

# UNWINNABLE MONTHLY

*Volume 9, Issue 9 - September 2022*

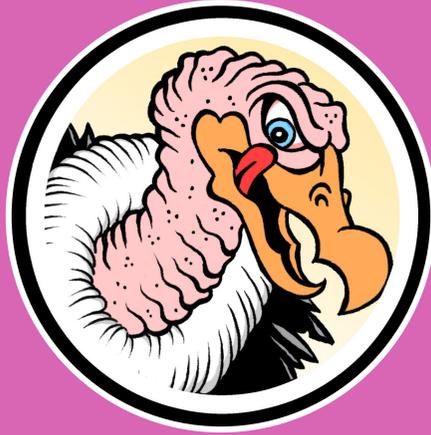


**GAWR GURA • ANIMAL CROSSING**

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*Monthly*

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This machine kills fascists.



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### CONTRIBUTORS



Dear Reader,  
Have I got some stuff for you!

This month's cover feature (cover by Mikhail Malkin) is Michael Lee on the very special shark. Our other feature this month is Taylor Hidalgo on a special kind of isolation in *Animal Crossing*. Both really get at a kind of participation and community but from wildly different points. We're taking a break from staff interviews this month and you'll see why *next month!*

Also, this month, we have new(ish!) people!

First of all, welcome back Oluwatayo Adewole. I told them they'd always have a spot here and look at that, they're back! But doing something different this go-around!

Next, please welcome Emma Kostopolus. Emma's written [features](#) for us before but now is taking a seat at the columnist table!

Please be super excellent to the both of them, follow on social, read and enjoy!

As for our regular columnists I'd like to bring to you . . . Maddi Chilton on *Elvis* (2022). Yussef Cole is back with a true story of *Zelda*. Dierdre Coyle on just a few of her favorite things in *Switchcraft*. Amanda Hudgins examines "hybrid shifters." Matt Marrone on the state of American (TV) politics. Justin Reeve builds a racetrack! Rob Rich looks inwards on his chosen profession. Levi Ruback is not into the new-fangled thing you kids are into. Phoenix Simms jumps into *Klonoa*. Noah Springer was a very sheltered boy! And Autumn Wright brings it all home with letters in an unexpected order.

Next month begins our favorite month at the office. We'll have a theme issue, along with all sorts of other goodies. Also, please join us for our ongoing playthrough of [Alien: Destroyer of Worlds](#) Thursdays in September at 8:30PM EST.

Stay safe, wear a mask and remember, we're here because you want us to be. A lot more to come on how our subscribers make us what we are next month but sincerely, thank you!

See you all in a few weeks in Exploits!

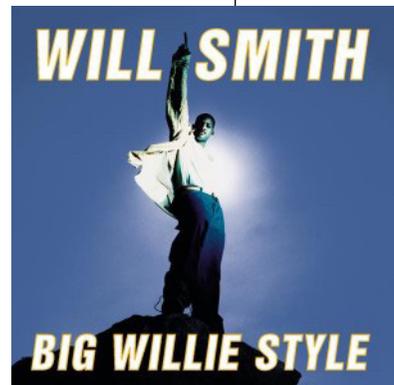
David Shimomura  
Chicago, Illinois  
September 16, 2022



I've written about this before, but I was relatively late to liking hip hop in my life. I was pretty sheltered as a kid. I mean, not totally sheltered, like some sort of prepper in Idaho, but culturally, my parents didn't let me access a ton of popular culture. My dad still listens to classical music pretty much exclusively. I didn't really start understanding the genre until I was 20 or so, but I think 1997 was the year that hip hop finally broke through even to little old me, starting with, of course, the one and only Fresh Prince.

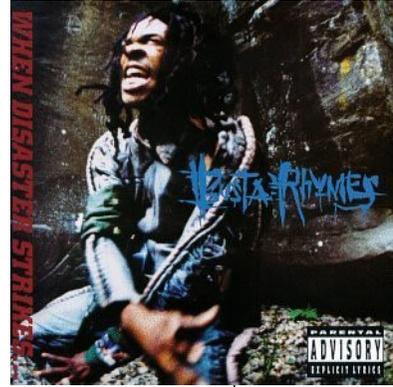
### Will Smith – *Big Willie Style*

I didn't really watch *The Fresh Prince of Bel-Air*, I missed *Bad Boys*, and I definitely hadn't listened to anything DJ Jazzy Jeff & the Fresh Prince put out, but when Will Smith dropped his first solo album in 1997, I was on board! Well, me and like 300 million other people. Listening back to *Big Willie Style* for the first time in probably 24 years, I can't help but see why we were all so hype. This is a fun, bouncy piece of pop entertainment. The lyrics aren't the most inspired, but Will Smith's flow is talented enough to hold them together. Even though the production sounds a bit dated at this point, it's still full of bangers front to back. Add to that the fact that the Fresh Prince was on a movie tear, dropping *Bad Boys*, *Independence Day* and *Men in Black* back-to-back-to-back over previous three years, and it might seem like 1997 was the pinnacle of Will Smith's career. Really though, it was just the start of a 25-year plateau at the top.



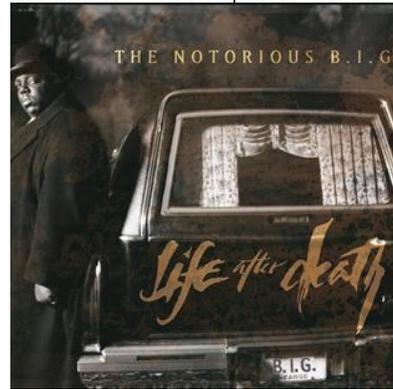
### Busta Rhymes – *When Disaster Strikes...*

I vividly remember hanging out at my best friend Dan's house back in 1997, watching the [music video](#) for “Dangerous” and just vibing. Hip hop music videos from this era were enamored with the fish-eyed lens, and Busta was no exception, but dressing in white face was a strange and frankly hilarious addition that I don't remember seeing in other music videos from the 90s. But even outside this certified banger, *When Disaster Strikes...* is Busta at his strongest: aggressive, lyrically dense rhymes over classic, East Coast beats, a hefty dose of comedy and a little bit of consciousness laced across 72 minutes. I'm not sure how Busta's more recent music has been received, but his output in the 90s shows why he is one of the revered elder statesmen in the genre.



### Notorious B.I.G. – *Life After Death*

Speaking of fish-eye lenses, the music video for “Mo Money Mo Problems” was ubiquitous in my little, 11-year-old, middle-of-Illinois world. I was very concerned about getting rich, but it turns out that never really ended up being an issue in my life. I know I'm not the first person to say this, but I do like *Ready to Die* better than *Life After Death*, but Biggie's first posthumous album was the one that burst into my world first. Even though his first album is better, I can't deny that *Life After Death* has too many hits to not be considered a classic – “Hypnotize,” “Going Back to Cali,” “Notorious Thugs,” “Ten Crack Commandments.” But the fact is, it would be a much stronger album (and potentially better than *Ready to Die*) if Puffy had cut the fluff and just kept the hits. A double album is just too much music, and even though this was supposed to be the final, grandiose statement for the Notorious BIG (I tend to ignore the other posthumous albums), it feels a bit bloated to top the best debut of all time.



### Missy Elliott – *Supa Dupa Fly*

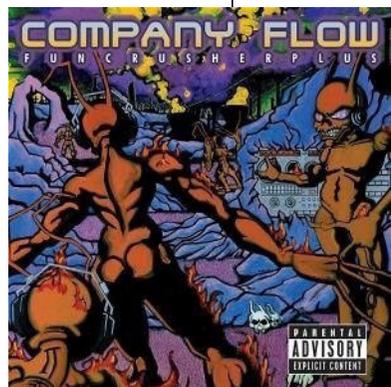
Busta Rhymes opens up Missy Elliott's debut, *Supa Dupa Fly*, but is so quickly overshadowed you almost forget he was even there until he pops back up on the outro. In between, Missy proves that her debut competes with anybody

else dropping music in the '90s. It also acts as a showcase for Timbaland who produced the whole thing with his signature funk and rhythm. While this album wasn't as prominent in my life as the previous three, Missy Elliott was definitely still on my radar back then, if only for being one of the only women to break through doing it at that level in the '90s. Now, I clearly recognize that she is one of the best braggadocio rappers to ever do it. Listening to *Supa Dupa Fly* now, I really wish this had broken through to me back in 1997. I guess I'll have to settle with it breaking through now.



### Company Flow – *Funcrusher Plus*

Even though Missy's debut wasn't as much on my radar as Biggie, Busta and Will Smith, you know who really didn't make it to an 11-year-old in central Illinois? El-P. But his debut album with his first group, Company Flow (alongside Big Juss and Mr. Len), is one of the best albums of 1997, if not of all the 1990s. *Funcrusher Plus* is a landmark independent album, full of obscure samples, intricate, surreal lyrics and, frankly, just plain odd beats. Although *Soundbombing* dropped only a couple months later and was potentially more influential on the sound of underground NY hip hop at the time, *Funcrusher Plus* is the actual debut of Rawkus Records, one of the most important labels in the history of underground hip hop. Shame that I wasn't aware of them at all yet. Well, probably not a shame really. I don't think they cared too much what 11-year-old Noah thought.



\* \* \*

As a quick coda, you may notice that everything I talked about here is from the East Coast. I certainly wouldn't want to imply nothing was happening in the rest of the country at this point. Atmosphere dropped their debut in '97 and Eminem dropped his first EP. Outkast was in the midst of their god-tier run between 1996's *ATLiens* and 1998's *Aquemeni*, 8ball and MJG dropped, *Lyrics of a Pimp*, Lil John popped on the scene and Birdman was solidifying the New Orleans sound with the Hot Boyz. On the west coast, Dr. Dre was cooling out a bit after Tupac's death, but Warren G, Ice Cube and MC Eiht all dropped solid

releases and, of course, Tupac released a posthumous album, *R U Still Down?*

But, looking back, there was a reason four out of five of these albums reached me in the Midwest, and that's because for each of these albums, there is at least one more classic east coast hip hop album from 1997. Jay-Z and the Wu-Tang Clan both dropped their second albums, Jedi Mind Tricks dropped their first, Capone and Noreaga released *The War Report*, and Aesop Rock (technically east coast, I think) debuted with *Music for Earthworms*. But ultimately, I think the east coast broke through because Puff Daddy ran the MTV game, and that was the avenue to middle America. 🇺🇸



# 1987

**H**i! I'm back! If you've been reading Unwinnable for a while then you'll probably recognize me from my World Tour column where I talked about works from different countries every entry. On this occasion we're shaking things up and taking ourselves through time!

**NO MORE BUSINESS AS USUAL! Come to Wall Street in front of Trinity Church at 7AM Tuesday March 24 for a MASSIVE AIDS DEMONSTRATION to demand the following**

1. Immediate release by the Federal Food & Drug Administration of drugs that might help save our lives.

These drugs include: Ribavirin (ICN Pharmaceuticals); Ampligen (HMR Research Co.); Glucan (Tulane University School of Medicine); DTC (Merieux); DDC (Hoffman-LaRoche); AS 101 (National Patent Development Corp.); MTP-PE (Ciba-Geigy); AL 721 (Praxis Pharmaceuticals).

2. Immediate abolishment of cruel double-blind studies wherein some get the new drugs and some don't.

3. Immediate release of these drugs to everyone with AIDS or ARC.

4. Immediate availability of these drugs at affordable prices. Curb your greed!

5. Immediate massive public education to stop the spread of AIDS.

6. Immediate policy to prohibit discrimination in AIDS treatment, insurance, employment, housing.

7. Immediate establishment of a coordinated, comprehensive, and compassionate national policy on AIDS.

President Reagan, nobody is in charge!

**AIDS IS THE BIGGEST KILLER IN NEW YORK CITY OF YOUNG MEN AND WOMEN. Tell your friends. Spread the word. Come protest together. 7 AM ... March 24 ... You must be on time! AIDS IS EVERYBODY'S BUSINESS NOW.**

To kick things off with this new column we're discussing two films from 1987, both by trailblazing gay directors, Joel Schumacher's *The Lost Boys* and Derek Jarman's *The Last of England*. The former film focuses on a pair of teens who move to a new town with their mum and soon discover that it's full of very cool and totally-not-gay vampires. The latter film sort of defies description, it's 87 minutes of poetic queer rage directed squarely at Thatcherite England.

These are clearly very different films, something central to both of them is an engagement with contemporary panics about moral collapse in the West. While neither film explicitly says anything about the AIDS crisis or the Satanic Panic, the sense of moral panic clearly influences both of them. More specifically it's worth focusing on how the so-called collapse of the hegemonic family, a. k. a. the vision of two married white middle-class heterosexual parents with good white children raised in the home they own which is/was understood to be the moral backbone of society, is reflected in these films.



*On July 13th 1987, the first McMartin pre-school trial began, based on a storm of dubiously-evidenced childhood sexual abuse allegations which picked up steam by being wrapped up in the contemporary Satanic Panic. The trial would eventually turn out to be the most expensive in California history and result in no convictions, by the end of the process the accused Ray Buckey had spent five years in jail without being found guilty of any crimes.*

The family in *The Lost Boys* is already a far cry from the idyllic nuclear unit that New Right dreams are made of, with a father who's out of the picture and a grandad who isn't much of a patriarch. However, this family unit is further threatened by the threat of the roaming biker gang that seeks to draw the oldest son into chaos even further from the good moral path.

As with everything in *The Last of England*, meaning is much less straightforward, but it's still there. There is a delirious sequence where a marriage takes place and it feels feverish and chaotic. Aside from this we also see the iconic Tilda Swinton in her dress and veil which she destroys in front of an open flame. In his own way, Jarman engages with the panic over moral decay by defiling one of the main institutions of Western Christian morality.

*In June 1987 the Conservative Party won that year's general election, suffering some seat losses but still maintaining a healthy majority. One of the key elements of their campaign was reaffirming their commitment to maintaining their staunch moralistic stances exemplified by the campaign poster here. The next year this government would go on to put Section 28 in place which functionally forbade local authority employees (especially in schools) from talking about homosexuality in anything other than negative terms.*



While on its face *The Lost Boys* is about the eventual triumph of The Family over these rogue elements, the reality is more complicated. Talking about Milton's sympathetic portrayal of the Devil in *Paradise Lost*, William Blake wrote "The reason Milton wrote in fetters when he wrote of Angels & God, and at liberty when of Devils & Hell, is because he was a true Poet and of the Devil's party without knowing it." I think the same applies to Schumacher's portrayal of vampire society in *The Lost Boys*. Though this time he very much knew what he was doing – this was not a man afraid in reveling in "sin." It's infernal, it's violent, it's murderous, but it is also undeniably sexy. According to [Schumacher](#), in a test screening for the film a bunch of "surf punks" tore up the cinema with excitement at one of its most violent scenes. The costumes (by Susan Becker), hair and makeup (by Ve Neill) are a series of wild choices that defy time and there is an incredible amount of leather all around. The

film's tagline is "Sleep all day. Party all night. Never grow old. Never die" – and who could really resist the temptation of an eternity of bacchanalia in an era drowning in queer death?

For Jarman's piece there is no facade of the triumph of the family. He leans hard into the decay of it all. The delirious wedding scene is punctuated with too-wide smiles that feel painted on and the way that Jarman plays with the frame rate pulls you into the delirium yourself. The frenetic editing and lack of dialogue makes it very clear that he is not only disinterested in the structures and forms that are traditional/hegemonic but is actively trying to tear them down. With this, Jarman gleefully moves into the sacrilegious, one of the most striking visuals of the film is when two men (one of whom is in paramilitary gear) have sex on top of a giant Union Jack. The paramilitary part of the image is only made more striking when you consider the context of Thatcher's hardline stance against republican action and the likelihood (as suggested by later investigations like the Police Ombudsman report) that British security forces were giving loyalist paramilitaries carte blanche to commit acts of terror. There are some real parallels to *Jubilee* a decade earlier but this time it feels like Jarman's sacrilege has much more grit and direct pain to it. With the seething anger in every frame comes a catharsis that you can only really know as a person who has been denied anger and expression for years. To separate the rage from the Letting loose is not only necessary and freeing but it just feels fucking good!

*Hurricane Annie ripped the ceiling of a church  
And killed everyone inside  
You turn on the telly and every other story  
Is tellin' you somebody died  
Sister killed her baby 'cuz she couldn't afford to feed it  
And we're sending people to the moon  
In September my cousin tried reefer for the very first time  
Now he's doing horse, it's June*

*Times, times*

In the face of aggressive moral panics these men are defiantly enjoying the monstrous role assigned to them. They are leaning into the hedonism, the rage and the catharsis. In their own ways each piece of work feels like a cry against the moral policing of the time saying, "if I am burnt at the stake then I will burn bright and beautiful and glorious!" Much better than to fade in silence. 🍷



## Hybrid Shifters

In *Twilight*, Stephenie Meyer goes out of her way to establish that the wolves of the Quileute tribe are not werewolves but are rather wolf-shifters. This is a strange narrative line to draw in the sand but it is one that also opens up the universe for other types of shifting creatures. Ones that become bears, foxes, ferrets. While Meyer is undoubtedly not the first to make that distinction, it's a trope that has only grown with time and one that thrives in the environment of fanfiction as well as in standard fiction. This year, monster-fucker author Vera Valentine wrote a novella called *Squeak* about omegaverse hybrid balloon animal shifters, which is a lot of words that have very little meaning together outside of the fanfiction and romance novels. The important phrase here is "hybrid shifter."

What is a hybrid shifter?

Hybrid shifter romances are romances where at least one of the characters can change form (usually entirely) into an animal. Animorphs-style. They usually retain some of their cognitive function in animal form but as a side effect are more tied to their "animal instincts," usually a close-to-the-surface desire for violence, scenting and sex. In erotic stories, these animalistic changes are usually sexual in nature, but highly fictionalized, like knotting or heat cycles. While there are animal-shifter stories of all kinds, the animals selected are the ones you'd normally expect when a white guy tells you he has a spirit animal – wolves, bears, snakes, cats, bunnies. Large predators or animals with storied sex drives.

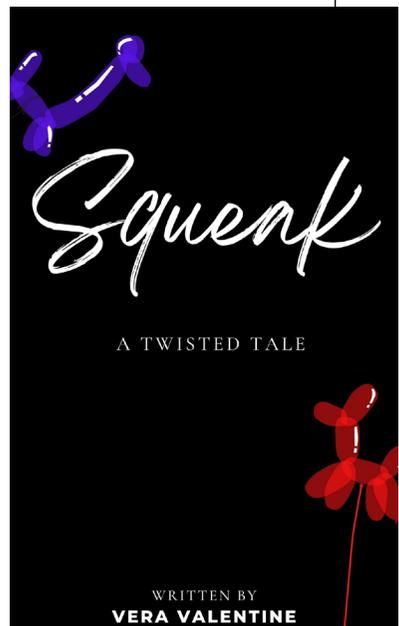
While hybrid-shifter stories are common throughout fandom – they’re probably at their largest in K-pop fandom. This is likely because, in part, idols are frequently assigned animals that are intended to represent them – usually through fan-translations that decide that Jimin from BTS is a chick so they can represent his speech in text form on Twitter with an icon instead of his name. It’s a linguistic shorthand for the social media age, but it also segues nicely into fanfiction.



Is Hoshi from Seventeen just really into tigers? Does Min Yoongi from BTS have the traits of a house cat? In real life, it’s debatable, but in fandom all things are possible.

What’s more interesting in terms of hybrid-shifter works is not the acrobatic, animalistic sex but actually the moral issues that the purveyors of these works often have to reckon with. I’m talking about fictionalized slavery. The closest analog to hybrids in the real world are literal animals, and if you’re not into zoophilia then these creatures you’ve made are effectively people – except that hybrid-shifters are frequently still owned. Ownership is a frequent narrative device – who owns who, past bad owners – and while they’re frequently analogous to lovers, they’re still owners. Being lovers and owners is its own can of worms.

If you moralize in your porn, how do you reckon with someone who needs to have the cognitive ability to consent vs. being owned? It’s an issue that the writers of this kind of work are often not really ready to tussle with because it’s heavy. Slavery usually is. It’s something that pops up even in non-fandom works, like the aforementioned *Squeak*. The two male leads of that story are balloon animals – they are literally made manifest by a circus witch into sexy men with anatomically impossible penises but when they sleep and when they have sex they once again take on the characteristics of balloon animals. But even in this frankly bonkers concept, you have the idea of slavery. They escaped bondage from the circus witch, who kept them as sex slaves to sate her desires. They exist in this universe both as objects (they are literally manufactured balloons given consciousness) as well as men, who desire freedom and love.



If you've made Min Yoongi an actual cat, what does it mean when someone owns him? Is he both a cognitive creature capable of decision making and also someone's pet? If so, his ownership is always going to be a tragedy.

This is perhaps why, so frequently, these works choose instead to operate without engaging with slavery at all. Usually, one of the easiest ways that this occurs is if they don't have ownership. Min Yoongi is maybe a catboy, but in this case it's because "designer children " were a thing for a while in this universe and now the fad has died down. Still a hybrid shifter of some regard, but more likely to also go to college and have a normal relationship with his sexual partners. Magic also helps with this. Sherlock can be a crow shifter without moral conundrums if it's simply because a wizard made him one.

Ultimately you see in hybrid shifter fiction a desire to create people who are closer to their "natural instincts" over reason, a call back to nature. Is the reason usually sexy? Of course, it is, it's derivative work. But it's still a concept worth engaging with. 🐱





**S***witchcraft* is a visual novel and match-three game that combines several of my favorite topics: witches, witchcraft and protagonists with cool hair. For a genre whose games are often hastily and sloppily written (not naming names, but if you've ever played a narrative-based mobile game [angling for microtransactions](#), you know what I mean), many of *Switchcraft*'s character arcs were surprisingly satisfying. Even minor characters who didn't get their own plotline had well-written dialogue options.

The story takes place at Pendle Hill Academy, a.k.a. witch college, and deals in mysterious disappearances, romantic choices and dark visions. The heroine, Bailey Ward, is a freshman with solid credentials for cool: she's the Boston-born daughter of a drummer and a journalist, wears flannel well and has long, wavy hair with an undercut. Oh, and she can do magic, the coolest quality of all.

I was tempted to write about Bailey – she *is* someone I want to know – but it almost seems unfair, given her objective coolness, when the game boasts so many minor characters who might need more attention.

As I went through my screenshots, I focused on Ruby Blue: Pendle Hill's overtly sexual librarian. Ms. Blue's aesthetics speak volumes: she wears librarian clichés – cardigans and tortoiseshell glasses – with bodycon animal prints, statement jewelry and long, blue nails.

In one scene, Ms. Blue shows Bailey a pair of studded black boots and makes a casual rock reference: “These are my shiny, shiny, shiny boots of leather.” If you don't recognize the line, she's quoting the Velvet Underground song “Venus in Furs,” which is inspired by a nineteenth century novella of the

same name. The novella centers around sadomasochism and female dominance, and this in turn becomes relevant when Ms. Blue runs for chancellor of the academy. One of her campaign platforms? Including erotica in the library. Whether or not the writers intended to draw that literary connection, it worked for me.

I can't support all of Ms. Blue's behavior – she flirts with students, and her campaign for chancellor is suggestive in ways that are not particularly appropriate for someone in an academic position of power. But the game engages with this as well, and student criticism of her “suggestive” campaign strategies leads her to drop out of the race and remain the school's librarian. But she is good at her job,

and in multiple instances, helps Bailey and her Scooby gang find books and information. Kind of like a flashy, amorous Rupert Giles.

I obsessively played *Switchcraft* for several months until, last week, I completed the storyline. I was upset about completing the game not because I was unhappy with my ending (choices matter, and I stand by mine), but because I wanted to keep playing. In general, I want to keep playing narrative games on my phone when I'm console-less, and I haven't found many mobile games that provide such satisfying levels of attention to character and story.

Ms. Blue's literary *Venus in Furs* reference nested in a musical “Venus in Furs” reference nested in an offhand line of dialogue about outfits is catnip for someone like me, a 60s music nerd who loves outfits. The line would be easy to tap through and ignore; Ms. Blue's boots are not integral to Bailey's story. But this is one example of many solid one-liners and pop culture references embedded in *Switchcraft*'s narrative arcs. And it's this kind of seemingly casual detail that puts *Switchcraft* high above its tactically similar counterparts. 🍷





## An Introduction and Manifesto

I love being scared. Movies, books, haunted houses – if there’s terror or gore to be had, I’ll gleefully participate in it all. I have another gig writing film reviews for a horror magazine (shameless plug, check out *Ghouls*), I’ve screened shorts for horror film festivals and I have consumed hours upon hours of every subgenre of horror, from the most messed up extremity to the schlockiest B-roll. And I love all of it.

But out of all the mediums that house unspeakable horror, I think videogames do something special. And it’s something that, while I’m sure a lot of people are thinking about it, I haven’t seen that the cultural criticism market is yet saturated with takes about horror in our interactive media. So that’s what I’d like this column to be, is an exploration of how games in particular can use and expand on what we think of as horror, and a little bit about why they’re so good at getting under our skin.

Of course, to do this, I’m going to have to do everything from thoughtfully theorize to baselessly speculate about developers, players and the games themselves. So, here’s a little bit about me, so you can decide whether or not you’ll vibe with my hypotheses. I have a Ph.D in Rhetoric and Composition, which is the part of English that doesn’t study literature exclusively, but rather looks at language more broadly. We study speeches, advertising, VCR manuals and try to figure out how all of the “ordinary” writing you encounter every day, the stuff that we don’t always think of as art, is influencing the way you think and feel. And because for so long videogames weren’t really considered “art” (though, for the record, they absolutely *are*), a lot of us study those, too. My professional

work largely thinks about how games persuade us to believe certain things, not just through the words they use, but through their mechanics. When a game says “you win by doing this,” our brains naturally go “okay, so doing that thing must be good.” Obviously, there isn’t a 1:1 correlation – violent games don’t cause violent behavior, for example – but games still work to influence our values and beliefs, like all art does. And horror games do this in a very particular way.

My working theory, my grand idea that I’d like to convince you all of as you continue to read this column, is that the horror of videogames, and a lot of horror more generally, rests on the fear of time. You don’t do something at the correct time, you miss an opportunity, and bad things happen. Horror is all about needing to do things at the exact right time in order to succeed – hide in this specific closet, run away at this particular moment. Most of the suspense of horror happens because we know exactly what the person needs to do, and we squirm because we know they won’t do it. When you think about it, even a fear of death is really about time – you run out of time before you want to. This concept, of knowing the right moment for action, is a piece of rhetorical theory called *kairos*. We often think about *kairos* as knowing the right moment to say something in order to win the argument – as a kid, you asked your parents for special things when they were already in a good mood and not when they were upset with you. Horror hinges on *kairos*, because if you don’t do the right thing at the right time, your time runs out.

While horror films and books are experiences where we simply have to watch the action play out and hope that the characters are savvy, horror games scare us because they place us in the very real position of being the one who has to know what to do at what time. If we don’t push the correct button, or pick up the correct item, our player-character may shortly be in very bad shape. Games also often force us to act against what we know to be *kairotically* prudent – in a film you can shout “No, don’t go in the basement!” But in a game, you’re the dumbass who walks down those stairs, because that’s how you keep playing.

Being scared is one of our last undisturbed means to expand the way we think about the world around us. This may seem at first counterintuitive – we tend to avoid the things we are afraid of, and being baselessly scared of things like change, new people and situations or the unknown can lead to living a rather limited and dull life. But a mediocre existence is not itself the product of fear – it is the product of *avoiding* fear, of always staying in your lane, never looking in the closet or under the bed. By allowing yourself to be afraid, to actively engage with the thing causing you fear, you open yourself up to change, to new things and new understanding and even to the possibility of confronting the ultimate un-knowable. 



## Evil as Can Be

**E**lvis (2022), Baz Luhrmann's latest flashy musical extravaganza, mostly works. Austin Butler's bravado is hampered only by the necessity that he convinces as both a gangling teenager and a bloated forty-something while looking mostly the same. Opposite him is Tom Hanks, a round peg desperately hammered into the square hole of Elvis' life-long manager, Colonel Tom Parker.

As spectacle, the film delivers. Butler sings capably, and exudes greased-hair, popped-collar sexual charisma in a manner that somehow still manages to land in 2022. It's colorful, fast-paced and quite funny. Like many biopics, it's essentially a hagiography, though it gestures vaguely at evenhandedness by acknowledging Elvis' debt to black music and giving lip service to his relationship troubles. Mostly, though, it serves as a two-odd hour reconstruction of the Elvis myth, where a beautiful young man stumbled onto the national stage, blessed us for a time, and then stumbled off. A satisfying, if well-worn, type of story.

But it's a story that follows Western narrative conventions, so every hero needs a villain. Colonel Parker is supposed to be everything to Elvis: father, fan, manager, friend, affectionate family member who can comfort and console him and objective third party, capable of molding him as necessary to navigate his newfound fame. Next to them, the heavier descriptors pile up: exploiter, abuser, killer. A one-stop bad guy shop to match our golden boy.

Of course, Parker's never going to come out of the narrative looking *good* – he was slimy in real life, and he's slimy on-screen. It is jarring to watch the car-

icature Hanks makes of him when he's opposite what ended up as a startlingly delicate Elvis, and even more so when he's supposed to direct the structure of the film. The movie begins with a sick, withered Colonel Parker lugging his IV through a casino, speaking to the camera, exhorting us to listen to his side of the story before making judgements. It's as serviceable a villain monologue as any, and it funnels right into three hours of Parker being, in fact, the most reprehensible human being alive. By the end of the movie, we've seen it all, the rise and fall, Elvis' highs and his lows. He's lived and died in front of us. We've laughed with joy and curled our lip, sympathized with the struggles and scoffed at the excesses. Colonel Parker gets to his outro, the dramatic climax – he didn't kill Elvis! We did, with our love.

Which is bullshit, of course! The entire movie is constructed around Parker as eternal, irredeemable evil. Even Tom Hanks' physical transformation into the role involves him hitting every American shorthand for villainy, all of them rooted in bigotry and prejudice: the fat suit, the prosthetic nose, the just-foreign-enough-to-be-suspicious accent (Parker's real voice, apparently, sounded like a generic Midwestern American with a slight lisp). His treatment of Elvis is covetous and possessive. From the very beginning where he traps him in a mirror funhouse to make his first manager's pitch to one later on where Elvis pushes through an adoring crowd, grabbing women by the face and kissing them, as Parker follows right behind with both hands on his waist. There's no empathy in the presentation of his character, no desire for him to be anything other than a cartoon villain.

But there *is* empathy in the way Elvis' fans are presented. The screaming teenagers, the wild gaggles of girls, mesmerized bystanders stopping to listen to the radio and disbelieving TV execs doing a double-take at their screen – *them* we're supposed to understand. Why wouldn't we? We feel the same way! And that stardom, that phenomenon that fueled his music, his movie career, his wild concerts and, later, his five-year Vegas residency and constant na-



tional touring, even as he declined, visibly and rapidly – that is presented as neutral. The movie forgets to make its own point, which is that fame is unlivable. Parker set it into motion, sure, and fed it, and profited off it, just like so many behind-the-scenes schemers before and after him, but the idea that Elvis would have been happy and healthy and long-lived *if only were it not for Colonel Parker* is ahistorical.

What *Elvis* doesn't want to acknowledge is that, in a way, Parker was right. They let the media machine off easy; it's so much simpler to point to specific instances of cruelty, unfairness, or mishandling in Elvis' career than to confront the idea that there may be no way to have one without the other, that fame and frenzy of that scale cannot exist ethically.

One of the strongest sequences of the film is the first time Parker sees Elvis in person, after hearing his music playing over the radio. He hurries through the back rooms of a music venue, desperate for a glimpse of this kid he heard singing, as the camera claustrophobically follows Elvis' shoulders and back, his face just out of sight. The first time we see him is the first time Parker sees him; it hits us like it hits him. For a moment, Parker, the public and the viewer are the same, all granted this early hint of what he would become, that first tantalizing, intoxicating taste of the man who would be Elvis.

The film depicts hour after ugly hour of Elvis' life, a life lived in the public eye from adolescence until death, but ultimately scoffs at Parker's assertion that, *Yes, I sold him, but you bought him*. It avoids complicity. How could something so beautiful be evil? Do we all not deserve to partake in his greatness? See how he sings. 🎵





## Acquiring Phantomilian

*Contains spoilers for the end of Klonoa: Door to Phantomile*

Language is one of mankind's oldest technologies and the more I think about it in that sense, the more a lot of our ways of mapping ourselves onto our newer technologies makes sense as well. Like (and you knew this was coming if you follow my column) games. Both like to muck about with rules, systems and the power dynamics of systems. Games have their own form of communication and language and, in some instances, they include constructed languages, or conlangs, that are foreign to their players too. That's not an exhaustive list, as both mediums are also very expressive in various ways and directly involve and affect us with how they convey meaning. I digress, but that digression might be a future column's discussion.

I've been thinking a lot lately about communication and the building blocks of that interpersonal process: language. This rumination is inevitable as I've entered my fourth month of part-time tutoring English as a foreign language. I talk to a lot of people living in different places and stages of their lives. I get the opportunity to learn about their goals, both professional and personal, for wanting to speak, write and read in another language. But I also learn about how we learn about communication or anything really, as well.

For instance, did you know there's a distinction made between learning a language and "acquiring" it? Well, I didn't until I trained to become an EFL educator. The former term relates to how most of us gain foreign language skills in an academic setting and focuses on the grammar and pronunciation

of language. The nuts and bolts or rules of language, so to speak. Acquisition, meanwhile, is about making meaning and receiving what some pedagogical literature calls “comprehensible input” from native speakers of another language.

What I’m fascinated by is that this latter term makes English sound like a commodity, but what it’s actually about is English as a natural resource. One that doesn’t get distributed as often amongst EFL students (especially young adult to adult ones) as it should. Wait. That still makes the language sound like a commodity. Ew. Okay, well, the truth is that language often is bound up in power and trade. Different languages over the course of our history have at turns been the most prevalent ones (believe it or not, there used to be more French speakers than English), and those that speak a lingua franca that holds as much political power, such as English, have a tool that’s advantageous for international communication and connection.



Anyway, what I want to emphasize with all the above is that when we talk about language “acquisition” we are talking about how people can access a natural resource for communication. This principle goes for non-verbal languages too, which are just as significant. Like how children learn from interacting with their parents, siblings and/or their friends on the playground or at school. This process of acquisition is a very important part of becoming fluent in any language. We need that natural comprehensible input in order to amass enough of a language to reproduce it in an intelligible manner. But there’s an interstitial stage for some of us that I’ve been finding really interesting with regards to conlangs and how they operate in games lately.

Some children, especially twins, develop a seemingly nonsensical babble of a language with each other. For non-twins, this is called idioglossia, for twins

it's cryptophasia. There's a lot of discussion about whether or not these related forms of gibberish are considered legitimate language or simply a sign of delay in speech development. But that's not what I'm interested in. What I'm most interested in, with regards in particular to idioglossia is how it relates to a successful conlangs that act as ambient storytelling tools in games. One game I grew up with, which I think is a good starting example, but also has been brought to the fore via this year's crop of remasters, is *Klonoa*. Specifically, the first game in the series, the tragicomic *Door to Phantomile*.

The eponymous character's conlang, informally known on the net as Phantomilian, is a language that's approximating the sounds of Japanese, but is mostly gibberish. Some characters, like Klonoa's ring spirit friend Huepow, speak in such a high pitch that the language devolves into mostly an assortment of squeaks. The game shares a similar way of dealing with conlangs as *Animal Crossing's* Animalese, which [Jenna Stoeber once noted](#) was a deliberate choice by one of the series' co-creators in order to emphasize the feeling of connecting with others via communication. Animalese differs from Phantomilian in one key aspect though, in that it's "translated" to approximate English for the western version from its original Japanese-like babble. I have a speculative theory about why this might be the case, but the explanation requires my spoiling the ending for *Door to Phantomile*. If you don't mind, or have already played Klonoa in the past, then continue on!



So, it's revealed at the close of the story, after Klonoa and Huepow have gone on many adventures throughout Phantomile and even gone to the Moon Kingdom to battle Ghadius, a literal living nightmare, and his beast Nahatomb, that Klonoa's childhood friend has lied to him about practically everything. Klonoa is not from Phantomile and Huepow programmed Klonoa's memories

so that he'd accept being brought to the land of dreams from his home world, which Huepow refers to in the last scene as Klonoa's Phantomile. This makes me wonder, does Klonoa (or really any character in this series) speak the same language when he's in his home world? Or is Phantomilian another signifier of his dream travelling?



Near as I can tell, everyone in both *Door to Phantomile* and *Lunatea's Veil* speaks the same language, no matter the world Klonoa exists in. And at least as of the start of the sequel, we never see Klonoa awake in his home world. This is rather odd. While Phantomilian gives a sense of consistent world-building, in truth it's more mystifying than anything else. Does Klonoa speak the same language while he's awake? How did everyone in Huepow's Phantomile know his language? Did Klonoa acquire his language from Huepow, who posed as his childhood friend and planted fake memories? Or does Huepow and everyone else who lives in a dream world speak Klonoa's language because of dream logic?

I don't necessarily need answers to any of these questions, but I love that conlangs make one think about such questions because whether languages are verbal or non-verbal, they make us more cognizant of how we learn or acquire communicative knowledge from each other. David J. Peterson, the creator of conlangs like Dothraki and High Valyrian for *Game of Thrones*, explains in his book *The Art of Language Invention* that there are several different types of conlangs. Each of these conlangs tries to achieve different communicative goals, from creating a secret language that a small group of friends can share, to demonstrating the logic of language, to adding some depth to a fictional world.

There is a difference Peterson notes, however, between a fictional language, like Tolkien's many variants of elvish and a language like Phantomilian that's not created with as strict linguistic rules. Phantomilian is most likely what's known as an artistic language, or artlang. It resembles real language, but is

present mostly as a metaphor for something in the stories it's featured in. Some artistic languages have even been created for purely aesthetic purposes. But similar to fictional languages, artlangs are created within a specific context and are strangely closer to our languages on Earth since they contain idiosyncrasies that develop for any number of reasons throughout the history of their use.

In this way, Phantomilian is an artlang that's akin to an idioglossia since it's a language that is largely nonsense and is spoken in an interstitial manner – except in this instance the interstices are located between dream and reality. Perhaps Phantomilian also denotes the stage of development Klonoa's character is at the close of *Door to Phantomile*. After all, he's a child who, understandably, is bewildered by the fact that although he has walked and talked at his friend's side for a long time is confronted with the brutal truth that his friend was using him. Even when he's ripped unceremoniously back to his home world, he's in denial that Huepow as he knew him was a lie. In a way, Phantomilian as it's used in the game demonstrates a willful miscommunication or a breakdown of communication. Klonoa thought his friend spoke the same language as him, but as it turns out, Huepow was just using Phantomilian to motivate Klonoa to save the dream world.

Although perhaps it's more complex than that. Huepow does seem almost as distraught as Klonoa as he tries to cling to his betrayed friend's hand and cries tears of regret at losing his friend so that his world can be made anew by the rescued Lephise's song. The two did spend enough time together throughout their adventure that they've likely bonded via their experiences and how they relate those experiences to each other. Yet they did this in Phantomilian, a language that doesn't exist. Perhaps the reason this artlang, for all its silly babble, stuck with me over the years is because it perfectly reflects how ephemeral and changeable our dreams and our relationships to others can be. Or how dreams and reality are intertwined, like Huepow and Klonoa once were. 🍷





## Living the American Stream

Imagine a United States of America in which politics, yes, can be nasty at times, but more often than not politicians have an ethical core, and even the worst of them will earnestly assert things like, “Country over party.”

That America exists! It’s just in a dumb guilty pleasure TV show you can stream right now on Netflix called “Designated Survivor.”

Also: Imagine a United States of America where our leaders are not without their faults and people get hurt, but always they try their best.

Guess what? That America exists too! In fact, “people get hurt, but always they try their best” is a paraphrase from another guilty pleasure TV show you can also stream right now on Netflix called “Madam Secretary.”

I have been living in one America during the day, but at night the past several weeks, I have nestled into my comfy Dad chair in the living room and had my passport stamped for these two other Americas, where, goshdarnit, the accidental president – Kiefer Sutherland – is actually not only competent but the perfect man for the job, and the Secretary of State – Tea Leoni – is, for all the speed bumps they toss in her way for drama, basically the perfect diplomat, wife and mother. Leoni also happens to have, with exceptions that only prove the rule, the perfect husband and perfect kids, all of whom are brilliant and in no way live lives that are plausible or at all fair to compare my own life to, but of whom I’m insanely jealous and rooting like hell for.

Sutherland has massive hills to climb and often stumbles. But generally, he

succeeds in ways that are inspiring and completely at odds with the reality of a wonky former HUD secretary tasked with rebuilding the world's greatest superpower after its government is completely destroyed by a bomb detonated at the Capitol during a State of the Union address. He's an Independent who works with Republicans and Democrats to successfully find – try not to laugh – *actual solutions*.

Leoni, meanwhile, solves problems within a couple-episode arc, sometimes even more swiftly than that, and she does it by deftly pulling strings that, if this were not a TV show, could not be pulled – or at least could not be pulled simultaneously.

There are other aspects of these shows – I've alluded to family drama, which occurs in both, and spycraft, which is also a shared element. In "Designated Survivor," the star field agent, played by Maggie Q, might be the only person in the world capable of thwarting terror plots but seemingly only by risking her life again and again and again for the sake of the drama; in "Madame Secretary," the leading spy is often her husband, played by Tim Daly, who is so maddeningly ideal I would marry him myself if the option arose.

But I digress. The bottom line is both of these shows are completely at odds with what a mere 30-second Twitter scroll might tell you about our nation in this part of the 21st Century. While there are plot points in each that are as tragic or even more so than what we typically read above the fold, they rely on people – public servants, citizens, politicians, world leaders, etc. – to be ultimately decent. To hold shared values. Beliefs. Truths.

Since I started writing this, Leoni has convinced the President in *her* show to also run as an Independent. And, you know what, I'm sure he's going to win, too. Because America is beautiful – at least at night, without checking social media, as it streams on Netflix. It's almost enough to make you proud of this country again. 🇺





## End of Zelda

When, on a cold Christmas morning, we tore through the wrapping paper of one of our gifts to reveal the bronze and gold design of Nintendo's classic, *The Legend of Zelda*, it wasn't just my brother and I who were brimming over with excitement. Our dad was too. He'd dabbled with our other games, but something about this one, this big little adventure with a tiny tan guy holding a sword and an oversized shield held some greater interest for him. Maybe it was easier to lose oneself in the wild woods and forests of Hyrule than on the rigid brick lined avenues of *Super Mario Bros* or the trash and pizza filled streets of *Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles*. He'd grown up camping in upstate New York, and continued that tradition with us, driving the family to camp sites along the Catskills mountain range, setting up tents and building fires. He felt at home in these places, likely far more so than in the Bronx apartment where our family spent the rest of the year. Perhaps in Hyrule, which was apparently inspired by the local woodlands of its designer, Shigeru Miyamoto, he could grasp some of that same fantasy, that escape.

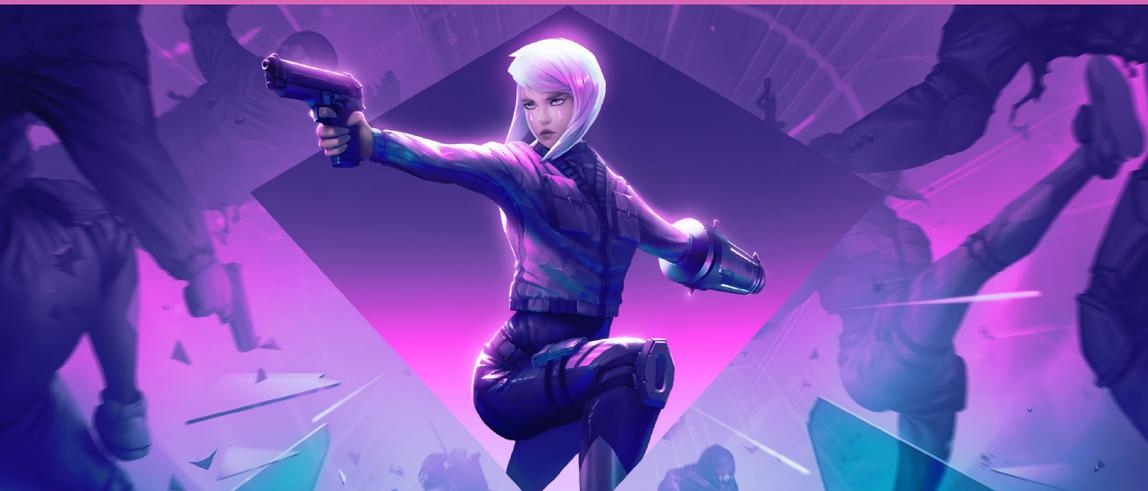
Whatever the reason behind the original hook, it was a lasting one, and his save file accumulated just as many hours of unlocked dungeons and solved puzzles on it as ours. We'd huddle together to work out the correct path for making it through the game's twisting forest maze, we'd strategize over how to stuff bombs down Dodongo's gullet, we'd gasp with shock as a stray flame or bomb might open a previously hidden path. Just as in our time spent camping together, there was joy to be found in the mutual discovery and exploration, the sense of passing down inherited knowledge, of sharing

secrets and tips and ways of doing things. How to light a fire, how to find the magical red candle, how to thread a hook through a worm, how to play the whistle to stun Digdogger, and so on. We were uncovering things together, through play, rather than the obligation which ruled so much of the rest of our lives. Elsewhere he was the workhorse, the breadwinner; elsewhere we were confined within the steep walls of school, to memorize, to socialize with classmates, to steel ourselves against homework and bullies.

At some point his save file was accidentally deleted. And like the bits in that specific chunk of memory, his presence in *Zelda*, as well as the wider world of games began to fade away. He refused to start over, and when new games and new systems arrived over the ensuing years, he abstained. We never really figured out why. Maybe it was tied to his growing detachment from other areas of our lives. The family's financial situation had become tense, he'd lost a stable job and had to start working on smaller gigs, sometimes at random hours of the day or night. Our family TV went from being a site of mutual enjoyment and playful camaraderie to a bifurcated zone: ours to enjoy during the day as long as we made scarce and left it free for him to unwind with alone at night, sat in his darkened room laughing in a sleepy stupor to shows and movies that were locked behind parental passcodes.

I never finished *Zelda*. Without the mutual pleasure and encouragement of figuring out and unlocking puzzles and secrets together it was hard to find the motivation to keep going at it alone. It had lost some of its magic, its cherished status as a site of familial play. Instead, it was reduced to a digital distraction, soon overshadowed by other, more effectively distracting ones. We were, all of us, growing older, and growing apart; inevitably leaving the adventures behind and learning how to live in the world alone. 





## The Fresh and Vertical

It is time to acknowledge to myself that my tastes are settling. There's physiological evidence that as the brain more or less finalizes development people are less open to new styles of sensory input, finding themselves drawn primarily to their favorite flavors of the past. Perhaps the memory of freshness becomes easier to bear than input that scrambles our brains, where once new experiences were more common than those immediately understood. Eventually that coin flips, and a formerly wide-open world seems threatening to what one believed concrete and understood.

Though I have tried to fight against it, the comfort of the known has become increasingly appealing. Not so much revisiting the defining albums of my youth (I claim while typing this on a plane home from seeing Nine Inch Nails with one of my oldest friends) but finding new players using mostly the same sounds that best tickled my ears, digging through sites and links to discover the kids copping from what moved previous generations. And with videogames it's a matter of recapturing the totality of what first felt like home. Side-scrollers and Akira Toriyama adjacent roleplaying games, dashing and double-jumps, first-person flow states were my wells, and I find myself still thirsty.

The last of these was primarily fulfilled by *Titanfall* and *Titanfall 2*, masterpieces appreciated by many but overshadowed in all the ways the big publishers care about. I have processed this horse to hell and back in this mag and on other sites, but between server woes and lifers with more cumulative hours invested than the earth has spent rotating, I regularly find myself investigating any videogames even lightly inspired by parkour shooting and/

or big robot points of view. Luckily this is something of an emerging subgenre that I'm only just beginning to pick through, with entries like *Devil Daggers* working at the most minimal element of run and shoot and others like *Boomerang X* embracing first-person verticality.

Lately though I've been picking through *Severed Steel*, a title still honing in on the parkour and the shooting but sidestepping long set pieces for a series of puzzle rooms and time dilation. Which is to say that you are in full titan-pilot mode maneuvering around normally at a speed just a couple notches above manageable. What helps there is a handy ability to switch into bullet-time slow motion, which costs no resources when diving or sliding, thus establishing the first rule of *Severed Steel*: always be diving. The game encourages this, necessitates it, though there are probably those for whom it's not strictly necessary. I applaud them.

You play as a young woman left for dead now clawing her way through an entire facility of guards with better weapons and shields, so I for one relish every advantage I can claw back in my favor while navigating stylistically polygonal industrial spaces, tasked with destroying certain objects or defeating all the guards, and just when you get the hang of that, you gain another tactical ability: to blow holes in most surfaces with just enough room to, yes, slide or dive through.

*Severed Steel* pulls the threads that *Titanfall* first stirred within me without settling for mere reproduction. The game acts more like a series of puzzle boxes, not unlike *Celeste* and others built with speedrunners in mind, granting you quick respawns upon death by misunderstanding or misapplication of reflexes or resources. Eventually you learn the layout of the stage and establish an optimal starting direction, and from there's a matter of managing the path to the end. And while slow, time doesn't stop; the player must still make their shots, be aware of ammo remaining lest they be required to throw their weapon to stun a guard and steal theirs, and watch ahead for the next step (hopefully not into a pit).

There's a light story so far but it knows not to overstay the welcome. I'm not trying to memorize lore, but pathways, while also micro-managing my aim sensitivity. *Severed Steel* zooms in on the heart-stopping quick-flash moments of multi-player shooters but adjust the dials on situational awareness and muscle memory, allowing me to savor the moments of alacrity or instinct well-executed. These are the elements of videogames that have always charged me, and while I hope to continue finding them in genres or titles that a personally overwhelming, it's nice when new ones feel like home. 🍷



## Another Meaning of the Words

There are some books on my shelves that aren't really meant to be read, I don't think: gallery books of special exhibits at colonial art institutions, glossy concept art from videogames with writing in languages I can't speak, the banged-up copy of *House of Leaves* my ex's sister passed on to me when I helped her move apartments two years ago. There are other reasons we go to the medium, of course – reference, representation, record – and then there are the books, or games, or sculptures that don't have an intended function as much as a conceit. A subversive design that says something more than its medium often makes apparent, a disruption of purpose that literally crosses form. This transformation happens in the De Stijl furniture of designer Gerrit Rietveld that I wouldn't want to sit on, in the heightened violences of 5RS's *Don't Shoot the Puppy* that wouldn't be “fun” to play, and in Ryland C. Quickbear-Stalder's *Alaska for Looking*.

*Alaska for Looking* is a self-described “alphabetical retelling” of the 2005 novel *Looking for Alaska* by John Green (or Green John, as it may be), and I guess this preamble is to say I can't really make a critical read of the book because, well, I haven't read it. Not in its entirety. It opens: “0 0 00 00 00 00 00 00 02 03 111111.” It continues: eight 2s, ten 3s, and twelve 4s. Eventually letters do appear, “a a a a a a a a a a...” for half a page. “A'ight” is the first proper word. Compelling, I know.

The alphabetical arrangement of *Alaska for Looking* brings attention to the nonmaterial components of text as a mode, and to the construction of the novel

as a form rather than material object. Like monkey's writing Shakespeare or a Babelian library, some organization of these words that could be described as "ultimately arbitrary" is the novel that I *have* read, that launched this *other* author's career, and whose inclusion in an 11th grade English curriculum was **challenged** by residents of Depew, New York, in 2008 for its "pornographic" content.

*Looking for Alaska*, the YA novel about a teenage boy obsessed with famous last words and the titular deuterogamist he falls for, sits in that moment we learn that others are truly *other*, that their lives don't revolve around ours, and that they're not something with any sort of rational logic to divine, or "read." There's a great irony here in the many levels of conflicting interpretation throughout the novel's life. At the level of text, it's that Alaska is the quintessential manic pixie dream girl, and in some interpretations, *Looking for Alaska* is nothing more than the epitome of everything Olivia Gatwood indicts in her poem on the subject. But the book is also a great subversion of the trope. Miles, who thinks himself more precocious than he really is, always thinks he knows Alaska even as he's constantly proven wrong. The story is about her being less mysterious, but more unknowable than he assumes. Human with all the contradictions.

Take Alaska's last words. The novel is divided nearly in half by a fateful day, and each chapter is counting some days before or after the night she dies. Even in death Miles sees her as an ideal, remembering her last words: "This is so fun, but I'm so sleepy. To be continued?" But of course, those weren't really her last words. The novel itself makes this clear. We can check a few pages back and see that Alaska's last words were a frightening and confusing "God oh god, I'm so sorry" said between sobs like "childlike half screams." Driving the point home, we learn in the book's conclusion that those weren't even truly Alaska's last words. She talked to someone else, not Miles, on her way to her car the night she crashed. After all, love, last words and death are all less poetic than we imagine as children.

Miles' learning to see Alaska as a whole person helps him confront the central question of the book, also posed by the deceased girl. And like all proud high school introspections, it is a matter of homework. An essay prompt: "How will we escape this labyrinth of suffering?" These are kids (this is a YA book, remember), who are for the first time, facing an existential question. Having first confronted their fragile mortality, the real thing that the question – or attempting to answer it – gets at is where each character finds meaning, purpose, in the refigured Sisyphean struggle of living through meaningless, meandering loss.

Another conflicting interpretation. There are 17 instances of “sex” some 60 pages into *Alaska for Looking*, but *Alaska for Looking* won’t ever appear in the American Library Association’s [lists](#) of the most challenged books in schools and libraries across the U.S. The then-novelty of the accusations of “pornographic” content and immorality leveled against *Looking for Alaska* in Depew in 2008 prompted an [exegesis](#) by the author, which formed as a statement of intent. There was no disagreement about the literal events in Green’s chronological arrangement of the words, but, as the author framed the controversy, a weak misinterpretation done in bad faith from a patronizing worldview. Still, the next decade of the book’s publication illustrates that intention can and often is rejected. *Looking for Alaska* has been repeatedly challenged to this day, and the author has responded [again](#) and [again](#).

And none of that – Miles’ existential confrontation with the Other, the humanization of the manic pixie dream girl, or the controversial characterization of its protagonists as sexual beings – is in *Alaska for Looking*. In Green’s [own words](#), *Alaska for Looking* is “a novel that I knew turned into a strange uncanny version of itself.” There is a suggestion there that it is the same novel, another meaning of the words. There are no theses to be found in its 90 pages – three of which are a block of consecutive “and” – and there is not much in the way of story for me to share. But though *Alaska for Looking* is not about chronology, it is also not just about alphabetization. These words can, in collaboration, form such beautiful poetics as “hygienic hyperventilating hypothetical hysteria i i i . . .” The phrase made all the more compelling by the nature of which it arose, a decades long collaboration between two authors not in correspondence with one another. Thus, the obfuscation of meaning-making becomes a central theme of *Alaska for Looking*: meaning imbued by a creator, meaning conjured by a reader, meaning found in the arrangement of all the parts just so. 🍷



## How to Build a Racetrack

I happen to be a pilot, so it should come as little surprise to learn that I've always been interested in aerodynamics. I mean, I'm not an engineer, but I've developed an understanding of the field through various forms of study. I've taken a few courses over the years. The upshot is that I've been following Formula 1 for quite a while now.

You might be wondering what the connection between aerodynamics and Formula 1 could be. We're talking about the difference between airplanes and racecars after all. The former takes off and the latter stays on the ground. The answer is that engineers in Formula 1 have been carefully considering aerodynamics ever since the introduction of the ground effect car back in the 1980s. You see, part of what creates lift is the pressure differential between the top and bottom of a wing. When it comes to airplanes, the high pressure below pushes upwards against the low pressure above, creating lift. The same principle is at play in racecars except in reverse. The low pressure is below and the high pressure is above, so the vehicle gets pulled towards the ground, something known as downforce. This greatly increases traction, allowing a vehicle to reach incredible speed without flying off the track. The downforce produced is so powerful that racecars can drive on the top side of a tunnel, at least in theory. I doubt that anyone really wants to prove the hypothesis, but the math definitely speaks for itself.

I pick up the latest Formula 1 game just about every year. I was particularly interested this time around because there have been substantial changes to the regulations in Formula 1, mostly regarding the aerodynamics. The outcome

has been a phenomenon called porpoising which occurs when the airflow underneath a car stalls, causing the vehicle to bounce up and down. I was rather disappointed to find out that almost none of this was actually reflected in the game, but the cars at least look and sound wonderful. The regulatory changes resulted in some truly stunning designs.

When I started playing the game, I first paid close attention to the cars, but after a while, I found myself interested in the racetracks. You've got all the classics like Silverstone and Monza, but also a new circuit, Miami. The city has often been visited by Formula 1, but following a litany of complaints by local residents, Miami was effectively off limits for a while. The track is a completely new creation that got me wondering what qualities make for a perfect circuit. The answer that I came up with is that everything depends on your perspective. You'd have a completely different approach to the problem if you were a contractor, mechanic, driver or spectator. This could be a lot more nuanced, but these four categories cover just about every angle, so I'm going to keep it simple.



Supposing that you were a contractor, I imagine that your primary concern would be construction. When it comes to making racetracks, there are basically three phases of construction consisting of setting out, earthworks and paving. You start by setting up a series of markers which indicate a given elevation above the building level before using a profile board with a fixed height called a traveler to control the excavated levels. When you place the traveler in between markers, you can see whether or not the excavation has reached the proper level. Formula 1 has been experimenting with canted racetracks these days, but that's another story.

The next phase of construction, earthworks, involves removing topsoil and vegetation before grading down to what's called the formation level by

means of a backhoe or bulldozer. The subgrade below the formation level has to be strong enough to support the load, so the subsoil often has to be removed and replaced with a compacted filler material known as a subbase, with consideration also being given to water drainage. The required thickness of the pavement is determined by the subgrade strength, meaning that you really need to pay attention to the subbase, regardless of whether you're planning on using the rigid or flexible technique. While the latter has you applying layers of asphalt directly over the subgrade, the former is basically the same as the rigid technique except that you first lay down a concrete slab, something which enables a better distribution of weight. The wearing course on top is generally made from a slightly different material, making the surface of the pavement a little bit stronger than its base. Well, there you have it. The perfect racetrack. That is if you're a contractor.



I'm going to guess that if you're a mechanic, your primary preoccupation would be the paddock and pit lane. These can be efficiently designed and spacious, but they can also be narrow and cramped. I'm sure that you already know a thing or two about pit lanes, but these are basically for servicing and repairing the racecars. The problem is that you can have really cramped pit lanes where mechanics bump into each other all the time, sometimes even damaging car parts. Monaco provides a pretty good example of this. The facilities have been improved over the years, but mechanics used to consistently complain about congestion. The pit stops present an even bigger problem from this perspective. Since you can save a place in the driver standings by keeping as many people behind you as possible, the pressure to pull out ahead of an approaching vehicle is pretty intense, making collisions in the pit lane a fairly common occurrence. When the pit lane is narrow, there's nowhere to swerve, so you get the occasional fender bender.

As for the paddock, this part of the racetrack is basically the space behind the pit lane where all of the garages and motorhomes owned by the various teams are found. This would be where just about everything happens when the cars aren't actually on track. The mechanics need to have enough space to assemble the cars inside their garages in addition to various other tasks. The teams in Formula 1 can be quite large, so I imagine that having plenty of space for stuff like hospitality would be nice. We all have to eat.

The racecars can't even get started without a mechanic, but the key players in Formula 1 are definitely the drivers. These are the real performers. There's a lot of personal preference involved when it comes to hills and corners, but a couple of things are of common concern. I can't for example think of too many drivers who enjoy competing on rough tracks. These can become bumpy for several different reasons, most commonly settling of the subgrade or progressive erosion of the wearing course. You tend to see this at older and more frequently used racetracks like Silverstone, a circuit which opened way back in 1947. The subgrade has probably shifted a little bit since the 1940s, but given how many vehicles have sped around Silverstone over the years, the wearing course has definitely seen better days, especially in the braking zones. The result is a bunch of rough patches.



When you reach speeds of more than 200 miles per hour, something else you don't want is bad runoff. The paved parts of a racetrack normally extend well beyond the painted lines, particularly at corners. When they approach a turn, racecars have to slow down because they've built up so much energy in the straight. Supposing that a vehicle has too much energy, the turning radius will increase, causing the car to make a wide turn, sometimes into the runoff. This of course allows for a certain margin of error. While newer tracks like Montreal have paved runoff, older circuits like Imola have grass or

gravel, making them more punishing for drivers. Monaco by contrast features nothing but metal barriers.

As a spectator, you really want a good show, meaning that you're looking for overtakes. These mostly take place in the straights, but everybody likes variety, so you also need some corners in there. I can't think of too many racetracks that don't have a couple of the sharp curves called chicanes and at least one hairpin. While there can be great passing in the corners, the straights are still where the most of the overtakes happen, though. You see, there's a rule in Formula 1 which basically bans moving parts affecting the aerodynamics. The only exception is a feature known as the drag reduction system. This involves adjusting part of the rear wing on command as a means of increasing top speed by cutting down drag, something which of course makes overtaking much easier. The use of this feature is naturally restricted, meaning that drivers can only deploy the device when they're within one second of the vehicle being overtaken. They also have to be on a specifically designated part of the racetrack, almost always a straight. The result is what looks like a sudden burst of speed allowing the overtaking vehicle to pull ahead. You often see defensive driving aimed at fending off this attack, but the possibility of a crash makes maintaining their position a real risk, so drivers mostly play it safe. There nonetheless have been some prodigious pileups providing plenty of excitement for spectators.

Since I normally write about architecture, what's the deal with all of this talk about racetracks? I feel as though adopting a broader view as to what constitutes architecture can be a worthwhile endeavor. While racetracks aren't exactly buildings, they're definitely designed by someone, making them a type of architecture, at least in a certain respect. The same can in fact be said for a lot of things. Planes. Boats. Cars. They might not call themselves architects, but all of these and many more have an element of design to them. Similar to structures, they also have to be made by someone. The process tends to be called manufacturing instead of construction, but when you really stop to think about it, the distinction is rather meaningless. The world is filled with all sorts of architecture. U





## I've Been Staring At This For Two Days

I love writing for Unwinnable. Love it. I basically have carte blanche to write about anything I want – from videogames to toys to kaiju movies to how much I love my cats, and just about any combination of those (and other) elements you can think of. It can't be overstated how much I both enjoy and appreciate the level of freedom I have with this gig. But here's the thing: I've been staring at the template for this article for two days now and I still have no fucking clue what to write about.

And that's the rub when it comes to writing. Sometimes actually getting started can be the biggest challenge of all. There's no way I'd presume I speak for everyone who writes, but I'm fairly sure I'm not the only one who has this problem. There are days where the work practically bursts out of me. At times I have to make myself stop writing because it's been several hours and I haven't eaten anything, let alone moved something other than my hands. On occasion I end up tripping over myself because I'm so excited to write about the next thing it's making it tough for me to focus on the current thing.

But then there are the other days. I've been having a lot of those lately. The days where I want to write – I *need* to write – but simply working up the enthusiasm to see what I might be able to write about is a challenge. Sometimes once I get going, I'm able to bang out an article at a fairly respectable pace. Sometimes that kickstarts my brain and I'm able to slowly ramp up my enthusiasm and keep things going until I've hit my limit. Other times I have

to take little mini breaks after every paragraph – every sentence – just to get through it.

Other-other times I *want* to do this thing I've chosen as a career path for myself, and actually do enjoy despite how it may sound going by what you've read here, but things just fall flat. I can't focus; I struggle for every word; I start to get back on track but now it's time to toss treats to our cats and now I can't remember where I was is this turning out okay it's a complete train wreck but I have to get it done oh god it's already been 45 minutes how much longer until someone asks me where the story is I haven't been hitting the same numbers that I was when I first started this job sooner or later they'll catch on and fire me I can't afford to lose this job I can't go back to [insert former job I hated or that literally would've killed me here] why am I even doing this I'm terrible at writing and even worse at doing it reliably how much longer am I going to have to wait for the other shoe to drop or some other overused phrase?

Point is, I have no idea what my point is. I legitimately had no idea what I was going to write about when I sat down and forced myself to stare at this template until something – anything – popped into my head. Then I thought “Well I guess I could write about how much trouble I'm having with writing this,” and now here we all are. I suppose I can always hope that somebody reading this can relate, and that maybe knowing they aren't the only ones who sometimes go through this will help them to feel a little bit better? Did writing all of this out make me feel better? I have no idea. I wish I did. 🙄

*Features*



# SHARK PARTY



By Michael Lee



If Plato's stories are to be believed, Atlantis was once a rich and powerful island nation that was swallowed up by the sea and lost to time. The myth of the forgotten city has fueled the dreams and ambitions of countless authors, explorers and archaeologists, all spurred on by romantic visions of a lost city hiding somewhere underwater. It turns out, an Atlantean has survived all this time. A lonely little shark girl named Gawr Gura, who recently left the sunken city in search of human contact, has surfaced and taken up residence on YouTube. And I was at her birthday party. It's a long story.

As our social lives migrate from the analog face-to-face to an immediate, everywhere all at once digital existence, new modes of sociality begin to take hold that shape relationships in ways not possible in the pre-internet age. The kinds of relationships people form in online spaces can be as meaningful and socially rewarding as physical encounters with

human bodies. Nowhere else does the digital agora fulfill that sense of communal belonging better than the world of live streaming. Platforms like Twitch and YouTube invite viewers to become active citizens in communities formed around a streamer broadcasting anything from cooking and crafting to music making and videogaming.

Where once parasocial relationships were a wholly one-sided affair between the viewer or fan and their chosen celebrity figure, with the immediacy and interactivity of live streaming, now the viewer feels as if they are a part of something real. But what happens when the person doing the live streaming... might not be a person at all?

The endless horizon where the ocean meets the sky obscures the divide between the two. With [anime-styled YouTubers like Gawr Gura](#) connecting with viewers in a way that creates real emotional resonance, we have now reached

that same horizon between the real and the virtual. Viewers ply this online ocean in search of a connection to something tangible, and catching sight of a Vtuber on that horizon, wonder if they might find their own digital Atlantis. Could they have actually found what they were looking for in their interactions with an anime shark girl?

Gawr Gura is one of hundreds, if not thousands, of Vtubers – Virtual YouTubers – appearing on streaming platforms across the internet. For her birthday, she hosted a virtual concert featuring her friends in the [Hololive VTuber stable](#), one of the major corporate players in the VTuber world. Gura performed on a 3D stage with an aquatic theme, singing anime theme songs and cozy [City Pop jams](#) – breezy Japanese pop songs from the 1980s that have seen a [resurgence in popularity](#), particularly in online communities. Fans cheered, showered Gura and her friends with heart emojis, some

claimed to be crying. Gura's party was a huge success, viewed by over a million people.

The surge of interest in watching a fictional, two-dimensional character play videogames or sing and dance on a live stream might seem like an exercise in social and emotional futility, the final death throes of a society that has completely lost touch with reality. But imbuing a character with life in such a way that we believe it to be real has long been a goal of performers looking to engage, and of audiences wanting to connect.

Back in Edo Period Japan, theater performers in major cities like Tokyo and Osaka would use puppets to tell stories, as part of an artform known as *Ningyo Joruri*, or doll narratives. Unlike Kabuki (that was just finding its footing at the same time) where human actors perform the story, *Ningyo Joruri* focuses on an expertly crafted doll filling the role of the actor. The play is narrated by a person





who remains off the main stage, while the audience watches as the large – sometimes upwards of four feet – doll acts before them. The doll’s well-constructed face is capable of changing expressions and their body capable of approximating human motion with the help of three puppeteers manipulating various parts of the doll.

This kind of performance attempts to blur the lines of reality, asking audiences to believe that the doll is in fact a living being, acting for your entertainment. Not unlike the ask made of viewers watching Gawr Gura as she plays through the latest game while chatting away with her fans, who are known as “Chumbuds.”

Gura’s anime avatar – which utilizes the visual language of anime and manga in order to maximize her charm – occupies the bottom corner of her stream, her head bobbing and her face reacting to whatever is happening. She is stuck in the screen, without the possibility of ever escaping it and entering into our world, yet fans tell her they love her, share personal problems with her, and ask her questions so they can know her better. If Gura says she’s tired, fans tell her to get a good night’s sleep. If she says

her tummy hurts, fans will suggest a type of medicine she should take to cure it. To them, she is as real as any human streamer on Twitch or YouTube. A great deal of that sense of realism comes from the character work done by the voice actor performing as Gawr Gura, and in considering the work done by voice actors, we begin to see how their work serves to bridge that gap between the fictional and the real.

In Japan’s voice actor community, there is a saying that the voice actor is the *naka no hito* (person inside) of a character. The image we see in anime, or that of a VTuber, is nothing more than a hollow shell, given life by the voice actor. It thus creates, as media scholar Thomas Lamarre would say in *The Anime Machine: A Media Theory of Animation*, a “soulful body.” Lamarre describes characters that are inhabited in this way—by their voice actor’s performance – as “characters imbued with a sense of life and internal consistency.” Gawr Gura is given this sense of life by her voice actor, who as of now remains unidentified, with in-jokes, personality quirks, as well as wants and desires, that give her an anima that viewers pick up on.

Anthropologist Shunsuke Nozawa (“En-soulment and Effacement in Japanese Voice Acting”) says that the voice actor is “an enchanter” who “relays characters’ voices to fans and animates characters’ bodies in narratives and events” acting as an “interface between fans and characters.” The voice actor does this while being effaced by the character, slipping into anonymity behind the mask of the character they are voicing. This tracks for Gawr Gura, as no one knows who her *naka no hito* even is, the effacement is so effective that we only see Gura speaking to us, there is no person behind the curtain, there is only an anime shark girl.

In order to keep up this fantastical illusion, the effacement extends out to public appearances when voice actors are doing promotional work for an anime. Concealing their face with an image of the character, or a script if they are performing a live read of an anime episode, voice actors go to great lengths to preserve the character’s soulful body.

At the recent Anime Expo held in Los Angeles, [VTuber Ironmouse](#) participated

in a panel with fellow online personality (and human) Connor Colquhoun, also known as CDawgVA. In order to maintain the consistency of Ironmouse’s image, the panel featured Colquhoun seated at a table next to a video screen where Ironmouse could comfortably float in virtual space. Her voice actor remained hidden (or perhaps was working remotely) in order to keep the conversation flowing as naturally as possible. If it had been Colquhoun and Ironmouse’s voice actor, the illusion that Ironmouse is a real, soulful body would have been shattered. Despite the screen acting as a physical barrier between fiction and reality, no one in the crowd seemed to think that Ironmouse was not real. She was there, answering their questions in person... or as in person as she could possibly be. The event was even marketed as “[CDawgVA and Ironmouse in the Flesh!](#)” playing into the blurring of the real and the virtual that Ironmouse’s image creates.

All of this work on the content creation side would be for naught if no one was watching, but people are tuning in. Some





kind of need is being fulfilled for VTuber viewers. Online spaces are beginning to shape what normative social interaction looks like, and for many, it means an entirely different, though just as rewarding, sociality.

When our worth as humans is determined by capitalist measures – [how productive are we?](#) What do we “contribute” to society? Are we living our “best” lives? – the result is often that we’re lacking something, and [technology is to blame](#). We’re told that we must be doing something wrong if we feel lonely. The suggestions to correct this feeling of lack almost always involve analog sociality. Get outside and meet someone. Join a club. Make plans with an old friend. Go for a jog. Then we’ll feel better. It couldn’t possibly be the crushing weight of a pandemic, or the grinding gears of late capitalism, or in the United States, more than [100 million Americans saddled by medical debt](#), no, it’s gotta be the iPad that’s making us “sadge.”

While it can be argued that our analog selves might not be connecting with as many people face-to-face as previous generations, and we might be lonelier now, what is overwhelmingly clear in Gawr Gura’s stream is that this weird digital space is a place for people to belong. A place where the feeling of community and socialization is palpable. While the real world is becoming increasingly more hostile and [uninhabitable](#), virtual worlds are becoming more inviting, more inclusive. And the retreat into virtual worlds shouldn’t be seen as wasted energy, for many, it is the exact opposite. The Chumbuds are a giant family brought together by their shared love of a 9,000-year-old shark girl from Atlantis. They share tweets of Gura fan art, they hang out in Gura’s Discord, they write their own lore for Gura in the form of fanfiction. How can this not be a good thing?

Live streaming has opened up a new kind of sociality that brings a content



creator directly into our world, creating high emotional engagement by combining the somewhat voyeuristic intimacy of watching someone's every on-camera movement, coupled with the ever-present possibility that your comment in the chat might elicit a response from the streamer themselves. It's a restructuring of the traditional one-sided nature of parasocial relationships into what academics Rachel Kowert & Emory Daniel Jr. refer to as "[one-and-a-half sided parasocial relationships](#)." The accessibility to the streamer, and the possibility of interaction with them, gives the viewer a greater emotional investment in the parasocial relationship forming.

A glance at Gawr Gura's chat reveals just how invested her followers are. Responses, reactions and emotes indicate varying levels of affection towards Gura, thanking her for being in viewers' lives. One viewer donated \$50 to have their message highlighted as a Super Chat during Gura's birthday stream saying "You bring so much happiness to people everywhere . . . you are such a special and

unique person. I will always love you." This comment gets at everything that makes VTubers such a potent force for a unique kind of online sociality, and reveals how much of a social and emotional support VTubers can be to their audience.

A study by Professor Jan de Wit from [Tilburg University](#) found that "watching Twitch helped viewers cope with difficult periods in their life and that it became a larger part of their lives during the difficult period compared to regular viewing." Unlike more traditionally passive media, such as television, where the viewer can only engage by viewing, Twitch's interactive element – communicating directly with the streamer and other viewers through text chat– helps to foster "the sense of social connection and community" between viewers watching a live stream.

There is a feeling of trust present in the online space of a live stream. Not only trust in the streamer, but trust in the community to support one another and share in their passion for the streamer. Viewers feel safe sharing personal details about their lives, or troubles they might be having, looking for support from the streamer or others in the chat.

With a virtual YouTuber this dynamic is even more apparent, as the dance along the borderline between reality and fiction emboldens viewers to profess strong feelings towards their favorite anime avatar. With a human streamer, societal norms from the analog age still linger, and might prevent someone from openly declaring that they are in love

with the streamer they are watching, but Gawr Gura hears it constantly from her fans. She leverages her fictitious existence just enough to elicit more uninhibited responses. This helps people get stuff off their chest, or lets them express themselves with strong emotions that in other contexts might be a little much. If people want to love an anime shark girl, let them!

That we've reached a point where expressing love for an anime shark isn't the weirdest thing going on online speaks to the high level of presence that VTubers command, their "soulful body" on display for all to see. Presence, in this context, is a state where the line between "real" and "virtual" becomes blurred. The online space Gura occupies along with the chat window that viewers occupy, heighten presence. Physical presence, where individuals perceive virtual objects as real, social presence, where virtual beings are seen as actual social peo-

ple, and self-presence, a reality where individuals perceive their virtual selves as actual self. The parasocial connection viewers establish with Gawr Gura creates a state where they come to see her as a real person, and more than that, they themselves come to identify as a virtual person in Gura's world, sitting there in the chat window next to her, talking to her and to all the other Chumbuds.

While [virtual idol Hatsune Miku](#) pioneered the "anime girl in the real world" vibe 15 years ago, and play between fiction and reality goes back at least as far as puppets in Edo Japan, VTubers represent a major shift in our social and emotional relationships to virtual creations. Through the voice work performed by the effaced *naka no hito* and the one-and-a-half sided relationship of the live streamer, a virtual girl now has a soulful body that feels closer to being real than ever before. 🐡



# TO BE A BIRD ON AN ISLAND

By Taylor Hidalgo





A room can be a very quiet, solitary space.

Sometimes that can be a solace, giving one a bit of insulation from too much stimulus and not enough space. Other times, it's far too much quiet, dragging the hours beyond their usual length and giving the emptiness a sense of gravity it would otherwise lack. A deafening sort of silence.

Over the past few years of one global pandemic, and a second one growing at the same time, it can be difficult not to feel the weight of the distance as a kind of broken coping mechanism. To see other people as a potential hazard – the very air around them potentially suspect, the touch of their skin carrying a risk. Over time, many have become more indifferent to the spread of the disease, the hard edges of security practices and isolation have eroded, but the risk hasn't really gone away.

Which isn't to imply that everyone is a walking biohazard, exactly, but that it's become impossible not to be at least pass-

ingly aware of the potential dangers. Constantly feeling the sense of low volume unease. At least, that's how it's felt to me.

Living under an eternal haze of anxiety, too aware of the background radiation, has made the past few years very difficult for me. Seeing risks everywhere one chooses to look isn't something the mind is equipped to handle, much less endure for several years. I've found it hard not to start feeling myself close off, to chase the emptiness and isolation of a single room, divorced from most contact and far removed from feeling crowded in a mostly empty store.

Sadly, I know it's gotten to me. That people have started to be characterized first by their habits and risks, and then by who they are and what they do. That spending so much time in my own space has eaten away at thoughtless kindnesses and human interest that used to be so reflexive. It's neither their fault nor mine, humans need to practice things in order

to keep them present and sharp, but I still know that some of the things I used to be have been taken away by the looming specter of a world that made its very air dangerous with almost no warning.

Like many, I turned to videogames to help me find some echoes of human connection that the long distances and disquieting risks have taken away. Grand adventures on horseback through fantasy landscapes and universe-sprawling sci-fi are excellent distractions, but one of the games that has resonated with me the most in these times has been *Animal Crossing New Horizon*.

Part of it has undoubtedly been the comfort of a warm, charming island full of bright colors and low-stakes conflicts. In a world where everything feels like it has a risk, going to a space almost entirely devoid of conflict or concern is such a breath of fresh air. A space where the highest stakes one faces is where to put furniture. It's hard to find anything much

more comfortable than traveling around the island, talking to the residents, getting errands done at a leisurely pace and having more than enough time to settle down on the beach to watch the waves for a few uninterrupted minutes.

The villagers make for a similarly cheery space. Almost without exception, they're very happy to see you. They perk up when they notice you wandering by, and sometimes stop what they're doing to canter over and share some little piece of good news, or ask your opinion on their outfit, or give you an old carpet they found while cleaning out their attic. It doesn't really matter what it is, they're just happy to see you, and not at all shy about communicating their happiness.

There are always more errands you can run, shops you can visit, fish you can catch or fruit you can pick. There's never a lack of things to do, given sufficient motivation to find them, so the island has plenty of reasons to stick around. So





you can bid your animal residents a brief goodbye if you have other tasks on your plate, and they're more than happy to wave goodbye and get to their own business, whatever it happens to be.

But it doesn't matter how busy you are, or how little time you have for them, they'll always be happily waiting for the next opportunity to wave at you from across the way, take a break from their group exercise class, or pause their mid-afternoon song to greet you, answer a question about a lost notebook and share some passing words about their day.

Even when the mayor they're greeting has been virtually absent for the better part of a year, they hold back any desire to argue or press the issue. They'll comment that it's been a while, but that's as far as the topic goes. Whether or not they'd seen their mayor the day before or not since the previous year, they let it be water under the bridge, and they share what they'd been up to that day with ex-

actly the same exuberance and energy. Long overdue or just a few minutes prior, the villagers embrace the joy of the human experience, at least as much as an anthropomorphic penguin could.

It is charming, and in the depths of the much lonelier world, almost overwhelmingly so.

I had forgotten what it was like to drink so deeply from the well of simple kindnesses. It's such a little thing, to suddenly be met with an old nickname that had been long forgotten, to return in that moment alongside a brief story about a bug that flew away while trying to capture it under a jar. Yet here it is, present in the form of extremely friendly, chubby little animals sauntering their way across a tropical island, on their way to sit at an outdoor patio table and eat an orange they picked on the road. Uncritically, and almost unconditionally, kind.

Without meaning to, Nintendo has made something of perfect rubric for a

mid-pandemic role model. That despite slogging through tired and defensive times, there's an easy example for how to rediscover some of the simple pleasures that I've lost practice with. How to let go of some of the weight of expectation, and engage with warm thoughts and shared experiences not just uncritically, but jubilantly! A reminder of how to embrace the day, even if that day happens to be rainy. Or full of bugs. Or more crowded than you expected.

For the villagers, even when conditions aren't the best, or they've been left on their own for a length of time, they're never far from a little slice of happiness. No matter how little a slice it is, they're also always happy to share.

I don't live in the same world I used to. My mind has changed, even if the landscape mostly hasn't. There are no answers I can personally find or manufacture when I live in a world this complex, this complicated, this potentially dangerous. With that perspective, it's no surprise that I've found so many difficulties being the same person I used to be. It's

not my fault the world has changed, nor is it in my control to change it back. For better or worse, this is my reality now.

But a bunch of brightly colored animals on a tropical island have a point, I don't have to go through it with a set jaw. I don't need to elbow my way past the hardships. I can, just as easily, offer the world a slice of kindness as I go. We are, after all, experiencing the same challenges. There is still room for gentleness, for finding joy where pockets of it can be found, and for bringing some joy along with you when you strike out into the unknown.

I may not be a snappily dressed anthropomorphic eagle on a tropical island, devoid of major problems and rich in tropical fruit, but I am capable of the same kind of joy, the same kind of courtesy, and the same ability to make more of a day than its least pleasing components.

So, for now, I think it's a good time to leave my quiet, solitary room. Maybe see if I have any tropical fruit-flavored pop-sicles. 🍷





# 2020s TECH 1980s SPIRIT

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.

1980s pop culture responded to economic and socio-political tension with a mix of escapism and excess. The decade's tendency toward over-the-top bombast extended from the mainstream down to the underground, where hardcore punk and hip-hop gave voice to the disenfranchised, comics like *Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles* and *Watchmen* showed the medium could be edgy and successful and action films like *Terminator* and *Mad Max* envisioned bleak futures. It was also a time when geek culture crossed over and broke through to the masses, led in part by a nascent videogame industry.

For Dykom Software founder and developer Mike Garn, the 1980s have long been a source for inspiration. When you look at the Steam page for his forthcoming title *Arksync*, an innovative side-scrolling twin-stick shooter starring an animatronic teddy bear and his war robot friend, it's at once clear which eras of pop culture have influenced his work. The game's bold block font logo, RoboCop-esque protagonist, and pixel art aesthetic sit at the intersection of '80s arcade action and 16-bit era platforming.

Cynics may say '80s nostalgia has grown stale. Between the diminishing returns that come with each new season of *Stranger Things* and the wealth of indie shooters that have flooded the market, some potential players might dismiss *Arksync* as another retro reread. That would be a mistake. Not only does the game put several interesting twists on time-tested tropes and mechanics, but it also promises to be the beginning of something much bigger, and it's only going to get weirder from here.

"I'm building a connected universe of games and stories, and early on I had to ask myself what could I work on for the rest of my life. I found the answer in things that have always inspired me and always will: the '80s and dark science fiction, with a little bit of goofiness."

Garn started drawing his own game design documents when he was a kid in the early 1990s, taking inspiration from the previous decade's

geekdom. Later in his teen years, he set aside game design to play in garage bands and pursue the rock and roll lifestyle.

Garn couldn't stay away from his original dream of making games though, and in 2012, he started working in the videogame industry as a concept artist. He's worked on some of the biggest franchises in the business since then, with a portfolio that includes megahits like *Call of Duty*, *Apex Legends* and *Prodeus*. That kind of resume is nothing to scoff at, but while he valued his time working with major studios, he wanted more creative control. So, he took the leap into the world of indie game dev and hasn't looked back.



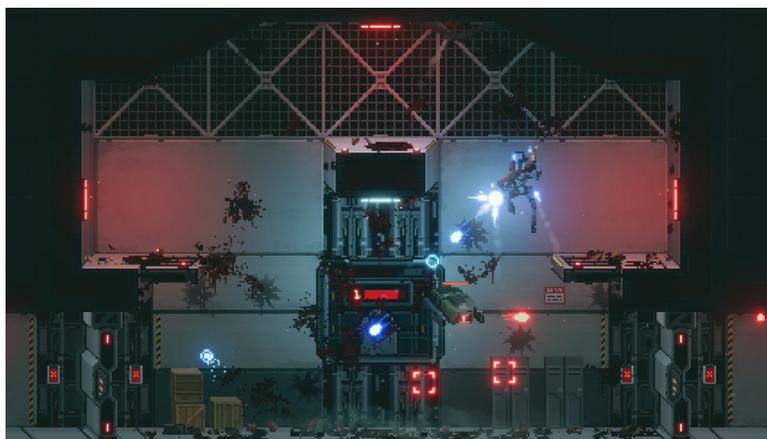
“I love working on these big AAA games, and I'm really grateful for that experience, but it lacks the creative control I'm interested in,” Garn says. “I'm motivated because I have a lot I want to say through videogames, things I wish would have been a part of my life sooner, but at a company I don't own I'll never get to say any of it.”

Given a basic understanding of *Arksync's* core premise, it would seem fair to question how much depth there could be behind the game's message. The game tells the story of a robotic kid's toy named Robby the Bear, who gets lost in a dystopian mechanical hellscape. Determined to be reunited with his owner, he reprograms a war robot to help him fight hostile enemies and find his way home through the post-apocalyptic wasteland. It's a classic tale of a robot befriending an, erm, more murderous robot.

On the surface, this plotline might sound like a paper-thin excuse to blow stuff up. But when Garn says there are things he wants to say

through the game, he's being sincere. Underneath the comic book-inspired ridiculousness of it all, there's a genuine desire to connect with players on an emotional level here; if you can relate to feeling out of place in your surroundings while facing challenges with impossible odds, this story is for you.

"Robby the Bear is a small robot children's toy, and he survives in a world where what he's designed to be seems impossible to be," Garn says. "When the world changed around him it didn't leave a place for robots like him. Yet he's resilient about being what he was designed to be. I think on some level a lot of people can relate to that, not just me, and that inspired his character."



Garn doesn't want to be too prescriptive about what players should take away from their experience with *Arksync* though. Instead, he prefers to leave room for interpretation.

"I consider the player within and outside the game a lot," Garn says. "I have specific hopes, but I think saying it out loud might add an exception or interfere with any unique insights someone needs. I hope players find their own meanings within the game, something real. Making someone's life even a little better, even for a moment, or giving them something to think about, that's what I want."

The balance between absurdist humor and emotional resonance is exactly the type of thing that Garn is drawn toward. However, it's also the type of game that a large studio might be hesitant to greenlight (which is why Garn took the independent route). However, for someone switching to a solo operation after working with triple-A

budgets and tools, lack of access to resources and software could be creatively constraining.

Fortunately, Epic Games stepped in with support on both fronts. They saw enough potential in Garn's vision to name him an Epic MegaGrant recipient for *Arksync*, providing much-needed financial support to complete development on the game. Unreal Engine's accessible UI also helped ease the transition, with its visual interface proving particularly helpful.

"I've never felt a reason to get diagnosed but I'm pretty sure I have a mild form of dyslexia," Garn says. "Unreal's Blueprint scripting language is all visual based, nodes you connect together, and has made it so I can code without the frustration of missing or adding stuff with traditional code . . . Unreal Engine and the team at Epic Games are incredible and have made *Arksync* possible."



While *Arksync* isn't the first twin-stick shooter to adopt a side-scrolling perspective, it doesn't have many close peers, as the genre has historically used overhead camera angles that allow easy multi-directional movement across a horizontal plane. For players that associate twin-stick controls with classics like *Robotron 2084* or the more recent *Enter the Gungeon*, it may be difficult to envision how such a control scheme would translate to a side-scrolling shooter.

How exactly does *Arksync* make it work, then? The answer is a combination of unique physics and movement options. This is where the game promises to deliver its most innovative twists on time-

tested design concepts, and the way Garn explains it, the game almost sounds like it could create its own subgenre.

“I almost see *Arksync* as 1.5D movement because the gravity creates movement limitations in the vertical axis,” Garn says. “You can’t just run up or down, only jump or fall. That changes everything, and in response I’ve added a generous jump, double jump, dodge, and ledge clambering. That upgraded movement makes up for that limited vertical axis. It makes it a new experience I hope people will find refreshing.”

It should also help that *Arksync* is being designed to accommodate different playstyles. While its central gameplay loop is built around gaining energy from defeating enemies, which can then be used to make purchases, players will have some latitude to decide which types of character upgrades (which are permanent) and weapon upgrades (which dissipate upon death) to choose. Utilities like grenades and shields can also affect how the player approaches combat from offensive and defensive vantage points.



With that said, *Arksync* won’t be for the faint of heart. While players will be given plenty of weapons and equipment to navigate its treacherous terrain and fierce enemies, there will be no handholding when it comes to figuring out how to use them. It’s up to players themselves to figure out their own sense of flow, something that may have been influenced, in part, by Garn’s experience as a musician.

“I’ve spent so much time with music it’s kinda how I see everything, like Neo seeing the Matrix . . . but minus bullet time,” Garn says. “I see

rhythm, balance and melody in everything. Imagine a song you can't hear, but can somehow see, touch or feel; and imagine it still being just as inspiring. That's what I aim for."

Players will get their first taste of *Arksync* when its first public demo is released during Steam Next Fest in February 2023. Garn is then aiming to release the full game on PC shortly thereafter, with Nintendo Switch and Xbox Series S|X versions to follow. That won't be the last that players hear about the broader Dykom Universe though. While Garn is keeping the details close to his chest for now, he promises the game is just the introduction to a much larger and inter-connected franchise waiting to be explored.

"This isn't going to be the kind of franchise universe people have come to expect," Garn says. "The Dykom Universe is different, weirder, committed to its rules and designed to be connected up. It wouldn't do it justice to say where the Dykom Universe is going, it really just has to be built and experienced. I can't wait to show what I've been working on for the last decade."

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*Learn more about Arksync on the [Dykom Software site](#). 🇺🇸*



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## Illustrations

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