *Jaws* turned out to be a colossal hit. Obviously, people would want to see the aquatic star up close in some shape or form. In a stroke of some luck, the mold used to create Bruce still remained (maybe it had been overlooked during the great mechanical shark cull). It enabled the creation of one more shark to hang as decoration at Universal Studios, a photo op for tourists.



Bruce in  
Sam Adlen's  
[junkyard](#).

One of those tourists would one day [revive](#) that shark.

Because Bruce would not be abandoned once, but *twice*. After another ill-conceived sequel (so ill-conceived that I forgot the sequels existed until I started researching) around 1990, the fourth Bruce would be removed as decoration and exiled to a junkyard in Sun Valley, California.

Except he became decor in the junkyard too.

In a move reminiscent of Dean from *The Iron Giant*, junkyard owner Sam Adlen kept Bruce, arranging him for display. And instead of [hanging](#) him vertically like a fresh kill as had been the case for him at Universal Studios, Adlen horizontally propped him among palm trees. In photos, it looks like an affectionate revisioning of a shark gliding through a tropical forest. The last mechanical shark of *Jaws* had traded an audience of tourists for a more private (and arguably more appreciative) audience. Bruce had gone from being strung up like a trophy to prowling impossibly through palm trees.

But eventually more people trickled in, die-hard fans following fellow die-hard fan and NPR reporter Cory Turner as he tracked the surviving Bruce

down to Adlen's junkyard. And then one of those die-hard fans, who'd first seen him as a tourist attraction at Universal Studios and again in a junkyard, would repair Bruce for his debut at the Academy Museum of Motion Pictures after Adlen's son donated him to the then-fledgling institution.

Greg Nicotero, special effects and makeup artist and cofounder of the award-winning KNB EFX Group, restored the shark that played a role in inspiring his career. The Academy Museum didn't even commission him for the job; he volunteered. Surrounded by reference photos, Nicotero and his team dedicated [seven months](#) to repainting and resculpting Bruce. Care, attention, and detail was poured into making this often maligned, overlooked, and abandoned mechanical shark look good as new, to give him more of what he was due. To pay him back for creativity he inspired in the act of building him, in his flaws that pushed a director to new heights, in influencing new artists that had returned to revive him with that same artistic skill they had gained from appreciation of him as a construct formed from human ingenuity.

Even some of Bruce's original creators [visited](#) Nicotero's workshop and essentially gave the makeover their seal of approval.

Now looking shiny and new, the Academy Museum had to figure out how to [install](#) Bruce. Because, fittingly enough, the mechanical great white shark was too big. Pieces of museum glass walls had to be temporarily pulled out to get him inside. And now he hangs there—again, not strung up vertically like a hunted beast as he had been at Universal Studios. Bruce is suspended horizontally like in Adlen's junkyard, looking more like he's swimming naturally. Instead of floating among palm trees, he's now in a pristine white building that could be imagined as an aquarium actually capable of housing a great white shark.

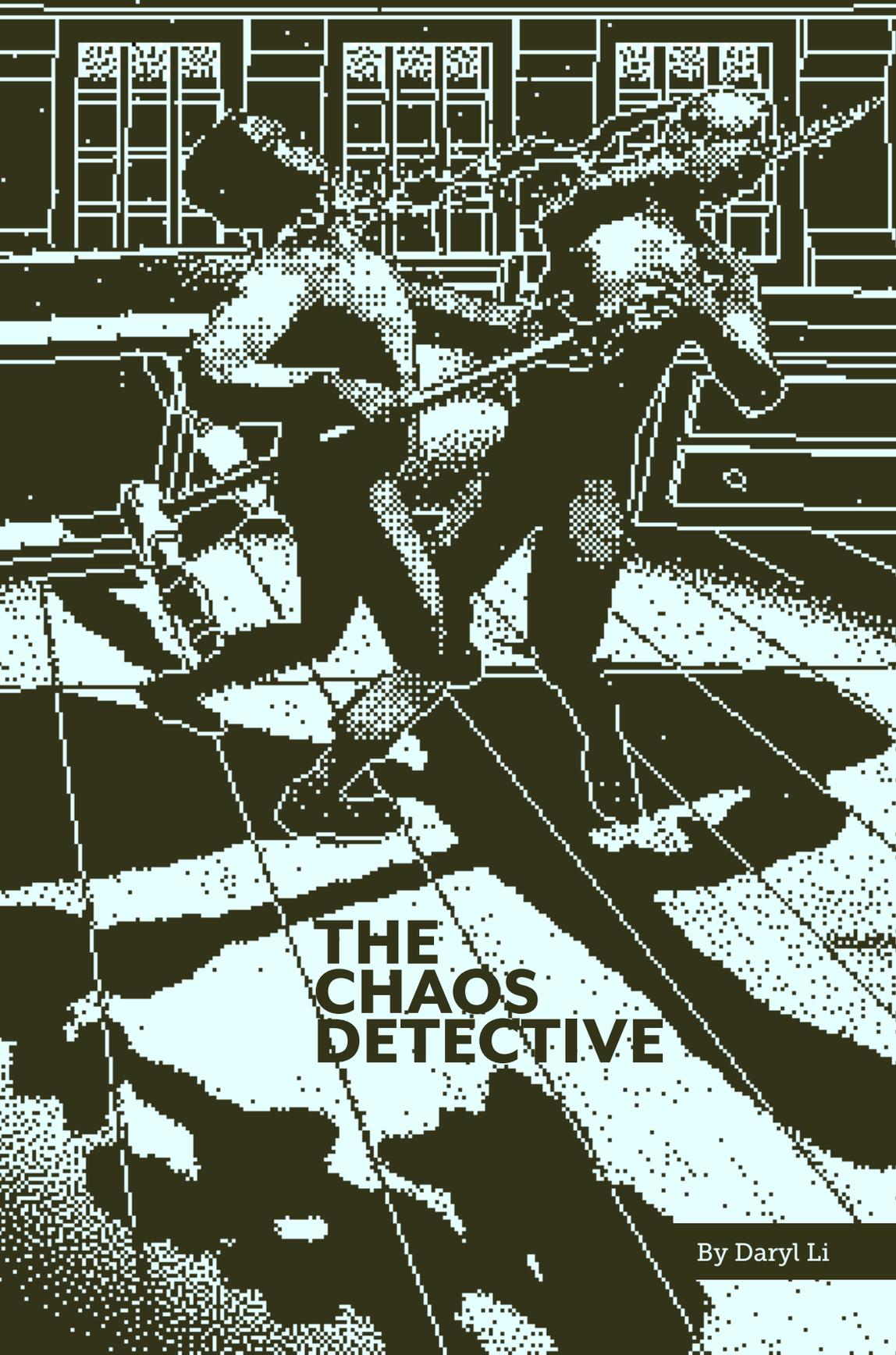
And in retrospect, it makes sense. It's not like displaying landlocked creatures such as dinosaurs in a museum, mounting them on platforms. Bruce is the animatronic recreation of a shark, and sharks swim in the water. The closest he can get to that is in the sky, the equivalent of gliding through the air, a space reserved only for mechanical sharks imagined and built by human minds. 🦈



"Bruce the Shark" installation at the Academy Museum of Motion Pictures in Los Angeles, November 2020. Photo by Todd Wawrychuk, ©Academy Museum Foundation.

*Features*





# THE CHAOS DETECTIVE

By Daryl Li



Having read one too many Agatha Christie novels, I became enthralled by the possibilities of detective fiction and murder mysteries at a young age. I quickly came to appreciate that part of the thrill of detective fiction is participatory. The reader tries to piece together the solution as though solving a puzzle.

With the active nature of gameplay and possibility of exploration, videogames seem uniquely predisposed to fulfilling the detective fantasy. Frustratingly, however, solving mysteries in videogames can feel like a dull procedure, transparent puzzles with overly prescribed solutions, a fitting together of pieces structured according to the conventions of game design. Games such as *Danganronpa* or *Phoenix Wright* exemplify this, where detective work is generally a matter of picking the right answers or using the right items at the right times, reducing

gameplay to little more than point-and-click adventures with thematic dressing.

This is not unusual. Conventionally, videogame design demands a certain degree of predictability and reproducibility – a mechanical fidelity that ensures that the game works as intended. Lucas Pope's 2018 game *Return of the Obra Dinn*, however, addresses these conventions and expectations self-reflexively, creating a taut mystery and game that nonetheless contains elements of uncertainty and the space for interpretation. In doing so, the game supports the detective fantasy by casting the player into the role of textual interpreter, who seeks to organize the chaos into coherent solution.

In *Obra Dinn*, the titular trade ship reappears along the coast of England five years after her departure from Falmouth in 1802 and subsequent disappearance, with her entire crew presumed missing or dead. As an insurance inspector tasked

with uncovering the truth of the *Obra Dinn*, players work to identify each of the 60 people listed on the ship manifest and to discern their fates using a logbook that provides essential information, tracks game progress, and offers the means to input one's solutions. Additionally, players have access to a magical watch called the *Memento Mortem*, allowing them to momentarily jump into snapshots of the past. Revisiting these moments in time, the player walks through what are essentially dioramas, typically centered around moments of death. With these two tools in hand, players proceed to explore the space of the *Obra Dinn*, locating one corpse after another and using the *Memento Mortem* to revisit moments in the past. Using the logbook, faces can be matched to names and fates—often the cause of death—from a list of possibilities, much like a game of *Clue*.

The 60 sets of solutions form the main contents of the game, but the

actual mystery of the *Obra Dinn* is its story, a series of tumultuous events fraught with tragedy, betrayals and sea monsters. The logbook measures the player's progress while delineating this mystery, ultimately demarcating the game's boundaries and shape. This is consistent with the demands of a game and the detective genre. A game without well-defined rules and boundaries would likely leave players lost and frustrated.

The game's structure parallels its fictive archetypes. The unspoken basis of detective fiction is that it presupposes a kind of totality, a closed fiction. All the pieces are there. Every satisfying mystery and game must be solvable, and to that end, everything within this fiction is intentional, has a meaning or purpose, even if that meaning or purpose is to be a red herring.

Yet, *Return of the Obra Dinn* also indulges a degree of uncertainty and chaos. While the basic mechanics speak to the





imperatives of causality and solvability, the game and indeed overall mystery are characterized by a type of disruptive uncertainty. *Obra Dinn* avoids the standard mystery solving tropes in game design. In the moment-to-moment gameplay the player quickly discovers that clues are not consumable items with predefined places in which they are utilized. Deductions instead require a synthesizes of contextual clues across a variety of sources, from the snippets of dialogue to their location, from their relationship to other characters to their clothes.

The complexity of investigation in *Obra Dinn* is further increased by a constant insistence on the incompleteness of knowledge. Players only have access to particular frozen moments, and with the monochromatic retro graphics, it can occasionally even be hard to see what is going on or the identifying characteristics of the faces, requiring players to crosscheck with other scenes.

As a result, comparisons across multiple scenes or using processes of elimination is often required when investigating. The game demands that players make sense of the complexity of this reality in a way that hews closer to an actual act of investigation.

Adding to this uncertainty, *Obra Dinn* disrupts the definition of its boundaries. The ship's spaces are filled with surprises and branches, as players go up and down the decks, search rooms, and sometimes even follow trails left by spirits to locate new corpses. The next available corpse might even be hidden in a barrel, with little more than a few buzzing flies to give its location away. Despite the defined limits of the logbook, the shape and size of the puzzle is never clear. It starts simply enough, with the discovery of one body leading to another, but quickly spirals into a complicated web.

Deep into the game, more characters are introduced to the player and more

questions posed at the same time. Threads spin wildly out, with some scenes contain over a dozen characters. Several pages in the logbook remain half-answered for extended lengths of time. It becomes impossible to keep track of all the clues, characters, and deductions. The same is true about the narrative, which weaves its way through surprises and twists in a seemingly ever-expanding story. Diving into *Return of the Obra Dinn*, one constantly peels away, with no sense of just how deep the rabbit hole goes.

This disorienting intricacy finds its most direct expression in *Obra Dinn*'s nonlinearity. Its mystery is chaotically presented and chaotically solved, with the player jumping in nonlinearly across the span of this tragic tale. In a way all mysteries, tempered by the inevitability of fate, begin at the end. *Return of the Obra Dinn* literalizes this notion by beginning with the chapter "The End." Its fractured time disrupts the defined

generic structure, and more crucially, reflects the nature of detective work. Flitting in and out of moments, players access the past as detectives would, albeit in a less metaphorical manner.

Indeed, despite employing the overwhelmingly magical conceit of the *Memento Mortem*, there is always a limit to what the player can know. Certainly, this is an intentional gameplay concession, but in another sense, it invites interpretation. *Return of the Obra Dinn* casts its players as readers, textual interpreters who make sense of what is printed or what is said, each diorama like an illustration in a book, each line a sentence ripe for interpretation. We emerge with a full solution and a satisfying answer, but we are also bound to our subjectivity and our limits. Who are these people? What are their relationships? What can we truly know if all we have are facts that skirt the surface? As players and as detectives, we



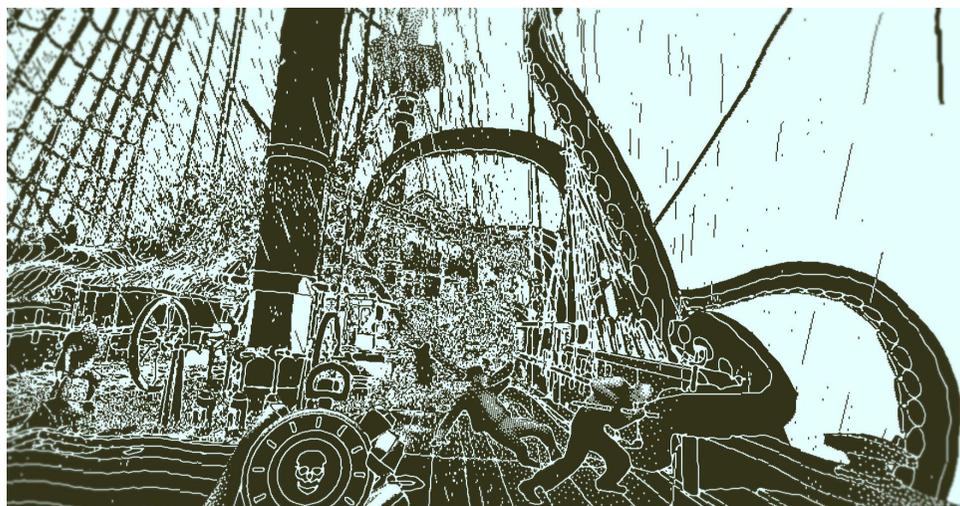
are the writers of this tale, rendering our own account of the tragedy of the *Obra Dinn*.

In fact, *Return of the Obra Dinn* specifically addresses the constructed nature of fiction. The logbook may be a gameplay mechanic and a storytelling format, allowing the input of answers and the charting of a way through the game's content, but it is also structured in a novelistic way, divided into chapters according to the linear developments of the story. The aesthetics of the game also support this metafictional conceit. The graphics mimic those of early Macintosh computers, taking the player back in time literally, but in their monochromatic presentation, they also mirror the look of print, evoking the aesthetic of a novel in the somewhat old-fashioned genre of maritime adventure.

By foregrounding its textuality, *Return of the Obra Dinn* speaks directly to the constructedness of fiction and artificiality, and specifically the detective as an archetype. Detectives are after all interpreters of complex reality, imposing upon the tangled web of a mystery

the hard logic of coherent narrative. Players in *Return of the Obra Dinn* do much the same. To solve its mystery is to reconstitute its fiction. But we ourselves are the composers, filling up the pages and editing the logbook into its novelistic destiny, organizing the reality of the world into a coherent narrative.

Upon finishing the game for the third time, I think back to the many mystery novels that I've read over the years. Their carefully constructed nature now carries a whiff of artificiality. It also seems clear to me now that traditional videogame design conventions would be at odds with the experience of detective fiction, unable to conjure any of the thrill of not-knowing and uncertainty. *Return of the Obra Dinn* creates the space for these, emphasizing interpretation as a lens through which we may understand the genre's archetypes, enabling a richer detective fantasy. Much like the *Memento Mortem*, the game is a tool that awakens us to the limits of our subjectivity, through which we may parse the chaos of the world. 🍷



# THE HORROR OF FINDING A HOME

By Andrei Filote





A weapon of mass destruction came to us in the fog of prehistory. We can't really know how it came to be, this hideous and hateful force of many heads and yet one mind. Throughout history it erased cultures, plundered their wealth, enslaved their children and passed itself down. It brought about the end of languages; it delayed the progress of mathematics for about a thousand years. It was a culmination of technology, statecraft and war. Genghis Khan and his heirs used it to kill fifty million people. In other times, millions died to recreate it. To the beat of drums, to the roll of tank treads, to the blast of artillery, humanity went under the hammer for its sake. They called it Empire, whose science is the management of human livestock, whose crop is the wasteland.

Beat after beat in *Path of Exile* comes down to the horror of Empire, something the game examines in the cursed land of Wraeclast, a graveyard of predatory

civilizations. The protagonist is banished to Wraeclast by the corrupt justice of a nation and there finds the still living corpse of another. And beneath that one, another still, and so on to a prehistoric time of evil gods that the younger empires were emulating. History iterates, too. We wonder: will this one last? Should it? Our previous life remains a vague outline. A notion of sin, or at least crime, hangs about our neck. Did we earn it? The sinister odyssey that follows smothers any doubt.

The action RPG premise asks us to arm a body with equipment and magic skills. The greater the synergy, the greater the damage. But as each foe we kill has only a miniscule chance to yield the gear we need, we're forced to devise a mass killing routine. We are not, like our hero cousins, an apotropaic force arriving in the nick of time. If anything, the eponymous exile resembles a virus, a being that seeks to verify whether it is fit to consume its new

environment. It usually isn't. A new one arrives, waking on sea foam.

To survive we rely on thaumaturgical skill gems, dense concentrations of energy harnessed from human sacrifice. The ancients would fit them into their flesh, achieving immortality. The practice worked so well that they still shamble in the streets, their spirits yet rage in torment. The more timid prisoner we inhabit is content to socket their gems into their equipment. But the idea is there, one of the first introduced, that our current power descends from the holocausts of another generation, a hand me down.

We can find no commentary more incisive. Alchemical orbs rendered from the same source make up the only currency. Literal blood money, they grant the ability to change reality. Provided we have them in the right quantity and quality, we can transform a blank item into a tool for killing gods. But we can't control the metamorphosis. Applying a

Chaos Orb can save an item, but it can also erase its only useful property. Our resources imply the random effect of violence, and there are few means to blunt them, but the crafting process depends on leveraging these cushions at every stage.

It must be said that playing *Path of Exile* invariably leads to third party resources such as, wikis, damage calculators, data aggregators, leveling optimizers and guides. The player alchemically connects insight to insight and shaves an hour off the time it takes to level up. The difference matters. The game doesn't end when the story concludes but when the player's will to imagine the next character fails. Seeking pre-existing knowledge is practically compulsory, but it's also the explicit text, as each empire found their apex atop the wreckage of another.

You see, the true veteran is an iteroparous fiend with a ledger, a marauding accountant. Making good





decisions requires that we understand the numbers, which requires that we play them out attempt after attempt. The world is deadly. Not just in the narrative. It resists our knowing it but punishes our ignorance. Everything from the first miniboss to the infamously dense skill tree tells us: “I don’t care about you,” in that enviable way that titles with niche audiences do.

That disregard has a touch of the terrifying indifference that the universe has for its inhabitants. We’re owed nothing, guaranteed nothing, so if anything must give it is only because we compel it. That spirit runs throughout but forms the explicit theme of the endgame. When we’ve finally put man, emperor and god in their place, we’re given a portal into a wider universe, an atlas of many different worlds accessed through special maps resembling the locales we visit in the campaign. All of these worlds are hostile, but they also

express a human dream of conquest. The machine we use to travel them lets us edit their properties, but only through the sacrificial gems that history’s monsters have distilled. We too reach our apex on the back of a dead empire.

The earlier survival tale becomes one of amoral predation, one chemical reaction absorbing the other. The idea that we’re fighting for our lives across worlds holds little substance beyond this point. We are bringing hell to others because we want to, the logical conclusion of concentrated power. The mechanical premise of enrichment by mass death has become the express purpose of our existence.

These ideas have found more explicit analogues in the bosses. The Shaper represents the player laying claim to a horrific frontier but losing their humanity in the process. In doing so, they draw the attention of the Elder, a cosmic predator who feeds on the imagination of any who would



contemplate these worlds. Sirius and his cabal represent player archetypes, champions who defeated the Shaper and Elder and turned against the world it was assumed they would protect. The Maven, an infant god, makes her home in a place called “Absence of Mercy and Empathy.” Sheer boredom leads her to our rampage, demanding that we escalate the threat for her entertainment.

The villain as a mirror of the hero is nothing new, but here they represent something different: the way the player consumes the game as a parallel to the eldritch monstrosities lurking in the void. Some of the principal antagonists are the demented artists and scientists whose prerogative is to do on living victims exactly the process that the player must master to form the perfect character. The first major boss, the man who condemned us, meant to force our evolution. Like him, we constantly test

new exiles in the hope of nailing down the perfect one.

Excelling at *Path of Exile* means achieving homeostasis with a system. We don't destroy the matrix, we fit into it so snugly that it hands us the reins. It's not about conquering an atlas of worlds but becoming at home in it, being comforted by its touch the way some animals tolerate the squeeze of a hundred atmospheres of ocean with an equal internal pressure.

What remains? The top of the ladder. A weapon that defeats challenges renders service. A weapon that surpasses limits tenders pleasure. The distinction makes the narrative. *Diablo*, the unholy grandfather of all action RPGs and many more live service titles, empowers through repeat-slaughter. This was always a demon's hallmark, not a hero's, because at the end of the journey the story runs out, but the killing doesn't. When we see the ghoulish piles of bodies

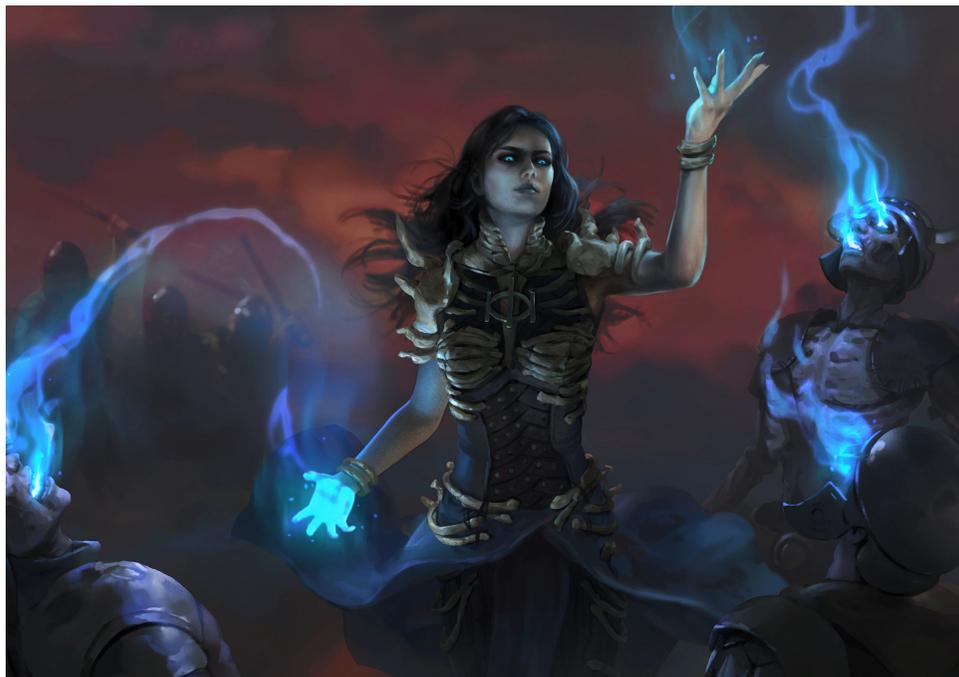
the villains leave behind, they register as camp horror, but we also understand that our pile of bodies is far larger.

A simple praxis symbolizes the transformation from survivor to invader. At first Wraeclast meets us like a corrosive membrane. We craft numerous characters to punch through to the end. Then the membrane slackens. And we create characters for the mechanical pleasure of emptying the universe. We finally acknowledge why we're here: not to be adored, but to take from a world and use our plunder to achieve greater taking. At that moment we can say we've experienced the satisfaction of being born into a form more suited to our purpose.

The appeal of mindlessly grinding away with a machine we've built to spin bloody carnage remains the ARPG

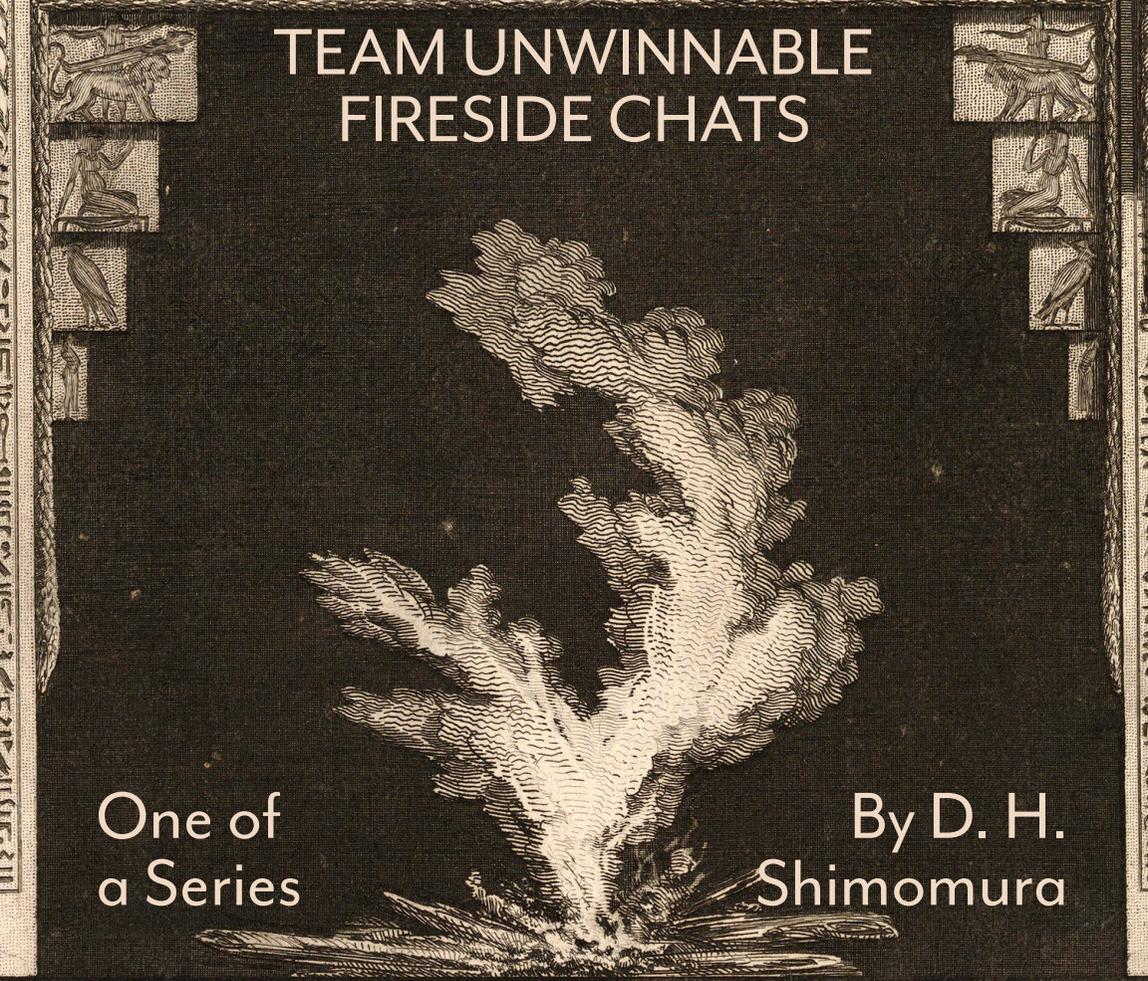
identity, but for years Grinding Gear Games have labored to make that goal as hard as possible. They have led a project whose tone and difficulty endow it with a puzzle-like quality. To figure it out, we must sometimes contemplate other aspects of the experience as we seek the necessary extremes to push into the next order of magnitude. Somewhere out there is the peak of what is possible.

The winding development of a live service game can take it in any number of directions. That Chaos Orb is always waiting. We can't say what *Path of Exile* will become, or whether this essay will remain true through the years. But for the moment, Grinding Gear Games have proven that even in such a narrative-immune genre as the aRPG, mechanics as well as text can bring the lysergic glare of any kind of truth. 🍷





TEAM UNWINNABLE  
FIRESIDE CHATS



One of  
a Series

By D. H.  
Shimomura

*This month, David chats with Unwinnable co-owner and vice publisher, Sara Clemens.*

\* \* \*

### **What brought you into writing about videogames in particular?**

Weirdly enough, Unwinnable! It wasn't the sole influence, but around 2010 I discovered a number of places that hosted videogame writing that made me think, wow we're allowed to write about *games* like this? I don't remember which chicken laid what egg on my reading list, but Unwinnable was one of those places. I remember Cara Ellison's piece on *A Dark Room* really clearly. She became something of a games writing rockstar to me – when she visited New York while working on her Embed with Games series I made it my beeswax to go to Barcade for a small meetup she held and dorkily asked her for advice on how to write about games. She told me, "Pitch to Unwinnable." I was too chickenshit to do it right away but eventually, I did.

### **Something I think you've kind of revolutionized at Unwinnable is our TV coverage, what intrigues you about the form?**

Ha, I don't know if saying to Stu, "Hey, since we cover pop culture maybe we should include TV," is all that revolutionary, but I'll take the compliment. I'm an actor, so television has always been attractive to me. There's job security in landing a substantial role on a long-

running series. It's a lot more stable than auditioning for films piecemeal or going out for theatrical work like I usually do. Also, in the early 2010s when I brought up the idea of covering TV for Unwinnable, we were solidly in a golden age for the medium. Shows like *Mad Men*, *Breaking Bad* and *Game of Thrones* were projects that focused on complex plotting and long-range character development. That's the juicy stuff actors like to work with, which is probably why I'm always ready to invest in it as a viewer.

### **What do you try to bring to people from television?**

I don't know that there's anything specific I'm trying to bring to the table with Unwinnable's TV coverage, though I do like to seek out new or weird stuff and try to steer focus to shows I think are good that don't get a lot of coverage elsewhere on the internet.

Mostly I just aim to spotlight the good or at least interesting projects that are out there. Like I was saying earlier, a lot of my personal analysis focuses on character work, but I also like to approach television on a craft level. I was a professional sound designer and engineer for instance, so I always notice that. You can't get a better television sound design than *Twin Peaks: The Return*, for the record.

### **So, apart from Unwinnable, you run Video Dame, how have you found one a source for the other?**

First, Videodame, like videogame, is one word. I've poached writers from the Unwinnable ranks to come do pieces for me at Videodame. I like to publish work on games that's a little more experimental or arty over there, so I tell people that they should come to me if they ever want to do the weird stuff. Sort of ironically, once I got my column at Unwinnable, I started saving up my "good" writing for that and stopped writing for Videodame, opting to focus solely on the editorial side. That ended up being a positive thing – it honed my chops as an editor which directly led to me feeling confident enough to pitch myself as TV Editor for Exploits.

**How has it felt stepping into the Publisher role? Have there been any surprises?**

It's funny, it feels a bit like I worked my way up from the mail room. I started (along with you!) doing mini reviews of

individual issues as part of our weekly comic book round-up, then got a column, moved into editorial, co-hosted the official podcast (along with you!) and now I co-own the joint. And you're the Editor in Chief! <[a href="http://paul-rudd-look-at-us.gif"]paul-rudd-look-at-us.gif[/a]>

It's always illuminating to peer behind the curtain of a place to see the how the machinery really runs. No big surprises yet (knock wood) though my stress level has increased a bit, which is to be expected. I get to help Stu fret about financials and sponsorship meetings which I'm glad about. I can't believe he did everything by himself for so long without imploding. Helping to shoulder the burden makes me feel like a useful part of the team.

**So, obviously your column here looks different, being a comic. Do you feel like that gives you extra freedom? The opposite?**



View of the original, abandoned Unwinnable offices, circa 1756, by Giovanni Battista Piranesi

Well, it's not always a comic and I don't think it's going to be permanently a comic, just sometimes it might be a comic. I went to grad school for creative writing a couple of years ago and on a whim decided to take a graphic narrative class as one of my seminars. Drawing and art used to be really important to me but I fell away from my practice in undergrad. In my seminar I rediscovered my passion for it and found that it kind of broke my writing open in a way I really liked. I tend towards the verbose and illustrating my work let me cut back on the wordiness. There's a lot more showing rather than telling, though ironically a lot of my illustration work zooms in on one or two specific details in a scene. But I like that – a lot of times when I sit down to draw something to accompany an essay my instinct to focus on one particular thing helps me home in on what's important in the writing itself. That feels very freeing, letting all those the unnecessary details

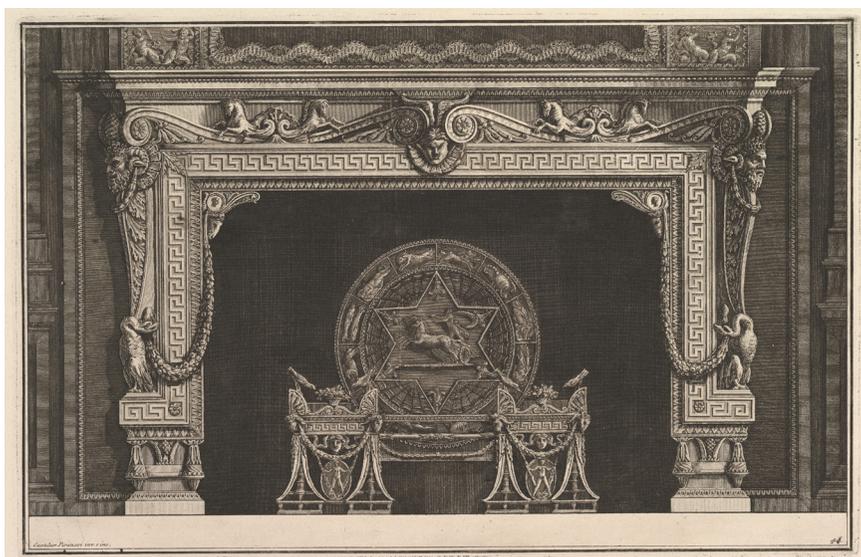
fall away. Release me from the trappings of extraneous language!

**Is there a piece of media that you found through Unwinnable that otherwise you wouldn't have paid any attention to or was out of your wheelhouse?**

I got into metal music through our dearly departed “Can You Hang?” music challenge, which was quite a surprise to me. I also never thought I'd play any first-person shooters. They used to make me dizzy and I was super bad at them. Now we have our board meetings over headset in *Rainbow Six Siege* and I take down the baddies while debating what the rewards for our subscription drive should be. What a brave new world!

**Is there something you'd wished I asked?**

Honestly, no. You're a pretty good interviewer. I can see why you got this job. 🙌





# CREATIVE CONSTRAINTS

By Ben Sailer





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

The phrase “necessity is the mother of invention” (derived from the line “our need will be the real creator” in Plato’s *Republic*) was coined long before the dawn of videogames. Yet videogame history is full of examples proving its prescience. Developers have been finding workarounds for technical constraints since the days of *Tennis For Two*, making design decisions to compensate for hardware and software limitations, often without the player’s awareness (and even as home consoles have grown more powerful).

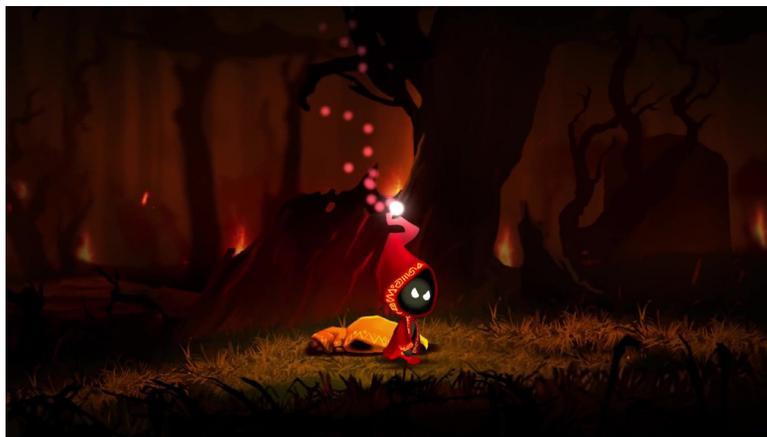
Sometimes this leads to more interesting and innovative ideas than game designers originally envision; for example, Hideo Kojima built the original *Metal Gear* around stealth mechanics because it was difficult to animate compelling combat sequences on the MSX2. This choice elevated an ordinary action title into something original, and in the process, it laid the foundation for the entire stealth-action subgenre.

*Unbound: Worlds Apart*, the 2021 puzzle-platformer from Bucharest-based Alien Pixel Studios, offers another modern demonstration of the same principle in action. The game’s hand-drawn aesthetic and branching pathways at once invoke memories of *Hollow Knight*, *Ori* and other side-scrolling adventure titles. It’s graphically and mechanically polished, with vibrant visuals, carefully crafted puzzles, and tightly tuned platforming, offering an experience that can hang with its peers in a crowded genre.

For an independent company with three employees (including co-founders Sergiu Craitoiu and Andrei Simion, as well as concept artist Olga Ciob), creating something that can compare favorably to the cornerstones of its genre is quite an achievement. Then again, this is a crew with experience working around resource restrictions. Even though he had no professional game development aspirations, Craitoiu started creating his own games (which he calls “crappy”) in college, which helped him learn how to use DirectX and OpenGL.

Craitoiu took graphics and programming jobs after graduation, but by the time he turned 24, he was uncertain whether he was on the right career path. Then, an invitation from a friend helped him find the direction he was searching for, proving his time spent developing rudimentary games in his off hours might have been more valuable than he thought.

“A good friend asked me to go with him to a game jam and use Unreal Engine to create a game in 24 hours,” Craitoiu says. “I had no idea about these kinds of events, and I joined because I thought it will be fun and challenging. There, I met other people with a passion for games and they had ideas about programming, design, music and so on. It was very fascinating for me, and I said this is what I want to do for the rest of my life.”



Craitoiu and Simion started Alien Pixel Studios two years later in 2016, with Ciob coming on board in 2017. They knew they wanted their first game to be a puzzle-platformer, but they also knew they wanted their debut title to have unique mechanics and weren't interested in merely copying their source material. They needed some sort of differentiator. Something that players haven't seen countless times before.

The pair explored giving players the ability to manipulate level environments, but while the concept was interesting in theory, it was difficult to manage the number of on-screen variables necessary to execute it. Then, thanks to a sudden flash of insight from an unexpected source, Craitoiu thought of the perfect solution, and the

core gameplay loop that would give *Unbound: Worlds Apart* its own identity.

“One day I was watching a video from the metal band Architects called ‘Gone With the Wind,’ where there was a huge bubble behind them where stuff was happening,” Craitoiu says. “So, it somehow clicked that we can use something like a portal, and not change the level.”

Based on its colorful and vibrant hand-drawn aesthetic, heavy music might not be the most obvious influence on *Unbound: Worlds Apart*; for the most part, this is family-friendly fare. Once the story starts, though, it does quickly reveal some bleak themes.



The plot begins in the fictional world of Vaiya (which, at first, looks like it could be a lush reimagining of Hallownest). During its annual celebration of The Guardian, a mysterious force attacks, leaving Vaiya in danger of collapse.

After this grim introduction, players are placed in the shoes of a red-robed wizard named Soli, who must navigate ten unique worlds to save his home. Each level is replete with all the complex puzzles and branching pathways that are the hallmarks of these types of games, and at first, it might look too familiar to stand out.

Chalking up *Unbound: Worlds Apart* as a stereotypical platform adventure would be inaccurate though, and once taking control of Soli, it doesn't take long for any lingering sense of déjà vu to dissipate. To solve puzzles and make progress through *Unbound: Worlds Apart's* labyrinthine levels, players must open portals by holding down a

shoulder button, which superimposes a circular window over the environment.

While standing inside a portal, Soli can use different skills—like reversing gravity or slowing down time—that allow him to clear obstacles and complete quests that are otherwise impossible. The portals function like a single core mechanic that enables several more compelling mechanics to be added as the game progresses, building a sense of anticipation to see which abilities Soli will gain next.

“Each portal gives the character a different ability for a specific area in the game,” Craitoiu says. “For example, there are portals that can turn the character into a stone, or it makes him smaller, or allow him to play with gravity. The portals are gradually introduced to players by solving simple puzzles or challenges to learn how they work, and towards the end it increases in difficulty, making the player think and react very fast.”



However, while the portals are essential to *Unbound: Worlds Apart*, they did come at a cost to another area of the game. Given the complexity of animating them in conjunction with combat, the team was left with a major decision to make; figure out a way to make them work together, or double down on building the game’s identity around solving puzzles by tearing holes in the fabric of time and space. Ultimately, rather than compromise the game’s most original hook, they took the less is more approach.

“We didn’t find a good way to fit the combat with the portal to feel right,” Craitoiu says. “Since the portal was the unique selling point and the main mechanic of the game, we decided to drop the combat.”

This was a bold move but one that could be described as addition by subtraction. It forces the player to think outside of the box, and without the choice to fight, clever timing with summoning portals is often the only way to bypass enemies. Monsters still present an element of danger, but in many ways, they're simply obstacles to avoid rather than to conquer. Considering Soli's demeanor is much more endearing than intimidating, the brains over brawn approach is arguably more thematically fitting too.

Something that wasn't a limiting factor in *Unbound: World's Apart's* development was Unreal Engine 4. According to Craitoiu, it offered several tools and functions that made life much easier for their three-person team. The engine's flexibility also allowed for a level of customization that directly affected how the game's portals work.



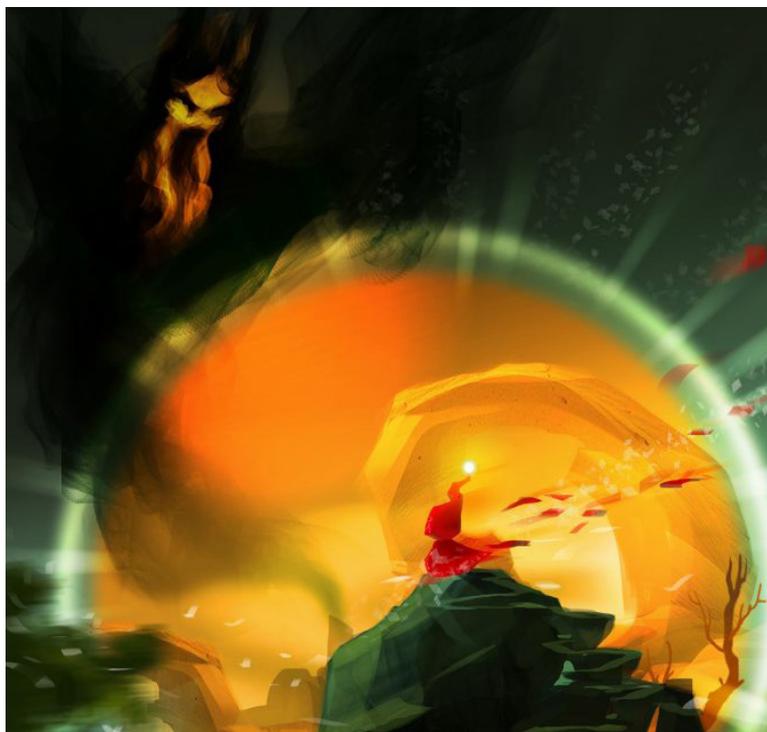
“The materials and shaders were really easy to create in Unreal,” Craitoiu says. “Development was faster thanks to the Blueprint system used for prototyping. Also, because the engine is open source, we managed to create a custom renderer inside the engine and improve the portal effect performance.”

*Unbound: Worlds Apart* was made possible in part with grants from Epic. Alien Pixel Studios applied for funding from the company twice and was selected as a finalist each time. Not only did this provide the studio with much-needed financing to complete their work, but it also gave them a massive boost in confidence, validating their vision while making it possible to more fully realize their vision for the game.

“Unreal Dev Grants was the first investment that we received back in 2018,” Craitoiu says. “It was amazing to receive it because it motivated us, and we knew that we were on the right track. Also, the money we received allowed us to prepare a good Kickstarter campaign. Then we received an Epic MegaGrant in 2020, because the game grew in scope and demanded more resources. That allowed us to outsource some art and music.”

The response from players and critics alike has been warm thus far, and future updates may bring further enhancements, such as selectable difficulty and enhanced animations. If players want to explore *Unbound: Worlds Apart*'s labyrinthine portal-based levels for themselves, the game is available now on the Epic Games Store, Steam, Good Old Games, Nintendo Switch, PlayStation, and Xbox.

“I hope that players will have a great time playing *Unbound: Worlds Apart* and appreciate the amazing art, story, and atmosphere of the game,” Craitoiu says. “The game has lots of characters, quests, and secrets waiting to be discovered . . . and interesting mechanics that will keep the player hooked.” 🍷



## Contributors

**DAVID SHIMOMURA** is the editor in chief of Unwinnable. Follow him on Instagram and Twitter @UnwinnableDavid.

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

**PHILLIP RUSSELL** is a Black writer based in Seattle, Washington, who is interested in race, masculinity and representation in popular media. You can find him tweeting @3dsisqo.

**EMILY PRICE** is a freelance writer and PhD candidate in literature based in Brooklyn, New York. You can find her on Twitter @the\_emilyap.

**MADDI CHILTON** is an internet artifact from St. Louis, Missouri. Follow her on Twitter @all-palaces.

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

**PHOENIX SIMMS** is a writer and indie narrative designer from Atlantic Canada. You can lure her out of hibernation during the winter with rare McKillip novels, Japanese stationery goods and ornate cupcakes.

**MATT MARRONE** is a senior MLB editor at ESPN.com. He has been Unwinnable's reigning Rookie of the Year since 2011. You can follow him on Twitter @thebigm.

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

**SARA CLEMENS** thinks too much about things. They run a site called Videodame and a Twitter called @thesaraclemens.

**LEVI RUBECK** is a critic and poet currently living in the Boston area. Check his links at levirubeck.com.

**AUTUMN WRIGHT** is a critic of all things apocalyptic. They usually cover games and other media on the internet. Find their latest writing on your timeline or in your email.

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

**ROB RICH** is a guy who's loved nerdy stuff since the 80s, from videogames to anime to Godzilla to Power Rangers toys to Transformers, and has had the good fortune of being able to write about them all. He's also editor for the Games section of Exploits! You can still find him on Twitter and Instagram.

**ALYSSA WEJEBE** is a writer and editor specializing in the wide world of arts and entertainment. She has worked in pop culture journalism and in the localization of Japanese light novels. You can find her on Twitter @alyssawejebe.

**DARYL LI** is a writer of fiction and nonfiction based in Singapore. His work generally explores themes of memory, identity and trauma. He also enjoys writing about games, music and film. *The Inventors*, a full-length collection of his literary nonfiction, is forthcoming from TrendLit Publishing in 2023. Follow him on Twitter @nonstickpanda.

**ANDREI FILOTE** lives somewhere between the Alps and the sea. He writes about all things games and really wants you to play Disco Elysium. Follow him on Twitter @letominor.

## Illustrations

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