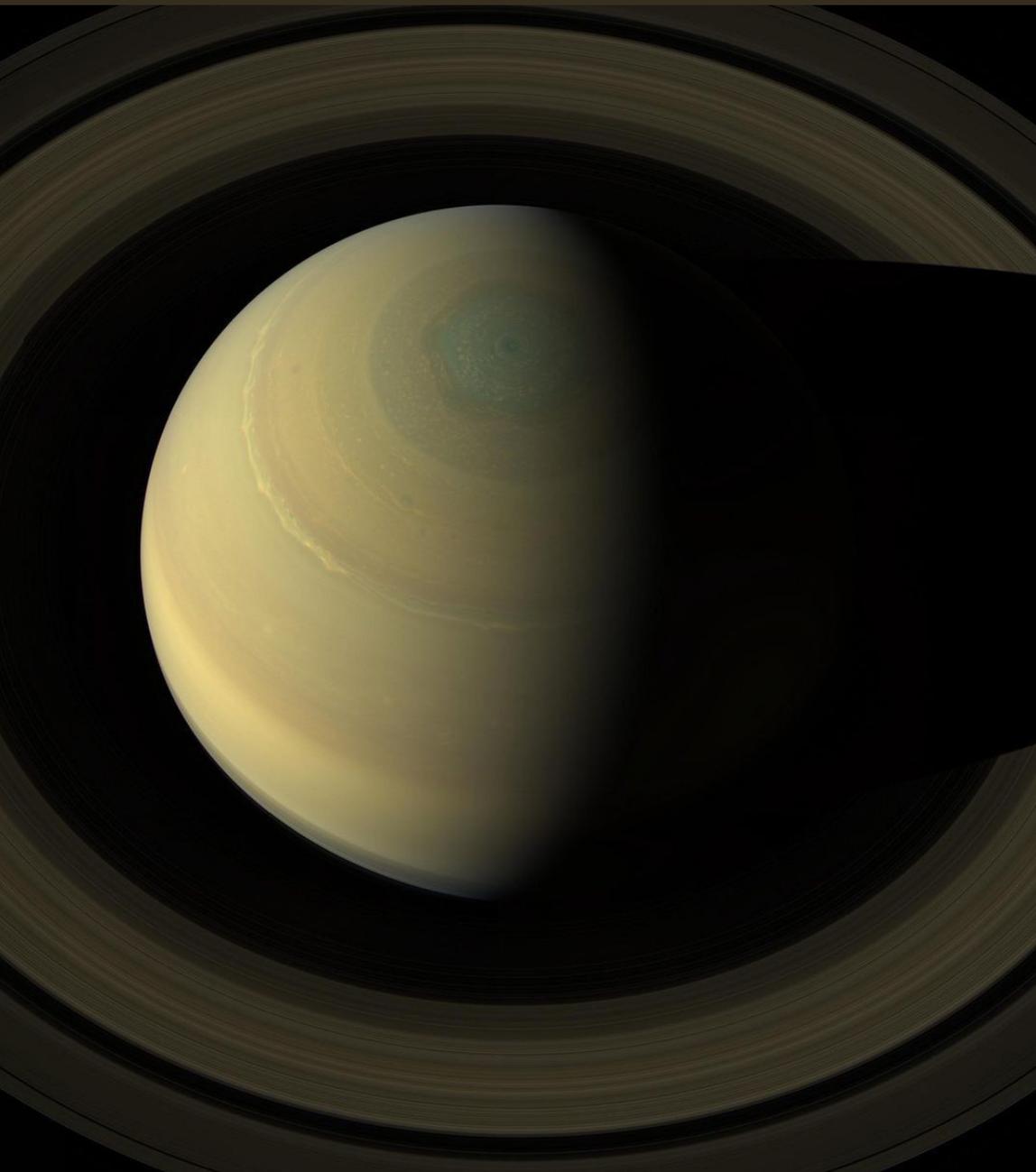


# UNWINNABLE MONTHLY

*Volume 9, Issue 11 - November 2022*

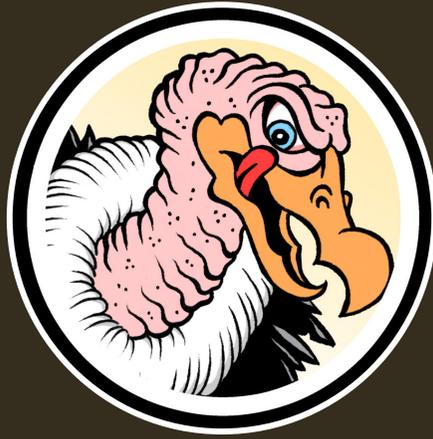


**SEGA SATURN • END OF THE ANTHROPOCENE  
• CLASS ON THE INTERNET**

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*Monthly*

*157*



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This machine kills fascists.



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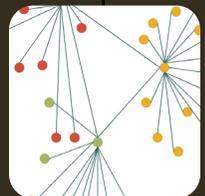
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## CONTRIBUTORS



Dear Reader,

First of all, I want to take a moment and welcome all of you joining us this month in our post subscription drive glow! Welcome! This year might just have been our most successful subscription drive *ever* and I'm so happy to have you aboard!

Now onto regular business!

This month's cover feature is Aidan Moher on the Sega Saturn! Also in feature-land this month we have Jon Bailes on furry friends at the end of all things and Ciaran Doran on the kind of classes the internet has made us.

As for our regular columnists I'd like to bring to you . . . Jay Castello on plorp! Maddi Chilton on *Barbarian*. Dierdre Coyle putting on her librarian hat. Amanda Hudgins talks about some boring wizards. Emma Kostopolus manages an inventory. Matt Marrone saw some horror movies. Justin Reeve talks about my dad's favorite plane. Rob Rich returns to Monkey Island. Levi Rubeck talks about writing as reading as writing. Ben Sailer becomes a *Bad Writer*. Phoenix Simms goes to hell. Sara Clemens goes to NY Comic Con. And Noah Springer gets a little more contemporary.

Stay safe, wear a mask and remember, all Twitter users have a duty to cost Elon Musk as much money as possible.

See you all in a few weeks in Exploits!

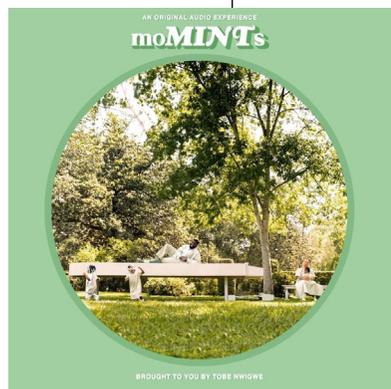
David Shimomura  
Chicago, Illinois  
November 12, 2022



I've been a bit caught up over the last couple months, talking about music from 25 years ago and monsters, and there have been some awesome releases. As always, I'm never going to capture everything great that has come out, but I hope you'll pick at least one of these up.

## Tobe Nwigwe – *MoMints*

I always love it when someone I have been following since the beginning of their career blows up, but it's also always great when I discover someone I haven't heard before and their whole catalog is awesome. I only stumbled across Tobe Nwigwe a couple months ago, but he has taken over my rotation, and his newest album *MoMints*, is just the cherry on top of five years of awesome music. Nwigwe's angry positivity offers a unique perspective to this hip hop scene, blending aggression with faith and love of family. His most recent album can be seen in equal measure as pump-up music for a hard workout or a basketball game or a spiritual reflection on the importance of family. Nwigwe works closely with his wife, Fat and features his children both in his lyrics and in his videos, which have a phenomenal mint-flavored, visual style of their own. All this is to say, even though *MoMints* is Nwigwe's most recent album, I can't recommend enough that you go back through his whole discography immediately. Don't sleep on his tiny desk concert either!



### JID – *The Forever Story*

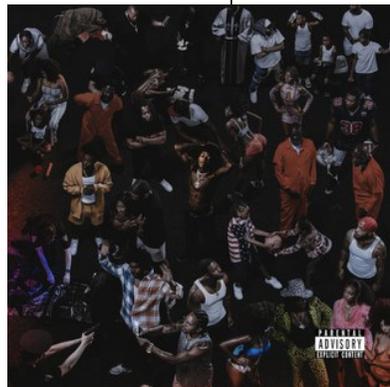
On the other side of this coin, I've been following JID since before he was signed to Dreamville and was partnering with EarthGang as Spillage Village. Now though, with *The Forever Story*, it looks like he's breaking through into the mainstream as a solo artist. And with good reason! JID is one of the best lyricists of his generation, giving folks like Kendrick Lamar and J Cole a run for their money. Across *The Forever Story*, JID changes his flow, style and content, switching between fast, punchy lyrics and slower, more song-songy storytelling with ease. JID proceeds to body a classic era Mos Def sample and then brings Yasiin Bey himself out five tracks later for a perfect feature. If you haven't checked him out before, take a second to dip into JID now before you regret missing out. Oh, he also has a great tiny desk concert!

### Doechii – *she / her / black bitch*

I'm not big on TikTok (I am an old man) but apparently Doechii exploded on that app last year with her track "Yucky Blucky Fruitcake." Based on this success, she was signed to Top Dawg Entertainment, Kendrick Lamar's former label and one of the most exclusive rosters in the game. Now, having listened to her most recent EP, *she / her / black bitch*, I can see why. Doechii brings fiery lyrical ferocity alongside a perfect delivery for bragadocious raps and an ear for avant garde beats. These five tracks are short, but they should tee Doechii up for an interesting major label debut soon.

### Marlowe – *Marlowe 3*

L'Orange and Solemn Brigham are back for round number three as *Marlowe*, and it's great. All three of these albums are incredibly consistent, with L'Orange's sample driven loops providing the perfect backdrop for Brigham's fantastic flow. I don't have much to say for this newest album that I haven't already said when I called their previous two albums "catchy, underground but poppy" albums that "drip sonic honey in my ears,"



but if you haven't started, pick something, anything from Marlowe up today. You won't be disappointed!

### **Danger Mouse and Black Thought – *Cheat Codes***

Danger Mouse and Black Thought are an odd pair for a collaborative album because it can be easy to overlook both of these artists when thinking about the respective greats in their fields (lyricist and producer). I think this mainly stems because they are both inherently collaborative artists, but to overlook them would be to underestimate two of top performers in hip hop of all time. With The Roots, Black Thought has at least two (and you could argue up to five) classic albums under his belt. Meanwhile, Danger Mouse's collaborations with MF DOOM, Cee Lo Green and The Gorillaz are phenomenal, and that doesn't even include his work outside the hip hop genre with folks like Beck and the Red Hot Chili Peppers. All this is to say, when two (slightly) underrated powerhouses from hip hop team up for an album that has been fomenting for over a decade, you need to tune in, and *Cheat Codes* doesn't disappoint. Classic Danger Mouse production full of lush samples underlay Black Thought's passionate lyrics. Even if you know both of these artists catalogs separately, their collaboration is something worth checking out! 🍷





**H**ello! This month we're travelling in my little time machine to the year 1973 and focusing on two films which (to a greater or lesser extent) take Blaxploitation and turn it on its head! In many ways they feel like fever dreams full of fantasy and power – so here's some poetry which embodies that feeling within *The Spook Who Sat By The Door* and *Ganja & Hess*.

Now can a martyr ever truly die?  
Asked men with heads bowed down to face the ground,  
The killer's stars and stripes they still do fly,  
Whose hand will be the one to take them down?

Do you remember what it is to smile?  
For teeth to show without the force of blade?  
Good sister I know it has been a while,  
Since all those promises of change were made.

What if in villain's lair there could be found,  
And broken all the tools that hold us here?  
Tomorrow's children could escape the mound,  
Tomorrow's children could escape the fear.

Now sister take this old forgotten blade,  
And rid yourself of man's insipid curse,  
Death's wings are clipped and now is he unmade,  
And burn the flowers – send away the hearse

Our brotherhood of steel is coming near,  
No more dashikis, now's the time for guns,  
Our sweat and spit must be this warship's steer.  
Give the oppressors nowhere they can run

Dear sister, now's the time to bathe in crimson,  
To let the red smother you in pleasure,  
Luxuriate in this sanguine freedom,  
Come join me in this joy without measure

No thrones, no slaves, a world anew,  
We will see it through.

Beloved sister join us in the manor,  
Where Man will never shackle us – not ever. 🗡️





## Elevating Trash

Harry Potter is a divisive topic.

The frequent outcry on social media about Harry Potter is folks demanding that long-term fans should “read another book.” But that doesn’t get to the source problem. The statement shouldn’t be “read another book,” but rather “have you really read *this* book?” Not just a surface level read of “boy goes to magic school, and fights a war” – but have you interrogated the source material as a mature reader? Loving something is knowing it, and for a lot of Harry Potter fans, ignorance seems to be bliss.

This isn’t a piece about how J. K. Rowling hates trans people. That’s well established at this point, and honestly if you’re still allowing her to profit off of her work in 2022, that’s on you. Harry Potter is the media equivalent of still regularly going to Chick fil-A because you like the chicken – it’s removing the morality of the monetary impact of your decisions. You’re an adult. You can make whatever decisions you’d like but do so as an informed adult.

Harry Potter is a work of fiction that is incapable of interrogating its own problems, and despite the wide and well-loved greater wizarding universe, the world-building falls apart on closer examination. Fanwork has, for years, propped up a franchise that is effectively a house of cards of hot button trauma and mid-tier fantasy.

Fanwork is labeled as “derivative work” because it fundamentally builds off of a previously established work. There is an implication in the term derivative that the resulting product is somehow lesser, and sometimes that is borne out in the product. But there is one thing that Harry Potter fanwork does that J.

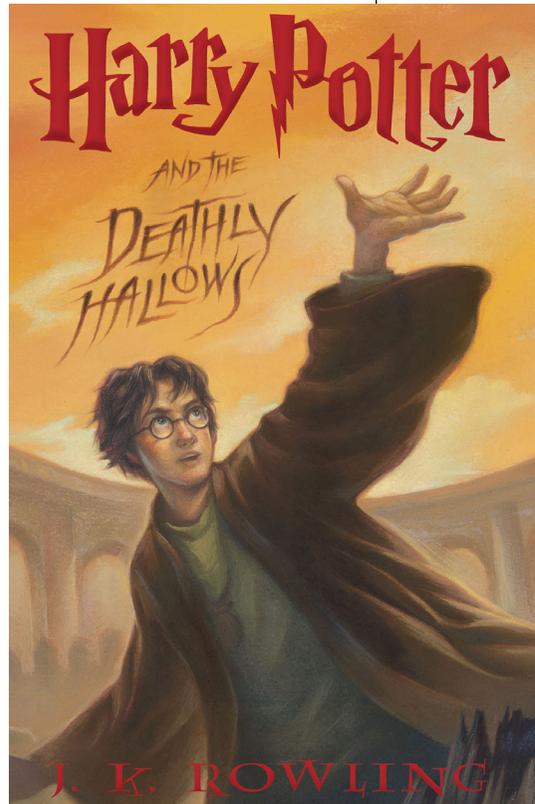
K. Rowling has never done – actually interrogate and contend with the heavy issues she broaches.

Harry Potter, the character, is a child soldier. He's not only a child soldier, he's actually the second generation of child soldier – his parents die at 21 protecting him, and for their brief time in the series they're shown to be constantly besieged. The series doesn't know what to do with this. (For a counter, [probably read K. A. Applegate's comments on war and its effects after the conclusion of the Animorphs series](#) aimed at the same age audience.) There are brief moments throughout the books where they hint at the loss of innocence of Harry – Mrs. Weasley trying to keep the children out of the strategy rooms in later books, Harry talking to Dumbledore on a ghostly platform when they're both dead spring to mind – but the series doesn't contend with those issues. It's impossible to say that “Dumbledore is just as bad as Voldemort” when the writer has coded Voldemort as a Nazi. But Dumbledore raises two generations of child soldiers to fight a battle where it's established that Dumbledore could act to end the war if he wasn't so tied in his own morality. A morality that won't allow him to raise his wand, but will allow him to raise children like sacrificial pawns. This doesn't even get into the fact that he

sends Harry off to be raised by incredibly abusive adoptive parents and doesn't check on him for a decade. Fanfiction has, for years, used this childhood as a catalyst for a more morally grey Dumbledore than is presented in canon – someone who intentionally raised a child who would be moldable by virtue of his childhood abuse.

In the world of fan fiction, there's a really popular tag called “Epilogue, What Epilogue?” or EWE, a sort of retcon for the entire end of Book 7. This is mostly because the Epilogue proves that J. K. Rowling doesn't understand any of the themes that she's established throughout the series.

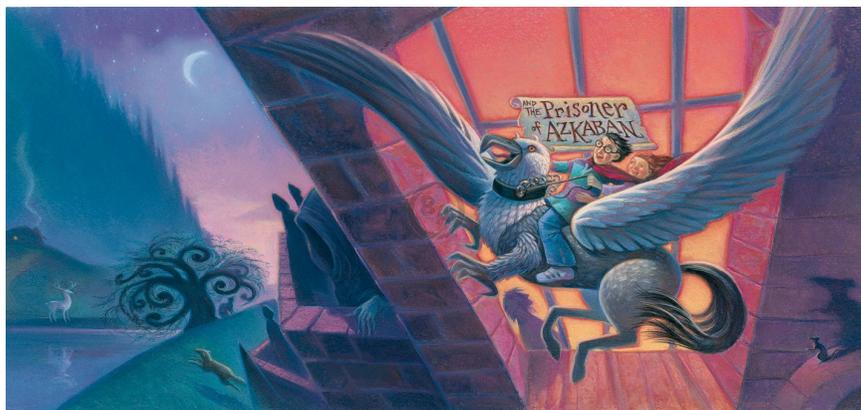
The conclusion of the Harry Potter series has Harry becoming a high school dropout wizarding cop who goes on to marry his childhood best friend's kid

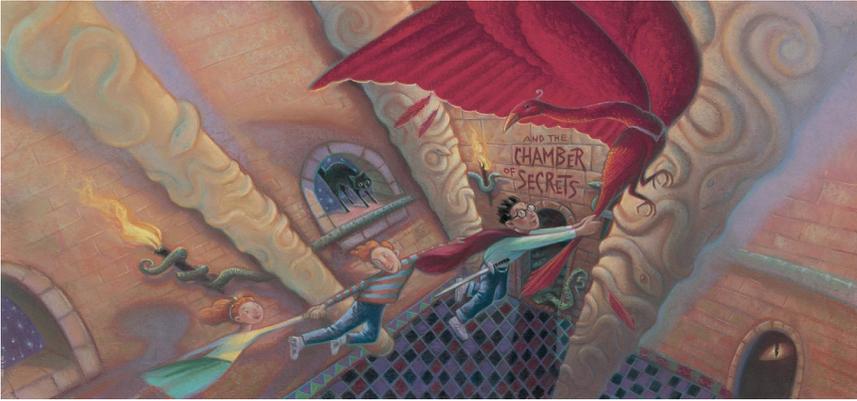


sister and give their resulting children names that I can only really describe as “weirdly white trash for a British children’s book.” (Strong Rennesme energy.) This ending is strange in the context of the rest of the book, but only if you value established writing standards. Throughout the series, Harry is shown in direct contrast to the government. Minor antagonists include several bureaucratic government officials, jailers (who are Dementors if not prison guards), and fascism – and yet when the story concludes, Harry becomes a cop. You usually don’t see this in fan work – there definitely are Auror Harry Potter stories out there. But a large point of the Harry Potter franchise is that Harry spent seven books having him fight the very system that he, as an Auror, in a thoughtless epilogue, now mindlessly enforces.

For a series that contends that “the power of love will prevail”, it frequently shows the opposite to be true. Love saves Harry from the death curse (and sorry every other child in this universe killed by the death curse, I guess your mom didn’t love you enough?) though the entire Horcrux thing awkwardly thrown into the last book even tries to undo that. But love doesn’t save Harry from a decade of abuse, love doesn’t save Sirius Black from a decade of horrific imprisonment and love doesn’t save Draco Malfoy.

Draco Malfoy is the least utilized character in a stable of underutilized characters in the Harry Potter franchise. If you wanted a clearer redemption arc, you could not have planned for one better than Draco Malfoy. But again, J. K. Rowling doesn’t know what to do with her own material. So instead, she focuses her redemptive energy on Severus Snape (more on that later). Back in 2014 she [wrote](#) that “Draco remains a person of dubious morality in the seven published books . . . all this has left me in the unenviable position of pouring cold common sense on ardent readers’ daydreams, as I told them, rather severely, that Draco was not concealing a heart of gold under that sneering and prejudice.” Frankly, this is bad writing. Draco is the principle minor antagonist





in the series, and she made him a one-dimensional bully. She's spent a lot of energy over the years establishing that she thinks that people who can see potential in Draco Malfoy are lusty teenage girls. Draco could have easily been a face for redemption, a fictional counterpart to someone like [Derek Black](#), the son of the Stormfront founder and prominent Klansman and white nationalist, who found a way out of hate through friendship and love. Draco Malfoy is a child soldier for a eugenicist death cult. He's a child. But because J. K. Rowling doesn't know how to actually write nuance, she can't see any gray in his story.

Fanfiction has found a lot of options through the years that she never imagined. Whether it be having him actually earn his redemption with our main characters, giving his character nuance as a father later, or having him fall in love and learn through a relationship that the ways he was taught as a child were abhorrent and harmed real people. There is a contingent of, for example, Draco/Hermione readers who are definitely in it for the dark romance, but there's also a large chunk of readers who generally want to see more creative solutions to a character like Draco Malfoy – a scared kid forced into a corner by bigoted parents. We could've had a Prince Zuko redemption arc, and in the end, J. K. Rowling gave us nothing but disdain.

Now onto the only Slytherin that JK Rowling thinks is worth saving: Severus Snape. I firmly believe that there would be very few Severus Snape lovers out there if not for the power of Alan Rickman's incredible performance throughout the film series. The writing is just not good. Severus Snape is the equivalent of an edge lord Incel all grown up, and his redemption arc is nonexistent outside of J. K. Rowling stating it to be true. One of the golden rules of writing is "show not tell." In the books, Snape is a cruel man who takes out his childhood anger on actual children. He's a bully. His redemption can best be summed up as "sorry Harry, I thought your mom was super-hot when we were teenagers, and then she stopped talking to me because I called her a

slur and I joined a death cult, the direct product of which ultimately led to her death.” This is his canon redemption arc. It’s incredibly weird. It’s unsettling, and it’s arguably a product of Rowling’s right-wing sensibilities that she thinks that the redemptive character in the series is an adult man who is cruel to children for the imagined sins of their parents’ friends. Every fandom take on Severus Snape is wildly ahead of Rowling’s own, whether it be actually giving him so agency as a double agent or giving him a more complicated arc as a trans man. All of them are better than canon.

There are plenty of other things I could cover in this – the slavery element, the anti-Semitism of goblin-kind, the entire Sirius Black arc, Hermione Granger being sidelined, Slytherin house in general, racism, Remus Lupin and Tonks and the necessity of making queer coded characters straight; this piece is just scratching the surface on the problems in the Harry Potter universe that Rowling is unequipped to handle.

This matters because people love Harry Potter. This series has such a long tail that in 2022, folks dress up en masse as her characters for Halloween. When I see wrap-ups of K-Pop idols they occasionally reference this universe. When I was a teenager in Japan, my host family’s daughter had been carefully translating the books with a binder of English slang she’d transposed in her own neat handwriting. There is a cultural relevancy to J. K. Rowling’s works, a ubiquity that stands the test of cultures and time – even if she is a reactionary asshat and a middling writer at best. Ursula K. Le Guin wrote that Rowling’s work is “stylistically ordinary, imaginatively derivative, and ethically rather mean-spirited” and often folks get hung up on the first half and somehow seem to miss the second half of that quote.

If you, dear reader, are someone who loves Harry Potter, do yourself the service of rereading the series as an adult. Interrogate it. Be prepared to actually know what you’re talking about. Because if you’re going to prop up a woman who champions the things that J. K. Rowling does, you should at least be able to say why you choose her universe over all others. 🇺





## On Organizing My Skyrim Library and Living in a Human Body

I have been thinking a lot lately about the constant changes to and eventual decay of our physical bodies (don't ask me why, maybe something about living through a late-stage pandemic, maybe because my back hurts from hunching over on my couch playing videogames).

I have often wished for nanites in my bloodstream that would constantly circulate through my body and fix whatever might be wrong with me (a regular occurrence in science fiction; Scott Westerfeld's *Uglies* comes to mind). Then I wouldn't have to think about my body as much.

Lately, *Skyrim's* 10th Anniversary Edition has been distracting me from my own physicality. Thoughts of my avatar's body still cycle through the usual concerns: what's my max HP, how many health potions do I have stashed, how high have I leveled my restoration magic? But thoughts of my earthbound body fade.

In *Skyrim*, if I get sick, I take a potion. Bludgeoned in the head with an ebony warhammer? Maybe two potions, as a treat. (Potions are the high fantasy equivalent of those science fiction nanites.) But it's a temporary fix. The thing is, getting brutally murdered all the time doesn't distract from mortality as much as one might think.

No matter how much fun I'm having getting spat on by spiders and swallowed by dragons, I wonder what choices I'd make differently if I couldn't reload. The answer is, all of them. I wouldn't fight a single fucking dragon. I'd be Frodo at the beginning of *The Hobbit*, except Gandalf couldn't convince me to do shit. I would neither have adventures nor do anything unexpected, thanks.

That's not to say that I wouldn't enjoy living in the province of Skyrim. I just wouldn't be an adventurer. I'd lie to everyone and say that I took an arrow to the knee, and that's why I have to stay home in the house I just built. And do you know what I'd do in that house? I'd do something that I *have* actually been doing in my most recent playthrough.

I'd organize my library.

*Skyrim* offers a number of properties the player can purchase or build; I have purchased and built them all. In one of my homes, Lakeview Manor, I have a dedicated library. I stash books I find around the world, careful to weed duplicates from my collection. I located an online spreadsheet of every book in *Skyrim* and am continuing to work towards my goal of catching 'em all.

Finding rarer volumes requires some extra effort. My preferred hunting ground is the library at the College of Winterhold, a mages' academy. Their library is known as the Arcanaeum, or the Ysmir Collective, and their librarian is an Orc named Urag gro-Shub. In the interest of column consistency, and of not personifying libraries themselves, Urag gro-Shub is the character I want to befriend this month (although if I could personify my *Skyrim* library and befriend it, you know I would).

It's not that organizing books makes me *forget* that I'm a decaying meat-coated skeleton living by the light of a dying star, it's that organizing books makes me not *care* that I'm a decaying meat-coated skeleton living by the light of a dying star. I love skeletons! I love stars! Who cares, just let me read!

Complete library sets might not be worth dying for in the corporeal realm. I'll probably never go on a *Ninth Gate*-style quest looking for a rare book about the devil (although that's not *off* the table – I know I said Gandalf couldn't convince me to do shit, but Boris Balkan's bank account might). But in *Skyrim*, I don't mind getting murdered a few extra times for that rare copy of *Sinderion's Nirnroot Treatise* or the folio edition of *Lusty Argonian Maid*.

Even though I may not be willing to get killed for literature in real life, I do feel similarly about library curation. This is why I have a master's degree in library science. The difference in *Skyrim* is that pursuing my passion didn't land me in any student loan debt. The other difference is that locating every book in the world is an attainable goal. So I'll respawn and reorganize until my collection's complete, dying again and again until I stop thinking about death. 📖





## Limited Inventory and Staggered Saves

The scene, within the game, is this: You're being pursued by a monster. You're almost out of ammunition for all of your weapons and you have no more healing items. If you face off against this monster, you will surely die. You turn the corner, and run into a room. The door closes behind you. You know that the monster cannot enter. On the table is a way for you to save your progress. Not saving now would mean that if you die, you'd be set back a significant period of time. However, if you save now, you're stuck with the limited resources you have, maybe trapping yourself into an unwinnable situation in the near future. This situation could be corrected if you returned to an earlier save and used your resources differently. So, do you save the game?

This scenario is a cornerstone of the classic survival horror game experience, popularized by the titan franchises *Resident Evil* and *Silent Hill*. Being able only to save at specific points and struggling with scarcity of resources, as well as limited inventory space, are very traditional ways of heightening the tension for the gaming session. Should you pick that item up, thus losing inventory space? Should you use your ammunition now, or save it for a more dire situation? And above all, when is an advantageous time to save your progress?

Making wise decisions about resource management and progress saving will make or break a survival horror play experience, as those of us who've tried to white-knuckle our way through an area in a *Silent Hill* game know. And

although many of these mechanics were present in these games because of technological limitations, the things that they taught us about the appropriate moment for a particular action fascinate me, and I assume many of my fellow survival horror buffs still treat resources and manual saving as strategically as I do, even when the situation is not so dire.

What *Resident Evil* and the like taught us relates closely to a concept that goes all the way back to Ancient Greece: the idea of *Kairos*. *Kairos* is one of the ancient Greek words for time, but it doesn't just mean "the point at which something occurs." *Kairos* specifically means "the correct, appropriate and wise time to do something." So, to act with *Kairos* means to act at the opportune moment, when something will have the maximum intended effect. Rhetoricians like me think about *Kairos* all the time, because the timing of your message impacts how people will receive it – asking for a raise when your boss is having a bad day is probably not going to go well for you.

So, the tension of classic horror games like *Resident Evil* or *Silent Hill* relies largely on the player not having a firm grasp of the *Kairos* of the game. Is it a good idea to use this item now, or will you regret it in ten minutes when it turns out you need it more? Should you save now and hope you'll find more resources soon, or decline to save and hope you aren't set back by failure? The ambiguity of the ideal moment for action keeps the player on the edge of their seat, because not acting *kairotically* has dire consequences, up to and including in-game death. This is directly contrasted with how tension is built in many horror films, where the audience is deeply aware of the appropriate moment for action (don't go into the basement right now, for example), but has to watch characters on-screen act without *Kairos*.

While it's important to note that much of the *Kairos* of these experiences comes from technological limitations and not intentionality on the part of the developers (so the game itself is being rhetorical without the human authors, which is a whole other can of worms), these mechanics have become so entrenched as facts of survival horror that even some contemporary horror games use them, instead of the now almost-ubiquitous autosave function. So you're going to see *Kairos* crop up a lot over this column, because my hunch is that this idea, of knowing (or not) the opportune moment for action, and then being able to execute that action, is pretty key to an understanding of why we think things are scary. Dying in horror media is often the product of being in the wrong place and the wrong time, and death itself is largely scary because it means we will no longer have the time or opportunities of life. And since dying is a large part, like it or not, of playing any video game, I imagine *Kairos* will play a significant role as we continue to unravel the survival horror genre. 🍷



## Go In Blind

It's almost insulting how good "go in blind!" as a recommendation is at making people watch movies. It manages to convey everything while saying nothing with a concision envied by politicians and PR firms; there's no good response to it save saying, outright, *No! I will not! I will ruin the experience you have just told me is the opportune way to see this movie because I am a chronic Googler and dislike being surprised!* You have to respect its boldness: both the promise that there is something worth seeing and the implicit threat that if you try to figure out what that thing is it will disappear in a puff of smoke like magic. I usually just end up caving and watching the movie.

There's a very simple reason why you have to go into *Barbarian* blind: because the big twist makes no sense. The entire film bends around that moment of the reveal, where Bill Skarsgard's character's head is smashed against the walls of the underground tunnels – it's a trick it only gets to play once. It's a fundamentally shallow shock. The absurdity of it, the bold disregard of the established narrative and split-second conversion from realist thriller into gore-splattered, fantastical horror would be admirable if done well. Unfortunately, *Barbarian* is also shakily structured, over-reliant on surprise and seemingly unaware of its own strengths.

It's hard to say whether *Barbarian* is *about* anything – a running theme ends up being something along the lines of "men are evil", but the choice to make the monster a demented female figure lets that throughline get lost as the plot progresses. The script gets tired of the initial AirBnB conceit within 30 minutes, and anything intelligent it had to say about the justified paranoia

of women is quickly abandoned once it's revealed that the *real* villain is an evil monster living in the walls. The flashbacks shoehorn in an almost offensively dull origin story: a creepy man kidnaps women and stashes them in his basement, raping them and their children. Somehow, in a span of time that is short enough for him to still be alive but long enough that no one has ever heard of him, the incest and assault produces a creature best described as “fucked-up naked lady”, who proceeds to live in the subterranean tunnels of the house and terrorize any mice or tourists unlucky enough to wander in there. What point her exaggerated age, nudity and monstrosity is supposed to make is anyone's guess.

The rapists of the film end up with a nice clean suicide and their eyes gouged out, respectively, and Tess does make it out alive, so the viewer could be forgiven for finding a feminist message in this mess. But there's a pointlessness to the entire escapade that makes Tess's eventual triumph feel hollow. What was the point of the initial AirBnB conceit if the movie Zach Cregger really wanted to make was about shadows lurking in tunnels? The tension between Tess and Keith – by far the most convincing aspect of the movie, the feeling of, *wow, if this guy doesn't hurt me, I might really like him* – proving to be nothing more complex than a fake out is a waste of talented actors and a delightful scenario for character work and genuine, organic tension.

At the end of the day, *Barbarian* is structured just like its setting: the house is a known quantity, legible but foreign enough to have hidden depths that can be genuinely frightening, a simple but rich set. The tunnels are extraneous. They lure the characters out of a context that makes sense into an abstract, caricatured stage of false movement, where the rules of the game are bent to satisfy not the narrative but the viewer. In that moment of not knowing, when we hand the reins to the director and actors and set designers and makeup artists and screenwriters, it's true: our capacity to be surprised, scared and disgusted is hypothetically limitless.

It's effective in that sense: as an experience. But only once. 🍷





## Better Living, Better Writing

It's easy, as a writer, to fall into bad habits. We often glamorize putting in long hours and late nights to reach deadlines, convincing ourselves that our negative routines are necessary parts of the creative process, burning the midnight oil in service to our readers. The cycle of turning suffering into inspiration, then suffering to turn inspiration into creative output, is one that all creatives are likely to be well acquainted with.

In reality, there's nothing glamorous about failing to establish healthy boundaries between your work and your life, even if you're working for your passion more than your paycheck. It doesn't result in better work, greater success, or more creative satisfaction. Instead, it only leads us to trade our health and relationships in the pursuit of executional excellence, only to ironically compound our misery in exchange for diminishing returns, chasing after goals that leave us feeling empty in the end.

This is the struggle that players must navigate in *Bad Writer*. It's a deceptively insightful game from award-winning writer and designer [Paul Jessup](#), one that author and critic [Lavie Tidhar](#) calls, "[the most depressingly realistic writer's life simulation I ever experienced](#)." While its adorable pixel art aesthetic doesn't exactly telegraph despair, and its simple mechanics don't immediately imply much challenge, my few short playthroughs with the game felt like taking a long, hard look in the mirror, and learning that to improve my craft as a writer, I need to improve how I live as a person.

*Bad Writer* starts with an introduction to its protagonist Emily, who lives in a modest home with her partner Cleo and their cat. Instead of searching for another employer right away, Emily decides to try becoming a professional author, giving herself a month to earn a sustainable living before she looks for another job. With little more than a computer, ambition and a supportive partner on her side, she begins adapting to the work-from-home life, with no bosses, no structure and no guarantees for success.

From there, it's up to the player to determine the course of Emily's future by making daily decisions that either diminish or replenish her happiness (which, in true videogame fashion, is visualized by a meter). Some actions inspire ideas for stories that she can submit to one of a handful of literary journals while others can simply have a positive or negative impact on her mental health. The goal is to land enough submissions to earn a sustainable living without burning out and throwing in the towel due to despair.



Some of your available choices, like reading a book or watching television with Cleo, might seem like distractions but can actually give Emily much needed inspiration. Other decisions, like checking social media, have a devastating effect on her happiness. There's also an element of randomness that can impact which decisions are available on a given day; for example, a blizzard might prevent her from leaving the house.

On a mechanical level, *Bad Writer* sounds like a simple exercise in managing energy and productivity, optimizing inputs to maximize outputs. It's also short and a successful run might not take more than 15 or 20 minutes to complete. However, that's more than enough time to impart some valuable lessons on the nature of writerly lifestyles, while making it easy to try again if your first few runs don't go the way you think they will.

My initial inclination was to try to rack up as many ideas as possible, avoiding anything that would take my attention away from the task at hand. When you work from home, your surroundings are full of potential distractions, and so staying as focused as possible seemed like it would be a winning formula. Hustle and grind. No time to rest.

It turns out this is the fastest path to failure in *Bad Writer*. Emily soon descended into depression with no published pieces to show for her effort. On my second run, I tried some of the other activities that are presented to her. Taking a walk through the park with Cleo? Super inspirational and yielded several ideas, plus the happiness meter received a solid boost. Reading books gave her ideas for her own work too, which makes sense since consumption can fuel inspiration. A couple more tries later, I finally made it through a full month, achieving something resembling a balanced freelance life.

In less than an hour, *Bad Writer* had shown me some simple truths about the creative process that I understand, but frequently ignore when I'm under stress. When I have too much to do – whether that's in reference to writing work or anything else – I tend to put my head down, block out everything else, and do whatever's necessary to get as much stuff done through sheer force of will. Sometimes this works in the short term, but eventually, I inevitably hit a point of diminishing returns. I suffer for the work and the work suffers for my shortsighted overambition to take on too much, too quickly.

*Bad Writer's* title feels like a commentary on the imposter syndrome that many of us feel when we pursue this craft. If you're going to create a game that halfway accurately captures how it feels to be a writer, you must eliminate the player's confidence in their abilities; even the most skilled wordsmiths are often plagued by self-doubt. In those moments where we've perhaps taken on too much, have procrastinated for too long before sitting down to get the words on the page, or start to question our abilities as artists and craftspeople, it can be easy to believe we just need to work harder.

Sometimes that's true. More often, we would be better served by spending time with our family and friends, reading a book, or doing something, anything that might replenish our energy rather than trying to go full speed on an empty tank. *Bad Writer* isn't complex, but it doesn't need to be to show that there is no way to be an interesting writer without living an interesting life, and there's nothing interesting about overworking oneself to the detriment of all the things that make our lives worthwhile. 🍵



## The Prince of Hades Laughs with a Mouthful of Blood

Well, I wasn't kidding that I had another column in me centering on the Prince of Hades. To date, I've played well over a hundred hours (that's not a brag of any sort) of Supergiant's narrative-driven rogue-like. And what's stuck with me the most is . . . surprisingly not Avalon Penrose, although the game's cast is definitely gorgeous. No, what I want to talk about is Zagreus' (hereafter Zag) character design, because I feel like he continues the conversation (both figuratively and literally) of biracial and multiracial representation.

In my previous column I explored at length how some characters like D, the famous Dhampir of *Vampire Hunter D*, are often portrayed as tragic liminal figures. Such figures often draw the ire of both those who fit into a human category and an Other, more monstrous or preternatural category. Physically, this liminal figure resembles one category of being more strongly than the other (usually the less human side), but they cannot pass as the Other category either. While D, at least in the film *Bloodlust*, is sometimes a hopeful figure who shows others the complexity of his existence with his more sentimental or heroic actions, he is still considered someone caught in an ontological purgatory. Sometimes this purgatory even has an extended metaphor in the setting that a mixed character traverses, like D's world which exhibits

elements of both a Gothic medieval past and a post-apocalyptic-meets-weird-western future.

Zag shares a few of D's traits, but I'll start with the most obvious physical ones. He is a multiracial demigod, with a Chthonic god Hades as his father and a half-Olympic goddess Persephone as his mother. Persephone's father is revealed by Demeter to be a human man, which results in Zag inheriting his mother's stature and one of her green eyes, the other red with a black sclera like his father's. Characters comment on Zag's appearance in conjunction with recognizing him as a demigod throughout the game. Thanatos mentions that Zag has one of his mother's eyes when Zag prods him for more stories about what she was like. Asterius, the minotaur, another character of more monstrous mixed heritage often calls Zag "short one". Other notable nicknames regarding his height are "little Hades" (Poseidon), "little godling" (Aphrodite) and "little sprout" (Demeter).

Most of these nicknames seem like terms of endearment, but they are also a little insincere. After all, the Olympic gods know Zag is only partially related to them, and it's difficult to determine if they simply want Zag to reach the surface simply to spite the Hades and his gloomy Underworld domain. But as you forge friendships with the Olympians, they seem to be invested more personally with Zag's plight and tell him they recognize qualities of themselves in him. Or perhaps that's due to all those offerings of nectar talking—I'm looking squarely at you Dionysus, for more reasons than one. But we'll get to that. Zag's height is not wholly about his heritage, of course, it's also to emphasize his epic nature of his journey to the surface. His size pales in comparison to even some of the lesser enemies called Wretches, minions of his father that he fights in each region of the Underworld. And speaking of the Underworld, that brings me to another major trait Zag shares with characters like D.





Zag is definitely a liminal figure trapped in a purgatorial space – and this metaphor extends to the entire setting of Hades. Or at least, so it seems at first as he fights his way to the surface to find and reunite with his mother. He doesn't quite fit in physically with his fellow Chthonic deities and finds more of an ideal father in Achilles, a fallen mortal hero, than he does with the giant and overbearing Hades. And those like the Fury Alecto and Theseus hurl epithets like “redblood” and “monster” and “blackguard” at him. Alecto's slur “redblood” feels particularly racially-charged, identifying Zag solely by the partially mortal blood in his veins that makes him a demigod.

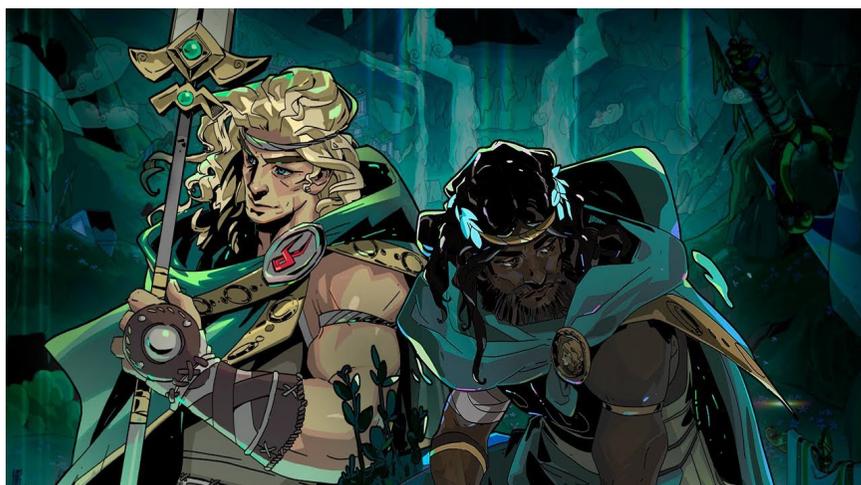
Notably the Prince of Hades rarely lets insults get under his skin and seems to brush off most of these with a sense of acceptance about his demigod status. Throughout the entire game, however, Zag is also reckoning with what he'll do once he meets his mother, and if you romance Megaera or Thanatos (or both as in my play-through) you start to realize that it might not be possible to leave behind the ties that Zag has made in the blood and darkness of the Underworld. And indeed, those ties make it impossible for him to remain on the surface in Greece (both physically and spiritually) when he finally does meet with his mother.

Supergiant Games' writer Greg Kasavin has masterfully woven in details, both in the key songs of *Hades* (particularly “[In the Blood](#)” and “[Hymn to Zagreus](#)”) and codices (written in Achilles' voice) that emphasize how Zag was never meant to choose one side of his family over the other. In the codex for darkness, one of your upgrade items, it explains that “Those born of darkness must remain in darkness; this is one of the Underworld's indelible laws.” Jacob Hamill, a *First Person Scholar* contributor, noted that although *Hades* lore is rooted in Greek mythology and its attendant genre Tragedy, [Supergiant Games has reinterpreted the deterministic aspects of both.](#)

The game is less about accepting one's fate than it is about redefining our relationship to it. I agree with Hamill that *Hades* consciously uses the roguelike structure to underscore the themes of fate and questioning the extent of our control over it. But what I'm more concerned about is how this game narrative structure also effectively shows you the core of Zag's identity crisis and how he resolves it as a multiracial demigod.

Zag at the start of the game is making a choice to choose one side of his family over another. He is at terrible odds with his father and when he discovers that Nyx and Hades have been hiding the fact that Persephone is his birth mother, he becomes that much more determined to escape the Underworld and never look back. During your initial journey to the surface, Zag is convinced that there is nothing for him in the Underworld. Here we could say that at the start of the plot, as the player continuously fails forward and experiences the cycle of life-death-rebirth with Zag, that he is still that mixed liminal figure. A person literally and figuratively torn asunder into fragments of himself as he tries to reconcile with his decision to reject one half of his heritage. This dynamic, both in the gameplay and the narrative, are tied to Zag's mythic connection to Dionysus.

In myth, Dionysus is known as a [twice-born god](#) (sometimes of Zeus, Hera and Semele, sometimes of Zeus Persephone and Semele) who was dismembered and devoured by the Titans. The game reduces this connection to a prank that Zag and Dionysus play on Orpheus, to get him to write and sing the "Hymn to Zagreus". Although this incident is one of seeming comic relief it also obliquely references Orpheus' mythic role as the founder of [Orphism](#), a cult of mysteries that involved rituals reenacting the death and rebirth of Dionysus, Zagreus and how the twice-born god is connected to the birth of humanity. The act of



rendering such heady references as a comic relief moment in the plot seems odd at first, but actually comments on the reinvention of Zag's character for Supergiant's story of taking your fate into your own hands.

Zag eventually discovers the full story of his birth by Persephone and Hades, a child who would've remained stillborn had his adoptive mother Nyx not intervened with The Fates, who are in fact her daughters. Arguably this revelation is part of the paradigm shift Zag experiences near the end of the main arc of the *Hades*, with him realizing that his spiritual bonds with those like Nyx and Achilles as well as his loved ones are just as important (if not more so) than the blood ties he has with Mount Olympus and his mother. What I love about Zag as a multiracial character is that he doesn't choose one side of himself over another, he accepts both and his fluidity of movement throughout the Underworld and the surface worlds. Unlike D and game characters who share his tragic mixed-race archetype.

While I agree with [Rosy Hearts' reading](#) of Zag's decision to convince his traumatized runaway blood mother, Persephone, to come back to the Underworld as problematic, I also feel that Zag bringing his blood mother back to the house of his adoptive mother is symbolic of him making peace with his liminality. He acts as a bridge between the upper and lower worlds of his heritage, but not one set in stone. Zag is a figure that in myth is associated with a god that represents a contradictory nature of being both Tragic and Comic and perhaps his returning Persephone to the Underworld is meant to rest uneasy on the player's shoulders. After all, Persephone is keen to note that if Hades drives her away again, she will leave for good.

Zag is a more hopeful mixed-race character than we usually get in games and I believe this is due to Supergiant allowing such a character to recognize that they are more than the sum of their parts. Zag's story could've easily been another *God of War* (2018) experience, where the focus was more on the pains of family and the sacrifices parents and their children make for one another. Instead, Kasavin envisioned a mixed protagonist that accepted their complex heritage and made that their strength. As a line from Zag's completed codex reads: "Rumors swirl about the lad; about how he bleeds red like a mortal does. Well, if there's a trace of mortality in him, I am certain he is better for it. I should know." For better or worse, the Prince of Hell is at home with his liminality. 🏰



## Your Post-Halloween Horror Movie Questions Answered!

**H**alloween 2022 has come and gone, but if you're anything like me – God help you – you've spent a significant chunk of time in the wee hours of the morning the past few weeks streaming random horror movies in your living room.

One thing I've noticed: Streaming random horror movies, especially without checking Rotten Tomatoes before you start them, can lead to a lot of unanswered questions concerning plot holes or peculiar character motivations. And while these streaming horror films are generally rather cookie cutter, they often attempt to differentiate themselves in ways that can leave you scratching your head.

But we like to stay positive here at the Rookie of the Year. So instead of calling out films by name and bashing them, we're going to assume *we* are the idiots, and answer a few questions that have baffled us recently. Again: We're not identifying the movies, and if we're confused, it's our fault – because the answers to the following questions couldn't be simpler.

Here we go:

**Why did the architect decide to build a secret room – complete with hidden passageways – in the walls of her house for her lover? And why did he eventually go mad, kill the architect and her husband and, in the twist at the end, was the one stalking the new owners of the house all along?**

They say there are no stupid questions. But this is a stupid question. If you're crazy and you're cheating on your husband and you're an architect, it makes *perfect* sense that you would add crawlspaces for your secret lover inside the blueprint of the home you were building for you and your husband. Why spend the money to put up your secret lover up at a hotel, or, worse yet, let him lead an independent life where he works and pays for his own home (and, presumably, can afford gifts for you)? No. You want him in the damn walls, huddled in a little rathole, so you can have access to him whenever you desire. At some point, of course, it's only natural he would grow so gaunt and pale and dirty he's almost green, will completely lose his marbles, if he had any to begin with, and employ an elaborate video camera system in his nest to mess with the tenants that move in after he murders you and your husband. Duh.



**Why did the successful, very pregnant Chicago businesswoman stay in the house she bought in the country after learning it was a former brothel haunted by dead prostitutes who attack her and her unborn child after having seduced and murdered her husband, as well as killing her friend and sticking his dead (but still surreally animated) body into a hole in the wall?**

C'mon now, dummies. Ultimately, this is the story of the triumph of feminism. The house was a test for her asshole, unfaithful, criminal husband. He failed. What her friend did to deserve *his* gruesome death might be

completely unclear, but the theme of the film is crystal. Husband having been dispatched, she is free to be scared out of her wits by a cultish spirit-infested sex show and what appears to be sperm oozing out of the electrical sockets, nearly fall to her death while being chased through the house and bash in the heads of the ghosts turned flesh with a hammer. And then, three months later, whisper lullabies to her precious, defenseless daughter in her adorable, yet – surprise! – haunted nursery. A cheap fixer-upper Victorian – even with unholy black fluid gushing from the pipes in the walls – is not something you let go of easily.

**When the trophy wife's husband shoots himself in the head after handcuffing himself to her in their bed, why doesn't she immediately cut off his hand or fingers instead of dragging his faceless bloody corpse down the stairs, all around the house and then outside the snowed-in property, much of the time while being chased by a deranged killer? And how is she able to evade said killer for as long as she does . . . while, like we said, her husband is handcuffed to her wrist?**

First off, have you ever been handcuffed to your dead husband? If not, who the hell are you to judge? If so, and you immediately chapped his hand or fingers off, well whoop-de-doo for you. I'm assuming, however, that my reader has not had this experience. Another question: Have you ever been in a horror movie currently streaming on Netflix? Didn't think so. But I digress. The answer here is twofold: 1. Winners don't make excuses, and 2. The actress playing the role, as the cliché goes, couldn't act her way out of a paper bag, let alone a pair of metal handcuffs.

Oof. Got a little negative there. I guess I'm gonna need to do some penance, which I present in the form of this final, bonus question.

**When scrolling for more things to watch, how come I can't tell which horror films I've seen even in the past 48 hours and which I haven't?**

Also easy. I work a lot of nights in October – which is for a baseball editor what tax season is for an accountant – and when it's 4 a.m. and I'm wired after the games and can't sleep, all streaming horror movies are great, even the horribly bad ones. Ultimately, binge-watching random horror movies make them meld together into a simple puzzle so relaxing to solve that before I know it, I'm snuggled in bed – having switched to a horror podcast via my AirPods, naturally – and tasting the sweet relief of sleep. 🍵



## The Monsters We Make

**I** come in search of monsters. This October we're doing a theme issue on monsters, you see, and since my October column is invariably about New York Comic Con I need to figure out a way to force this square peg into that round hole. There are plenty of monsters to be found in pop culture, of course, and since NYCC always takes place the first weekend of October they're especially present here at the con. I vow to keep my eye out for monster and/or monster-adjacent stuff to photograph so at least my pictures will be on theme even if my text is not.

Now I'm imagining you asking aloud, "hold on, am I reading last month's issue?" Not to worry, dear reader, you have not gone through a rift in the space-time continuum only to find yourself reading an issue of your favorite digital pop culture mag you've already dutifully devoured on publication day a month ago. For as I begin my methodical first-day sweep of the main show floor (I must walk up and down each aisle at least once – no FOMO allowed at my NYCC) I start to think too much about monstrosity and monsters and what it really means to be one and I realize I just don't want to spend my con in that headspace. There have been so many human bad actors in the comics and pop culture spaces recently that focusing on the zombies or vampires or supernatural slashers or fell beasts or whatever seems almost childishly pedestrian. Besides, I didn't get a reservation to the Jamie Lee Curtis panel to hear her talk about her final showdown with Michael Myers and even if I had, it's Laurie Strode's journey I'd be most interested in, not the monster's.

Despite my own cynicism often getting in the way, New York Comic Con has always been a place where I find a lot of comfort. I've always been one to indulge my inner child, even when I still was one, watching shows and playing with toys that were "too young for me" up until I was a teenager. (Please indulge me pretending as if I don't still engage with those things.) At next year's con I'll be 40, and while there's an easy layup of a joke about the putting away of childish things to make there, I've come to accept that immersing myself in the stuff I liked and still like is not a bad way to spend an early fall weekend once a year.

I'm old enough to see all the ways the con is designed to part fans with their money but hey, that's capitalism, baby. That aside, I can't discount the many creators who attend each year to make genuine connections with people who will appreciate their work, from the woman who makes skater skirts out of geeky fabrics to the family who's amassed the largest collection of vintage enamel pins I've ever seen. A pinhead (no monster-adjacent pun intended) could do some damage at

their booth. Which is to say this year and last they did some damage to my wallet after I visited their booth. And while I easily tend to part with my money each time I visit Artist's Alley, I recently bought my first house and that extended wall space won't fill up with original art by itself, thank you very much. Anyway it feels wonderful to give my money directly to a person who made the thing I ever-so-carefully need to slip into a rigid plastic sheath in order to make sure it survives the train ride home. These are the people I want to give my money to.

So, I waited to file my NYCC piece until the November issue because I didn't want to worry too much about monsters. It's not for lack of trying, though. I hunted for monstrous merch. I met Elvira. I went to a panel on the new television adaptation of Anne Rice's *Mayfair Witches* to try and drum up



some monstrous energy but as I waited in line to be let into the main stage I kept thinking, are witches monsters? Historically speaking, they're usually just women who men are afraid of for one reason or another. These witches deal outright in the supernatural, sure, but I'm still not sure that makes them monsters. The producers at the panel talked a bit about the new *Interview with a Vampire* adaptation as well, and the one thing they kept coming back to again and again regarding both shows was the characters' humanity. "A vampire is not *not* a human. A witch is not *not* a human," one said. As storytellers, the monsters we make are so often just mirrors. I'm happier focusing on a sunnier New York Comic Con reflection. There are enough monsters to be seen elsewhere. 🍷





**S**lime Rancher 2 is a game about selling poop.

The cheerful work simulator is constantly grappling with its own identity. The main task of the game is rounding up slime and corralling them into pens so that they can turn a profit. But it's self-aware of that and covered in a cute skin. The slimes are always smiling, bouncing around and making little noises. There's no way players would want to treat them like meat or dairy animals, with all the gritty realities those industries entail.

So instead, slimes produce plorts when fed, and it's these you can sell for money, which you can use to more efficiently gain more plorts. But make no mistake. Plorts are poop.

This gameplay loop, which as far as I know is transferred directly from the original *Slime Rancher*, works exceedingly well as a compromise between the forces that otherwise threaten to make the game fall apart. It is a game about enjoying taking part in ruthlessly exploitative capitalism. It is also a game about hanging out with cute little guys. The humor of plorts blurs where these things join together, and the cleanliness of their jewel-like appearance stands in for where everything else has also been cleaned up.

When discussing the tension hidden within *Slime Rancher 2*, Chris Donlan highlighted the exploration as one of the uncomplicated joys of the game. And it is a beautiful world to exist in, with islands in different bright colors, huge waterfalls and giant trees, and at night the moon and stars glittering over everything. "It is such a pleasure to explore," writes Donlan. "I would be out there wandering even if I wasn't lured through it with the promise of slimes to capture."

In her recent book *Wandering Games*, Melissa Kagen argues that “wandering is an activity designed to provoke unproductive, contemplative, anticapitalist play – or at least it can offer a provocative space for challenging (if not completely avoiding) the success paradigms and systems that have evolved around gameplay.”

But I never actually found myself wandering much in *Slime Rancher 2*. Like Donlan, I was really lured by finding slimes and various other resources that I needed. Like in many games, some of the main upgrades I was grinding for were more stamina for sprinting and fast travel unlocks, so that I could get to places faster and more efficiently. Wandering was an annoyance, something to be reduced over time, not a draw.



In *Braiding Sweetgrass*, Potawatomi scientist and writer Robin Wall Kimmerer recounts an experiment undertaken by one of her graduate students, Laurie. Sweetgrass is an herb considered sacred by many indigenous peoples, and the student wanted to discover how it responded to traditional harvesting methods. What she found was that sweetgrass flourished most when it was harvested at all. Its relationship with humanity is a win-win.

Of course, there are limits to this, and sweetgrass can still be over-harvested. Many indigenous practices avoid taking the first plant, more than half, or more than what you need. In this way, wandering becomes a part of what makes these relationships mutually beneficial. The harvester has to explore past their first foraging opportunity, and further still to assess how abundant any given resource is. Only by doing so are their practices sustainable, let alone beneficial.

Not so in *Slime Rancher 2*. Even clearing out an entire area won't prevent it from refilling with apparently unbothered slime next time you appear. And

your appearance often will cause an area to be decimated, even if accidentally. Slimes can take on the characteristics of other types of slimes by eating their plorts, leading to crossovers which are equally delightful and profitable.

But if these already crossed slimes eat another different kind of plort, they become tarr, which consume and transform slimes into yet more tarr. An entire area can be destroyed within minutes. But it only seems to happen when the player appears. Presumably this is because slimes are not loaded offscreen and therefore aren't eating. But it means that taking your time wandering an area with three or more kinds of slime is basically a death sentence for them all.

Wandering is deeply disincentivised in *Slime Rancher 2*, and yet, return after causing a tarr catastrophe and everything will have bounced back as if nothing had happened. Slime thrive when they're harvested, when they're not, when you spend time admiring the landscape and most of all when you speed through it as fast as you can. At its core, playing with an eye to sustainability is virtually impossible just because of how resilient the ecosystem is.

And why would you need to? It's only a game about selling poop. 🐛





## Ghost of Tsushima and the Cutting Word

Poetry is misunderstood and under-appreciated in the United States, and that's partly due to its fluctuating nature. Most definitions of the form are watery at best, dragging in terms like meter, rhyme, caesura, stanzas, requiring nothing but often operating most effectively when sticking to rules and conventions, flouting them explicitly, or busting out into completely free verse, and often all of the above in a single poem. They can be short, even just a single word, or epic in length as with the classics or contemporary novels in verse like Anne Carson's *Autobiography of Red*. They can seem incomprehensible, feeling like little lock boxes with the key flushed into the sewer, or at their best, when great poems strike our third eye open and give meaning to this often chaotic and unbearable life, even if only for a moment.

But it helps to start somewhere, and I like to start with poetry as expression. Even this basic setup can be intimidating – as a writer, examining the self and attempting to put it into language puts us dangerously close to being seen, or worse, misinterpreted; and as a reader, poetry often asks us to a more direct role in the making of the meaning of these words, where we must interpret, intuit, trust what we're drawn to and investigate that which maybe confounds us at first. Between writing and reading poetry, writing is often the easier act, if only because we can write for an audience of one and be content with our creation. Reading poetry is much more challenging and often topped with additional pressure of feeling like we read something incorrectly, which is

why I believe it's the lesser utilized aspect of the form, much to detriment of most of us.

Reading poetry is critical analysis, which is why poetry is more often taught at higher levels of English instruction. It's hard to test for critical analysis, because it can't be graded on a bubble sheet – someone has to read the student's essay about a poem, consider their assessments and determine if their analysis was clear, and from there, appropriate, meaningful or insightful. Outside of a testing environment, if a poem doesn't at least have a few lines that effectively hook a reader, they won't stick along to think about much else. We first approach verse that reflects ourselves, and sufficiently baited, can be led to larger modes of thought, and peeling apart layers with confidence that what we are drawing from the poem can indeed be found plainly on the page. So when I'm asked, as a poet, if I'm worried that people won't get what I'm trying to say, I respond that of course this worries me – I desire to be understood. But at the same time, there's an even sweeter thrill when a reader unthreads meaning that I may not have intentionally braided into the work, but to collaborate with them towards something that surprises and astounds us both can be uniquely intimate.

But this requires readers, and as stated, choosing to seek out and read poetry is often not the first experience with the form for many people. They're assigned something confusing, asked leading questions, instructed to read slowly and carefully as if examining a crime scene looking for clues. Reading poetry becomes work; writing poetry is meant to be freedom unbound.

I think about this dichotomy a lot, which I have no data to back up, so maybe I'm wrong. But it comes to mind usually when folks learn that I'm a poet, or at least I went to school for it, and they either tell me that reading poetry is too hard, or they've written some poems and would like to know what I think. I'm always happy to read anyone's poetry, but it's often clear that they haven't read much poetry. I'm not out here trying to say you have to “do the work” of reading before you're allowed to write, by all means writers should unburden themselves and put pen to paper however they see fit. But while I'm pretty sure I could run a paintbrush over a wall and call it a day, my housepainting would be much more appreciable if I'd watched a few tutorials, learned a little about color theory and really considered what makes a great paint job before just strolling into the hardware store.



This rant was meant to be more of an introduction to a piece about *Ghost of Tsushima* and how it asks players to compose haiku in a handful of scenic vistas, as well as the very end. Despite this failure of a pithy preamble, my original assessment of these haiku was appreciative frustration. Haiku in English are already hamstrung by our daisy-chained language, brimming with conjunctions, prepositions, articles of all sorts, words pulled and mutated from other languages and inconsistent application of adjustments for tense and plurality. As pulled from Japanese, Haiku are more agile, given that the language can do more with seven or five syllables. As such the relationship between English and Japanese haiku is not one-to-one. Luckily, the game allows you to break this rule, not forcing the player to choose the “right” lines, deftly refusing to grade or claim that there is a perfect haiku.

There isn't really a tutorial about what makes a powerful haiku, nor many examples to just sit down and read within the game. The vistas for writing haiku in *Ghost of Tsushima* are found in scenic areas secluded from the war. As such, they're ideal for haiku, which traditionally focus on nature as the subject and often the driving metaphor of the verse. Like most poems, there is the surface of the haiku, and the iceberg of meaning underneath. The surface is not superficial; the language must entice the reader to dive further. Though most of the game treats these moments as just another chore on the map, I was touched to find at the end, before an unflinching culture of honor and obligation forces you to battle your uncle and surrogate father to the death, both Jin Sakai and Lord Shimura sat down to reflect on the moment through haiku. At the precipice of an impossible decision, you compose some lines, ink your brush and put language to paper.

While I found the act of writing at this point to be invigorating, I was disappointed that the verse couldn't be shared. *Ghost of Tsushima* prioritizes writing haiku over reading it, saving your lines but beyond the typical modes of screenshots and sharing outside of the game only prioritizing what you have written, not offering something even like the absurd poetry of the multiplayer messages found throughout the *Dark Souls* games. Thus I found the haiku in the game honestly reflective of poetry's place in culture at large – prioritizing the purely introspective, disregarding of community and empathy.

This might have been where I'd left things, had I not remembered to inquire with my friend and fellow poet R. A. Villanueva. I knew he loved the game, and asked him to share his thoughts on the haiku experience. In his response he reminded me that, despite how I may feel about the state of reading poetry, I shouldn't bemoan the gift of writing it. Better to write a haiku in *Ghost of Tsushima* than to have not written at all. Who knows where the leaves may lead. 🍃



## Anatomy of an Airplane

I've always been fascinated by flight simulators. The first game that I can actually remember playing was a combat flight simulator by Lucasfilm called *Secret Weapons of the Luftwaffe*. The game was released way back in 1991 on floppy disk. This one came in a nice cardboard box with a paper manual describing the Air War in Europe that ran for no less than 225 pages. I still have a copy.

The latest and greatest flight simulator is undoubtedly the eponymous game by Microsoft. I'm of course talking about *Microsoft Flight Simulator*. The company has been making entries in this particular series for several decades now, the first game in the franchise having been released in 1982. I got started with *Microsoft Flight Simulator 98*, but really got into things a couple of years later when *Microsoft Flight Simulator 2002* came out. I've put several hundred hours at least into every subsequent release, a real standout being *Microsoft Flight Simulator X*. This one hit store shelves back in 2006, but remained the latest entry in the series until 2020, something that helps to explain how I managed to sink more than 1,000 hours into the game.

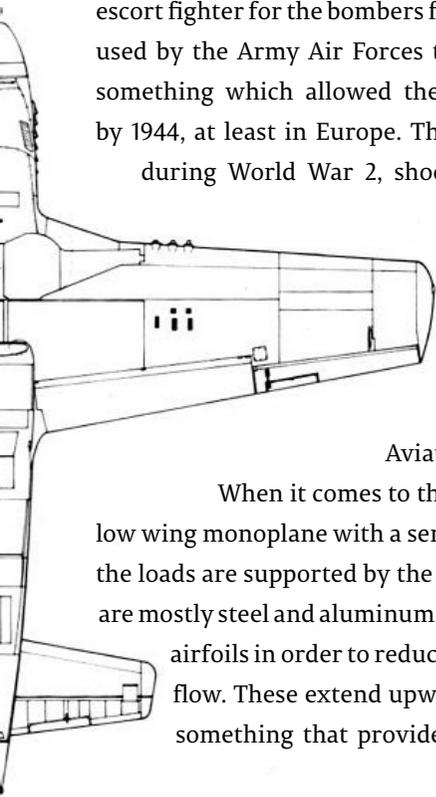
What I love so much about *Microsoft Flight Simulator* is that I can hop into all sorts of different airplanes, particularly warbirds. I happen to be a pilot, so there's nothing actually preventing me from flying any of them, but warbirds these days are so incredibly rare that hardly anybody ever gets the chance.

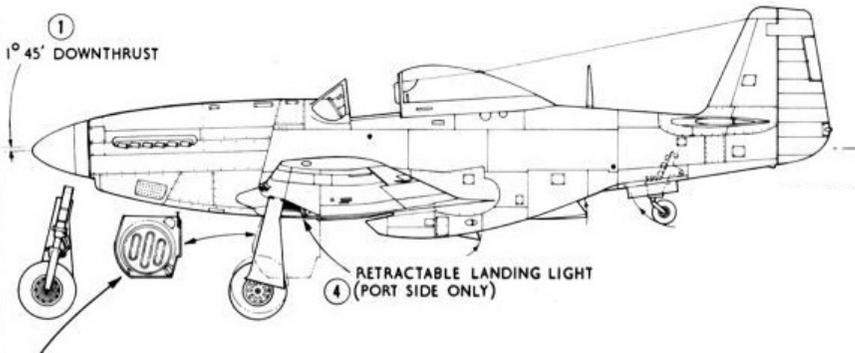
I like to go through all of the technical manuals before taking flight in the game, something which teaches me a ton about the different airplanes. These contain all sorts of information about the various components and systems in much the same way that you can learn everything you need to know about a building from its architectural documentation. Since the anatomy of an airplane is probably one of those things that you never thought much about, I figured this might be the moment to take an architectural approach to what I would argue is the best warbird of them all, the P51 Mustang.

The plane was a product of the legendary designer James Kindelberger. Created by a company called North American Aviation for the Royal Air Force back in 1940, the P51 Mustang entered service a couple of years later in 1942, mostly being used for reconnaissance missions. The earlier models were largely restricted to this role because they came equipped with a notoriously outdated engine called the Allison V1710, but later models were either given the famous Rolls Royce Merlin 66 or a license built version of this particular motor known as the Packard V1650. This power plant enabled the P51 Mustang to reach altitudes of up to 40,000 feet without sacrificing its already impressive range of 750 nautical miles, a staggering 1,375 nautical miles with drop tanks. The airplane cruised at 390 knots and featured a top speed that scratched the sound barrier at just over 500 knots. These made the P51 Mustang a perfect escort fighter for the bombers flying raids, but the airplane was also frequently used by the Army Air Forces to attack various types of ground installation, something which allowed the Allies to gain air superiority over the Axis by 1944, at least in Europe. The plane served in every theater of operations during World War 2, shooting down more than 4,950 enemy aircraft.

North American Aviation would make over 15,000 copies of the P51 Mustang before the Air Force began transitioning to another notable warbird in 1949, the F86 Sabre. That famous jet fighter was interestingly made by the same company, North American Aviation.

When it comes to the basic details, the P51 Mustang is a single seat, low wing monoplane with a semi-monocoque structure, meaning that most of the loads are supported by the actual shell of the airplane. The materials used are mostly steel and aluminum. The wings are much thinner than conventional airfoils in order to reduce drag at high airspeeds, a design called laminar flow. These extend upwards in a type of cantilever known as dihedral, something that provides better longitudinal stability, notably near a





stall. The wings feature differential ailerons on the outboard side and plain flaps on the inboard side of their trailing edges, basically ailerons that move in reverse of each other to counteract a phenomenon called adverse yaw in addition to hydraulically actuated flaps that extend without creating any kind of a gap. The empennage is typical of most aircraft, featuring a moveable rudder and elevator attached to fixed vertical and horizontal stabilizers.

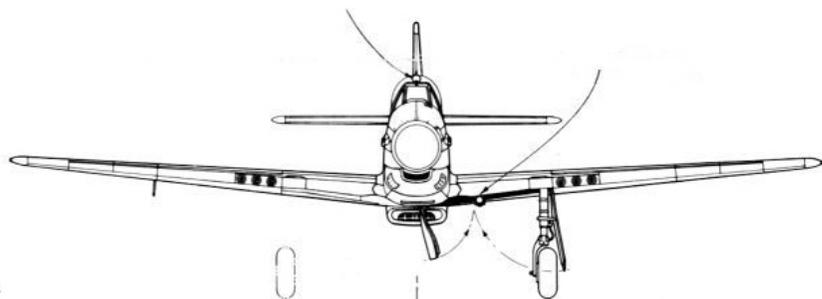
While most planes now have a nosewheel, the P51 Mustang is of the combination steerable and free casting tailwheel type with fully retractable landing gear, controlled hydraulically from the cockpit by means of a lever on the left console. This can be lowered in the event of an emergency with a nearby handle that releases the pressure in the hydraulic lines, allowing the landing gear to fall of their own weight. The plane also features a warning in the form of red and green lights along with a horn that sounds whenever you throttle to idle without extending the landing gear. The brakes are of the hydraulically actuated disk type and are given pressure from a reservoir driven by a pump on the accessory drive, located behind the engine. The control surfaces are actuated by the stick and a pair of pedals through a series of pulleys and pushrods, the pedals for the rudder and brakes, the stick for the ailerons and elevator. These each have a trim tab on their trailing edges which are controlled by a series of knobs inside the cockpit on the left console.

As for the power plant, the P51 Mustang comes equipped with a liquid cooled, carbureted V12 engine featuring a multiple stage supercharger controlled by aneroid switch that cuts in automatically at altitude, the first stage or low blower at 14,500 feet and the second stage or high blower at 19,500 feet. This basically is just a compressor driven by an accessory belt at the back of the engine which increases the pressure of the air entering the manifold for increased performance, particularly at high altitude where the air is thin. The motor is capable of developing well over 1,400 brake horse power at full throttle. While most engines at this point feature fuel injection,

the power plant of the P51 Mustang has a float type carburetor with a manifold pressure regulator that automatically compensates for differences in air density by means of a butterfly valve. The airplane is outfitted with a scoop under the fuselage that collects ram air which is bypassed in the event of a blockage by a door that allows heated air from the engine compartment to enter the carburetor. The after cooler and coolant radiators are also found in this particular part of the aircraft. Since the engine is rather substantial, the P51 Mustang is cooled by glycol through two separate systems, the first cooling the actual motor, the second cooling the supercharger.

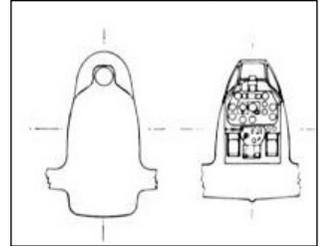
The plane has a mechanism that automatically changes the amount of fuel passing into the manifold, rich mixture at low altitude and lean mixture at high altitude. The fuel itself comes from a combination of two main tanks in the wings, one center tank in the fuselage and two external drop tanks for up to 489 gallons of gasoline. This gets forced into the carburetor by means of a primary pump on the accessory drive along with a pair of electrically powered secondary pumps within each tank and a special priming pump, all of which apart from the primary pump which is engine driven are actuated by switches in the cockpit. The tank in use at any given time is controlled by a selector switch on the floor in front of the stick. Some of the vaporized fuel goes back to the tanks when the engine is running by means of a return vent line. As for the oil system, the P51 Mustang has a large tank just forward of the firewall in addition to a radiator inside the scoop under the fuselage. The airplane features an outlet door on the bottom of the scoop which automatically controls the temperature and a scavenger pump which gathers up all of the oil thrown off by the pistons and drive shaft. This pump is in fact gravity fed, so the P51 Mustang is only able to stay inverted for eight or nine seconds before the engine will start to sputter.

Some aircraft with reciprocating engines are direct drive which means that engine and propeller turn at the same rate, but the P51 Mustang features a constant speed propeller which automatically changes the pitch of its four blades by means of a governor that operates on a combination of hydraulic



pressure from the oil reservoir and fly weights. The number of revolutions per minute can be set by a lever in the cockpit next to the throttle.

The electrical system runs on direct current supplied to the battery through a voltage regulator by means of an engine driven generator, both controlled by switches. The electricity produced powers the coolant and oil radiator controls, interior and exterior lighting, starter and secondary fuel pumps along with all of the radios and other avionics, all protected by circuit breakers in the cockpit. The amount of current flowing through the system is displayed by an ammeter that reads negative when power is being supplied by the battery and positive when power is being supplied by the generator. The ignition system is completely independent, current for the spark plugs in the engine being produced by a pair of magnetos controlled by a selector switch. These are basically just magnets rotating around a copper coil.



Fighters are known for their cramped cockpits and the P51 Mustang is no exception, but the controls are at least laid out for maximum efficiency. Similar to most light aircraft, cold air is fed into the cockpit through a small scoop on the fuselage, warm air being fed into the cockpit from another small scoop just behind the radiators. The controls for regulating the air intake are located on the floor next to the fuel gauges. Featuring a fairly standard safety belt and shoulder harness, the seat which is made from a type of material known as kapok is actually used in the event of an emergency as a life preserver. When it comes to the instruments, these are concentrated on the front console, flight instruments being grouped on the left, engine instruments being grouped on the right. The vacuum driven instruments which consist of the turn coordinator as well as the attitude and heading indicators are operated by a vacuum pump driven off the engine, the suction gage on the lower part of the front console showing whether or not the vacuum pump is providing enough pressure to spin the associate gyroscopes.

The most important instruments in the airplane are the airspeed indicator, altimeter and vertical speed indicator. These are powered by some combination of ram air entering a long shaft extending forward of the right wing known as a pitot tube and static air from a series of plates on the fuselage. While the airspeed indicator measures the difference between dynamic and static pressure, the altimeter and vertical speed indicator only rely on static pressure. The principle is that pressure decreases with altitude, so the needles on the altimeter and vertical speed indicator show an increase or decrease during a climb or descent even if the pitot tube is blocked. The airspeed indicator on the

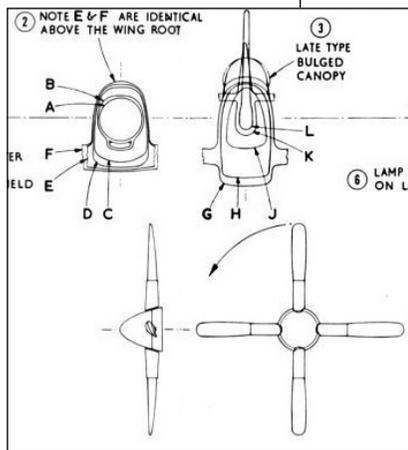
other hand will show an increase or decrease only when the amount of ram air entering the pitot tube changes, at least if static pressure is constant. The pitot tube is heated to prevent the formation of ice.

The engine instruments include a manifold pressure gage along with a tachometer, carburetor temperature gage, coolant temperature gage and engine gage. This actually is a combination of three different instruments, showing fuel pressure in addition to oil pressure and temperature. The various other instruments on the front console

include a compass, hydraulic pressure gage, oxygen pressure gage, ammeter and of course the clock. Located behind the seat are a transceiver which operates in the range known as Very High Frequency and an automatic direction finder which operates in the range called Low Frequency. The former features a mast behind the canopy and the latter features a mast running between the vertical stabilizer and the cockpit. The actual instruments are both controlled by knobs inside the cockpit on the right console. In case you're wondering, the automatic direction finder is a navigation instrument with a gage on the front panel that looks a little bit like a heading indicator, but features a large needle in the middle that shows your bearing to a given station.

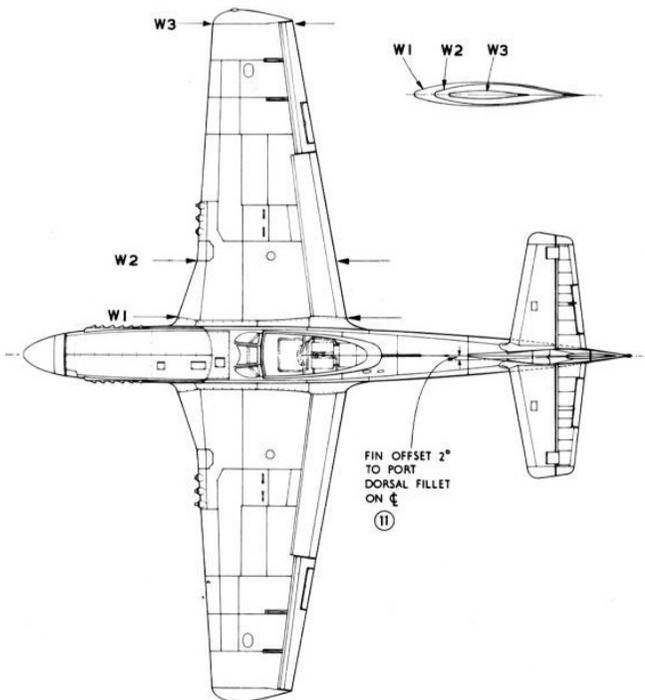
Since the airplane can be flown up to considerable heights, North American Aviation equipped the P51 Mustang with an oxygen system. This works entirely on demand, meaning that a regulator automatically furnishes the right amount of oxygen. You simply plug your mask into the relevant receptacle and open up the adjacent valve. The gages between the front and right consoles include pressure and flow indicators. When it comes to the oxygen tanks, these are located just behind the cockpit. They're accessible through a small door in the left side of the fuselage.

I've purposefully excluded the various parts of the airplane which are used for combat, but the P51 Mustang has a couple of additional features that are probably worth mentioning, the lights first and foremost. These are color coded to indicate direction, so the P51 Mustang has red, green and white lights on the left wing, right wing and tail. The plane also features a landing light on the left main gear strut. These can all of course be controlled by means of switches on the right console. The airplane has a parking brake in addition to a mooring bag filled with stakes and rope which is located within a small baggage compartment in the fuselage. The cockpit features a leather case for



maps and charts to the left of the seat. This can be found immediately above the bracket on the floor for something called a pilot relief tube.

I've mentioned this a few times before, but I think that architecture as both term and concept should be considered in a very broad sense. I mean, anything which is built or constructed requires a certain amount of planning, something which is typically called design. You might not think of an object as having been designed, but somebody still had to engage in a process of production. Perhaps they called themselves a technician. Maybe they were called an engineer. In my opinion, anything designed means architecture, at least in a certain sense of the word. Architects are definitely known for buildings, but the same approach to construction is common to all sorts of different trades and professions, the products of which being ships, cars or all manner of other things including of course aircraft. I personally believe that understanding how all of these things function from an architectural perspective can be a little bit enlightening. 🍷





## The End of Return to Monkey Island

This is a story about the end of a story, which means it's going to be spoiled – thoroughly. So, if you're a *Monkey Island* fan who hasn't beaten *Return to Monkey Island* yet, or if you're a series newcomer who wants to be surprised, proceed with caution. Or don't proceed at all, because the details will not be spared. If you do decide to carry on then great! But here's the thing: You should know that, like *Monkey Island's* legendary secret, things might not live up to your expectations.

Despite my initial reservations due to *Return to Monkey Island* being the first game in the series in over a decade – and the first original creators Ron Gilbert and Dave Grossman were involved with since 1991 – I had an absolute blast with it. Not just on a basic adventure game level, but as a return to, well *Monkey Island*. And along with the various references to past games in the series (plus a lot of returning characters), there was this sense of finality hanging in the air from start to finish. It was exhilarating, but also melancholy, feeling like this is it. This is when we, and Guybrush, *finally* find the titular Secret.

And that's exactly what he/we do. After all the puzzles and harrowing adventures; after all the mystery and riddles; after literal decades of wondering. We find the fabled Secret of Monkey Island.

Ultimately, Guybrush makes his way back to Monkey Island, delving deeper than ever before in a race to beat LeChuck to the punch, and then unexpectedly finds himself in a seemingly pointless back alley on Melee Island. It's physically

impossible, but then I noticed a rat that was a cutout moving along a track built into the sidewalk, and the windows were pasted onto the wall. I saw some discarded popcorn on the ground. Just like in *LeChuck's Revenge*, it was fake. I was in an amusement park. Guybrush makes a comment I can't quite recall now. Something along the lines of "Oh no, not yet!"

As the high seas adventure starts to melt away into what is presumably Guybrush's real life, the mighty pirate himself lets the facade slip. The implication being that this, and by extension all of his other games, were imaginary – a sort of pirate-themed role-playing fantasy vacation. Something to, for at least a little while, make Guybrush feel like a swashbuckling hero instead of a mere flooring inspector. And then, sitting in front of an animatronic LeChuck dangling an animatronic locksmith by one leg, sits the Secret. All Guybrush has to do is grab the key from the locksmith's hand.

Turns out the Secret is a T-Shirt.



No joke, the Secret of Monkey Island is a T-Shirt, tucked into an extremely gaudy treasure chest belonging to series mainstay (and morally dubious businessman) Stan. Disappointed? I know I sure was at first. But at the same time, what else did I expect? What else did any of us expect? That's the thing, though. As unexpected and disappointing as the final reveal of the mystical secret we've been chasing for over 30 years was, I also kind of loved it.

What's more, the game had been foreshadowing this reveal the entire time. We finally learn the Voodoo Lady's name, and it's . . . fine? It's a nice name but finally learning the truth takes some of the fun and mystery out of it, and Guybrush comments as much. There's a cupboard in a ship's galley that Guybrush expects is boarded up to contain some kind of unimaginable horror, but it's actually just to keep the doors from flying open in rough seas. And

again, Guybrush points out that the truth turned out to be less exciting. Even other characters make similar observations throughout, with Elaine (former Melee governor and Guybrush's wife) flat out telling Guybrush/us that we shouldn't expect too much from the Secret, because there's no way it could meet decades of expectations.

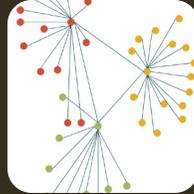
If we're being honest with ourselves, Elaine (and the game at large) was right all along. After so many years of curiosity and wonder, the Secret was never going to be what we all wanted – assuming any of us had even the slightest idea of what we hoped it would be in the first place.

This is why I love *Return to Monkey Island's* weird, disappointing and kind of sad ending so much. For Guybrush, it's a brief escape from reality. And really, isn't that exactly what these games are for us? Aren't we just like him in this case? Wanting a brief escape to an exciting and funny world where ghosts and zombies can be fought with root beer and sword fights are more about who has the sharper tongue than the sharper blade?

Perhaps more importantly: Even if it was all pretend (which, let's be real, it always was because these are videogames), does that actually make the exhilaration and puzzle solving satisfaction any less real? I'm not convinced it does. 🍷



*Features*



# LOST IN TRANSLATION

The Sega Saturn is one of the best JRPG consoles of all time...

...just not in the West.

By Aidan Moher





When you think of the Japanese RPG golden age, it recalls the 16-bit era, led by Nintendo's vast stable of classics like *Earthbound* and *Chrono Trigger*, followed by the PlayStation's dominance of the 32-bit era when *Final Fantasy VII* set the genre on a meteoric course for worldwide superstardom. It was a transformational time for Japanese roleplaying games, and created millions of lifelong fans in the process.

We all know how Sega played proud second fiddle during the Japanese RPG arms race of the 16-bit era, but what if I told you Sega, not Nintendo, was home to the second-best library of JRPGs during the 32-bit era, too?

"But, Aidan, the Saturn was a huge flop, has barely any JRPGs, and the ones that do exist cost, like, a million dollars."

Yes.

Correct.

But!

## Sega All Stars

No one will argue that the PlayStation trumps the Nintendo 64 and Saturn – and pretty much any other console in gaming history – with its avalanche of amazing JRPGs. It's got quality *and* quantity with titles like *Final Fantasy VII*, *Xenogears* and *Breath of Fire IV* among the impressive list

of exclusives. While the Saturn couldn't match Sony's quantity, it delivered high end quality titles for Japanese RPG fans, even if you only consider the games that reached Western shores. Couple this with the Sega Saturn's popularity in Japan and Sega's successful courting of many developers who weren't ready to make the jump to 3D, and you had the perfect recipe for a library of bold, experimental JRPGs that offer an experience unique to the console.

With its emphasis on 2D technology, the Saturn was the perfect home for the late Rieko Kodama's *Magic Knight Rayearth*, an action-RPG take on the popular manga from Clamp. It's bright and effervescent, and perfectly accompanied by a saccharine and cheeky translation from late-90s localization darlings Working Designs. Boasting equally impressive 2D graphics was Ancient's *The Legend of Oasis* – a sequel to the Sega Genesis's *Zelda*-clone, *Beyond Oasis* – which featured huge sprites and a world brimming with interesting locales accentuated by great art and animation. While *Zelda* was making the leap to 3D thanks to *Ocarina of Time* and *Majora's Mask*, *The Legend of Oasis* was a balm for players who preferred 2D exploration. *Albert Odyssey: Legend of Eldean*, also published by Working Designs, featured traditional Japanese RPG gameplay, striking 2D artwork, started life as a Super NES game and scratches the itch of players looking for something more familiar after *Final Fantasy VII* pushed the genre into new territory.

Late in development, Sega shoehorned 3D tech into the Saturn in an attempt to compete with the PlayStation, leading to great (if ugly) entries in their flagship *Shining Force* series with *Shining Force III* and a 3D dungeon crawling-spinoff called *Shining of the Holy Ark*. But the white elephant in the room – perhaps the Sega Saturn’s most infamous game – is *Panzer Dragoon Saga*, a \$1,200 game that actually earns its price tag for reasons beyond just rarity.

Based on Sega’s popular *Panzer Dragoon* rail shooters, this unique take on JRPGs introduced one of the genre’s most unique combat systems, which features just the singular protagonist, Edge, riding his infinitely customizable dragon and an Active Time Battle-like turn-based combat system that focused on positioning mechanics. Its story fleshes out the series’ evocative, melancholy world, creating a feeling that blends Hayao Miyazaki’s *Nausicaä of the Valley of the Wind* and French artist Mœbius’s instantly recognizable artwork. (So much so that

Mœbius did the cover art for the Japanese release of *Panzer Dragoon*.)

With flagging sales, and a new game console on the horizon, Sega sent *Panzer Dragoon Saga* to die in the West, reportedly shipping only 20,000 English copies of the game (compared to approximately 10M worldwide sales for *Final Fantasy VII*). Critics were impressed, but even at release it was so difficult to find that Sega ran an ad in gaming magazines making light of the situation: It featured a cut-out mask of Edge’s face under the tagline “For those who can’t find *Panzer Dragoon Saga* see below.” In the intervening years, its legend has grown, along with its price tag, which, at the time of writing, is over \$1,000 for a complete-in-box copy on the secondary market.

### **So, What Happened?**

The Saturn was rife with amazing games, including JRPGs, which were exploding in popularity at the time thanks to Square’s success on the PlayStation. So, how did Sega’s JRPG-friendly console die



at the exact time it should've thrived? A lot of miscalculations and a games industry shifting dramatically thanks to the arrival of newcomer Sony and their emphasis on cheap hardware and software.

“By the time [*Panzer Dragoon Saga*] came out in 1998,” explained Ben Lindbergh in a fabulous retrospective for The Ringer called “[The Ruinous Road of Gaming’s Missing Masterpiece](#),” “Sega of America was well into the depressing process of shrinking from a boom-time total of 2,200 employees to . . . a ‘skeleton crew’ of 200. The Saturn, Sega’s powerful CD-based successor to the Genesis, had lost the latest round of console wars to Sony’s PlayStation and Nintendo’s N64, sunk by a steep \$399 launch price (roughly \$650 in today’s dollars), a rushed release on the heels of Sega’s market-cluttering 32X Genesis add-on, a lack of third-party software support (exacerbated by the system’s difficult-to-work-with dual CPU), and the absence of an original platformer starring Sega mascot Sonic.”

3D was taking off, especially in the West, and despite best efforts from Sega to beef up the Saturn hardware for 3D

games, it wasn’t a contest. The console was floundering all around, due to many of the reasons outlined by Lindbergh above, but especially with JRPGs because, just like Nintendo, if you didn’t have Square, you didn’t have the JRPG crowd.

But, if you look closely at the Japanese Saturn JRPG library, you’ll notice that many of the best 2D JRPGs from the PlayStation – including *Lunar: Silver Star Story Complete* and *Grandia* – are there, and often offer the definitive experience. Now, decades later, those games are available to English-speaking players thanks to a robust fan community dedicated to making official and unofficial translations playable for the first time.

### Fans to the Rescue

One of the biggest challenges for the Saturn and its JRPGs has always been accessibility. From the console’s short lifespan, many games left behind in Japan due to its lack of success in the West and the Saturn’s architecture creating a difficult environment for software emulation, it’s always been difficult to play these games.

Now that’s changing.



When I covered *Lunar: Silver Star Story Complete* for Electronic Gaming Monthly, I lamented the localization changes made by publisher Working Designs when they brought the game west for the PlayStation. Not the translation, but the various gameplay tweaks they made in addition to adding an English script. “Working Designs took their role as localizers seriously and made many, many tweaks to the gameplay, almost all of which aimed at making the game more difficult than its original Japanese release,” I reported. “Enemies do a whopping 45 percent more damage, and provide 14 percent less experience and 10 percent less silver when defeated. These changes turn the game into a grind fest, requiring players to tip-toe into dungeons, push through until they’ve burned through their resources

and retreat to town to restock. It adds a significant amount of artificial playtime to the game, and feels at odds with the emotions the storytellers and visual artists were trying to convey.”

Since the late 90s, when young teams were unofficially translating games like *Final Fantasy V*, intrepid fans have been putting in countless hours bringing lost Japanese games to western gamers. In the case of the Saturn, this means players can finally play *Dragon Force II*, *Linkle Liver Story*, and *Sakura Wars*, or an entirely new localization of the definitive version of Yasumi Matsuno’s classic *Ogre Battle: March of the Black Queen*. These are high-end JRPGs that compete with anything found on the PlayStation. Of equal interest are fan efforts to port the English localizations from the PlaySta-



tion versions of games like *Grandia* and the aforementioned *Lunar: Silver Star Story Complete* to the Saturn.

The English PlayStation script for *Lunar* is great, but thanks to these fans, it's now possible to apply it to the Saturn version and experience the game with its intended difficulty. Western gamers only received the PlayStation version of *Grandia*, which was a graphically compromised port of the original Saturn release. Fans have similarly patched the Saturn version with the English script, once again creating a definitive experience for a classic golden age Japanese RPG.

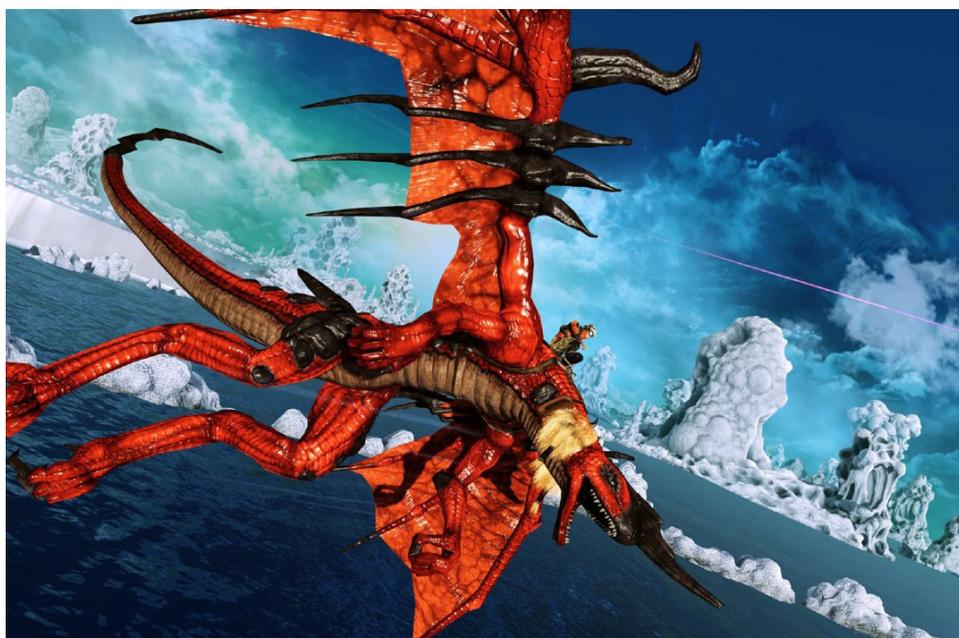
Thanks to these hardworking fan hackers, preservation efforts through places like the Internet Archive, advancements in hardware emulation options like the *MiSTer FPGA* project, and console mods like the *Fenrir ODE* (a microSD-compatible replacement for the Saturn's optical drive), it's becoming easier than ever to explore the Saturn's unique library of JRPGs.

## Legacy

As a JRPG-obsessed teenager in the 90s, the Saturn was a punchline for me and my friends. Little did we know it held a treasure trove of games we'd have loved if we had a chance to play them. Thanks to a bad business move, Sony's courting of Square and cheap hardware, and games media that seemed put off the Saturn from its first reveal, we never got that chance.

25 years later, I discovered a library of games uninterested in trends, a place for creators who weren't afraid to experiment. From *Magic Knight Rayearth's* irresistible buoyancy to *Panzer Dragoon Saga's* sprawling post-apocalypse, top-tier versions of PlayStation and Super NES classics and exclusive continuations of storied franchises, the Saturn proves its worth as not just a wonderful box of curios, but an JRPG powerhouse. A time capsule from a period when JRPGs reigned supreme.

And everybody's invited to the opening party. 🍷



# SURVIVING HUMANITY

The cat, the fox  
and the apocalypse

By Jon Bailes





To some, the end of humanity may not be a tragedy, more a curiosity. That's certainly the case for a lone cat in Blue Twelve Studio's action-adventure *Stray*, after she plummets into the ruins of civilization. For others, tragedy comes not from the demise of humankind itself, but in the ripple effect of its death throes. Take the fox in Herobeat Studio's survival game *Endling: Extinction Is Forever*, for instance, trying to nurture her cubs in an environment dissolving under the weight of human failure.

These two games, released on the same day in July this year, form a two-pronged critique of human hubris. Cat and fox provide low-slung perspectives from which we observe the collapse of the Anthropocene and what rises in its place. Their representations of humanity's (self-)destruction are like many we've seen before – *Endling's* opening could almost be a dark alternate climax for Disney's *Bambi*, as fire envelops the woodland and a panicked stag succumbs to the smoke – and follow a branch of modern apocalyptic fiction, such as *Don't Look Up*, that feels increasingly fatalistic. They

are indictments of a (neoliberal capitalist) civilization, laying out straight our collective idiocy, apparently concluding that all there is left to do is hope something better takes our place.

But when placed side-by-side, as benefits the publishing schedule that saw these titles born as twins, they reinforce one another's underlying currents. Approaching the apocalypse from either end – before and after – their themes cohere into a stronger whole that might prompt us not to forsake humanity but rethink it as something radically creative and outward-looking.

\* \* \*

After the forest fire in *Endling*, which our fox narrowly escapes, humanity's presence and destructiveness only increases. The pregnant vixen finds shelter inside a small rocky hollow and pushes out her cubs. Now you've got to venture outside to gather food, respecting her nocturnal rhythm to return before sunrise. The people nearby move during the day, of course, so when you emerge each

evening, you note how they've eaten further into nature – excavating, building, dumping and polluting.

The fox lives among the side effects of human industry, a concept explored by the game's 2.5D mode of exploration. What looks like an open world is really a network of linear paths, intersecting at junctions. These single lane roads signal how your attempts to hunt and forage are throttled by the dominant species, complicated further by parked vehicles, piles of refuse, guard dogs and locked gates that force you to find alternate ways around. Rather than puzzles to overcome, such obstructions simply disappear at intervals, linking your access to the world to human activity. All the while, natural sources of food diminish, forcing you closer to the enemy.

When the seasons change, you lead the cubs away and establish a new den in the shell of a discarded machine. As you move, in the background, the plight

of humanity begins to unravel. We see intensive farming operations, intensive logging, then a kind of environmental refugee camp, with caravans and shacks housing the displaced. Finally, it all washes away, leaving only a desert where forlorn survivors trudge hopelessly, hunting for scraps like the fox herself.

There's minor hope in the ending, as the cubs have by now learned survival skills of their own. But it feels like hope for a post-human world, while people themselves have learned nothing. *Endling* is an angry critique of our short-sightedness. Human endeavor here is disorganized and desperate, consuming nature in a way that undercuts its own ability to thrive, inducing a downward spiral where hardship leads to further destruction. Aside from a few individuals who offer the fox some kindness, we appear to be beyond redemption.

\* \* \*





In *Stray*, humanity isn't a problem. Some undisclosed time ago, a catastrophe on the surface of the planet forced people underground, constructing a city like a giant sealed bunker. Yet the survivors were wiped out by a terrible pandemic after all, and all that remains are their fossilized buildings and tech. The cat hails from the newly flourishing top-side, where it lives an idyllic existence as part of a small feline colony until an unfortunate slip sends it tumbling below. Your only goal is to get back up, to continue enjoying the post-human dawn.

From the cat's-eye-view, the retro-futurist ruin becomes an assault course or playground, where air conditioning units are stairways to ascend cracked apartment blocks, and dusty green bottles beg to be pawed off a ledge. There is a destructive mischief in being a cat, of course, from jumping on a checkerboard, scattering the pieces, to sharpening your claws on the arm of a couch. But this isn't

the conscious destruction perpetuated by humans, it's an altogether more innocent interaction with an environment built for other beings with other concerns.

Like *Ending*, though, the animal is only part of the story here, as a group of androids that outlived their human creators have formed a small community. On one level, these robots, displaying emojis on monitor screen heads like real facial expressions, seem to reflect life in postmodern consumerist societies. Each droid bases its identity on some aspect of "Western" culture without really knowing why, as if they picked roles at random, from a musician seeking inspiration to a drunk slumped on the counter in the local bar, creating the ultimate simulacra – a facsimile of a society that never existed. Their speech and motions are sincere but signify nothing. "I do love the smell of fresh paint," one droid remarks. "It reminds me of, oh wait. I can't smell anything. How sad."

Yet some of these machines are coming to terms with their existence, grappling with philosophy or concepts of art and creative expression. And within their number is a small gang that calls itself the Outsiders, whose singular aim is to return to the planet surface. Whatever has triggered this “desire,” it represents a break from everyday routines, and when the cat does finally open the city roof to reveal the sunlight above, the implication is that the androids will now have to define their own civilization.

\* \* \*

On the face of it, *Endling* and *Stray* both seem to resign themselves to the terminal decline of the present. *Endling* focuses on our blinkered excesses, whereas *Stray* mounts an escapist fantasy in which the world gets a second chance without us. Neither concern themselves with any potential for us to fight for victory over en-

vironmental destruction in our own era. Indeed, the only “human” voice in *Stray* is the digitized consciousness of a past survivor uploaded into a drone, which becomes the cat’s companion and eventually acknowledges that humanity’s time has passed.

And it’s difficult to argue against such a conclusion when colonialist capitalism is surely due a self-effacing apocalypse of its own making. *Endling*’s fiction rings especially true in the way it depicts the end as piecemeal, messy and desperate, not the result (as in *Stray*) of a singular back-firing grand plan. *Stray* is valuable, however, in how it reframes human disorder through a sense of cultural lostness and fragmentation. We might see ourselves in its androids – NPCs in our own reality, performing interests that grant fleeting satisfaction without collective meaning or effective causes to unite around.

Read differently, however, the Outsiders, along with the cat and the fox cubs,



can also point to a different possible future for us all. We're told by one droid early on in *Stray* that "there are those whose code can understand the concept" of the outside. In other words, like the Outsiders, some of us, perhaps many, are able to comprehend ways of living that break through dominant ideas and assumptions. There's a Utopian seed here that's still directed at us as humans in the present.

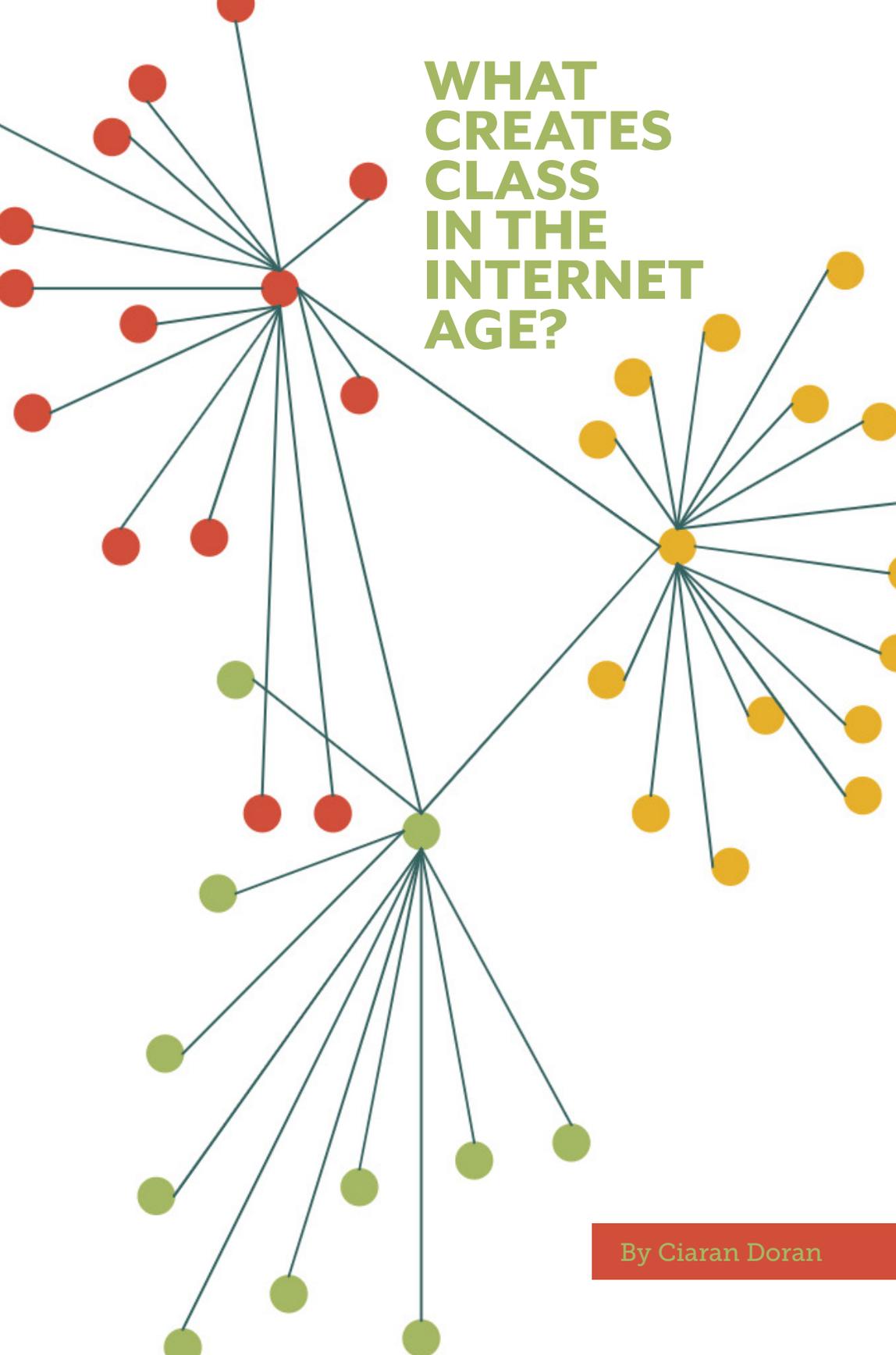
More than that, there's optimism in these games not in spite of, but *because* of the collapse of humanity they depict. Many post-apocalyptic fictions focus on the continuation of human experience, and as such can function as fantasies of post-civilization, where the remaining few finally become self-sufficient neoliberal individuals. Playing as fox or cat, conversely, de-centers humans from the composition, asking us to think about

ways of surviving and thriving that lack the baggage of our ingrained cultural concerns.

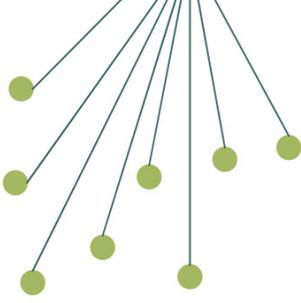
Substituting our usual videogame avatars with animals that would be mere set dressing in most titles highlights how surviving or averting the apocalypse is a matter of discarding common (ideological) viewpoints. If one implication in *Endling* and *Stray* is that we aren't worth saving, another is that the anthropocentric concept of saving ourselves is the root of the problem. As long as we obsess about our own future – leading to absurd "solutions" such as colonizing Mars – we're doomed not to have one. In short, whether humanity is worth saving depends on which humanity we're talking about, and the goals it has. But the "code" for self-transformation has always been within us. 🐾



# WHAT CREATES CLASS IN THE INTERNET AGE?



By Ciaran Doran



Let's time travel. Long before the internet, way before the telephone. A crisis is happening; international conflicts create division; division creates shortages. Or maybe the divisions create the conflict in the first place. Maybe the shortages cause the divisions. Resources are limited, how are "we" going to divide ours. "We" feed our own. "We" don't have enough for "them." "We" are not even like "them" – and so it starts: classes arise, whether they be based on genetic factors, ideologies or wealth.

To prove a point, I want us to travel back to 19th century Ireland, where the national crop has succumbed to blight and most have no food. Imagine being in the middle-class, among those who can at least consider leaving the island and going elsewhere. Most boats are going to America, and you can just about afford a ticket. If you were lower-class, you're going to take your chances staying (and they aren't good). If you were upper-class – and by this, I mean an English settler given land by the Crown – you'd be fine with staying. That's because you didn't rely on the national crop and had plenty of grain stored away in secured facilities. Historically, English Royals told their subjects that they could have the land in Ireland, and not to worry about the Irish because the Crown would defend settlers with guns.

Despite complications, we can still show the event highlighted three distinct classes: the upper-class who were unaffected, the middle-class who had to struggle for survival and the lower-class, for whom Fate rolled the dice. It's shocking to think about this, and that one group of people were untouched while others succumbed to hunger but looking at how the population was systematized, everything follows logically after the system. In the upper part of the system, we have the "controllers," those using weaponry (what we might call technology back then) to take the resources they wanted and subdue resistance from lower parts of the system: either those in semi-cooperation with the controllers or those with no influence whatsoever.

Today, your descendants managed to settle in America and have offspring. They tell stories about you sometimes and think of those events as far-off times that'll never happen again. After all, we've really moved on – society is more advanced. We've got The Internet. But no, things haven't changed all that much. The internet is just the new edge to the system but while that system is still stitched together with weapons, it's also being stitched together by itself. The internet is becoming the most efficient tool for segregation and that's because the internet is now between us and our food. It's getting harder to get food directly. Even before the global pandemic of 2019, I met a friend returning from China who told me that the area they worked in was full of cashless towns. She literally could not

use cash to buy anything. “What then, when there’s an internet outage?” I asked her. She shrugged, with a smile and said: “There are no internet outages.”

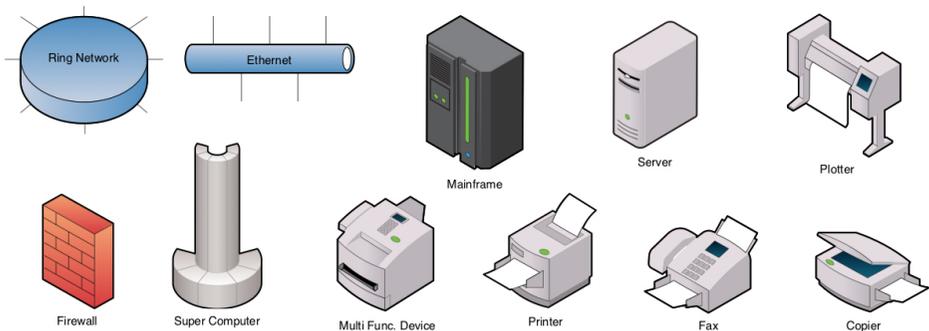
But there are and some of them depend on who you are.

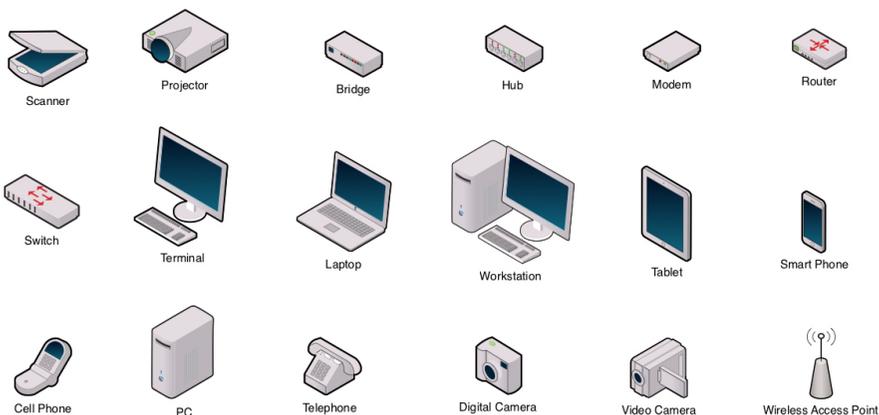
98% of international internet traffic flows along a network of undersea cables. This means of course that America might be connected to France, which then passes information to Spain and from Spain into Africa. It means that countries need to cooperate for information to be passed along. It also means that governments can modify the incoming information to suit themselves before it ever gets to the people. What might be sent from America might not be what a foreign citizen reads – if they even have access to the internet. Worldwide internet penetration is only hovering at around 50%. That means that every other person worldwide has no independent chance to read this article, and many might be reading it with applied censorship or even modification of material. Some governments might add lies.

With recent sabotage occurring on gas pipelines between Russia and Europe,

we can imagine that undersea internet cables are also at risk. Some effective attacks could easily isolate certain countries and in a time of conflict there might be little chance to repair such cables. The internet could then develop in completely different ways in different areas (as it already does now with nations building alternative types of networks internally, as a defensive and sustaining measure, should conflict occur). It could become impossible to send information to certain areas. The worldwide web (www) would then just be the wide web (ww).

In more liberal countries, citizens enjoy greater influence and make demands on governmental departments to allow free access to the internet as well as monitor it for harmful content and act to remove such content and restrict its sources. Of course, no government would ever allow citizens total access to all of the information that is saved on the internet but in America, a relatively small percentage of information is out of bounds to the individual. This ought to include sensitive information which malicious actors could take advantage of – things like passwords, banking codes, elements





of a person's background or history and official documents regarding national security. However, this isn't really the case.

You see, all of your personal information is somewhere. Everything you have ever done online and any information about that has been transferred online is traceable. The online (virtual) "you" is a web of activity that says a lot about the offline (real) you. Comments on social media apply here – this article applies to me and so do all of my purchases, transactions and actions. If you're a naughty person: you might be posting extremist statements or calling for violence against groups or states, the 2D nanobots called crawlers will alert monitors to your activity. It will then be scrutinized by real human beings who will decide how and when to apprehend you. And try you.

While it's easy to understand what a series of words mean, it's hard to interpret their tone or intention when they are not spoken. There is no accompanying transfer of emotional information – at least not to the same degree as in live contact. Your sarcasm may not be picked

by the A.I., though bots are capable of understanding the concept of sarcasm. They just aren't originators of it, and they aren't controlling in the same way humans are. They don't desire things unless they are programmed to. A wish to employ sarcasm will never arise within them – although they may be coded to reproduce sarcasm in certain interactions.

So, in taking the internet as a whole, humans are in control of it, but which humans? You are allowed to use the internet to access your money, but you are not allowed to access another's money. You can sell things on the internet and so can others. Who can sell the fastest? How is that determined? It is determined by internet speed and that is determined by internet providers. If you have a high speed your business can carry out a thousand transactions per hour while a business with an extremely slow speed might manage three. Clearly, the former of the two businesses will flourish while the latter is sinking by comparison.

In this specific case, the internet pro-

vider has created two classes. Even without your knowing, for reasons known only to them an internet provider can ensure that another individual or group of individuals can fare better in life than you. The others might succeed where you fail – or even die. What factors might provoke actors to provide internet access in an unequal and inequitable fashion? In a free market, that could depend on wealth; whether you are able to pay for an internet speed that even allows you to keep up with competitors. Were there discriminating persons in control of internet provision, they might enable or disable certain groups or individuals based on personal interests; they might suppress businesses run by people of certain ethnicities, religions, aims.

In a way, the above could mean that the world in the internet age is being divided into myriad classes according to their ease of movement online; what information those classes can access (knowledge being power) and other restrictions. It could still be argued though that the same amount of classes exist, the same three as in 19th century Ireland: The upper-class control the internet itself – the system. They suppress and subdue the middle-class, those people who are

forced to use the internet but don't influence its design. That's probably you, by the way. I very much doubt you are affluent enough to be "providing" internet access for others. You must follow the tunnels of the internet in exactly the way it's laid out for you, or you don't have access to energy, food, transport, communications, healthcare, banking or maybe life itself.

Today's lower class are those in a completely different bubble to the rest of us. They're the ones not getting on the ships in 19th century Ireland. They can't join the great middle-class because they have no way of getting online yet. In this view, humanity's lower class now total 50% of Earth's people. In countries like North Korea, the number of people without internet access totals 99%. They can't fact-check, independently research or share news.

No matter what you think the internet is, it boils down to a method of organizing resources. Those in control can cut the cake how they wish. Having the cake in one's hands might create the impression that one owns it and is beneficent enough to share it out to others. But it's everyone's cake, isn't it? 🍷



Proxy Server



E-Commerce Server



Database Server



Content Management Server



# BREAKING AWAY FROM THE FOLD

By Justin Reeve





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.

There was a time when indie games could get at least a little bit of attention, but over the course of the past eight or nine years, the market for them has become steadily saturated. I'm sure that we're all pretty familiar with the term "indie apocalypse." The result has been a constant struggle to stand out from the crowd, with some reaching astounding heights but others failing to make their mark on the world. With its calming atmosphere and innovative mechanics, *A Tale of Paper: Refolded* seems poised for success even despite the many challenges involved, thanks in no small part to some perfectly timed support from an Epic MegaGrant.

*A Tale of Paper: Refolded* is a puzzle platformer with a unique shapeshifting mechanic allowing you to assume a variety of forms. The game tells the story of Line, a magical character made of paper who can use origami to change its shape. "Transform into a frog, a rocket, a bird and more as Line embarks upon an emotional journey to fulfill the dream of its creator," the official description explains. The story poses a number of interesting questions including the extent to which our most deeply held hopes and ambitions can impact the people around us. In other words, "Can a dream transcend its owner?"

The way Concept Artist and 3D Animator Raúl Roldán describes the game, *A Tale of Paper: Refolded* is a charming adventure that "allows you to just lay back and enjoy a very calming experience for a few hours, playing as an endearing and cute character that can shapeshift using origami." The studio behind the project, Open House Games, based in Barcelona, Spain, refers to *A Tale of Paper: Refolded* as more of an experience than anything else, a feeling of presence or even just being there, something which tries to go beyond the bounds of its own medium. "We see it as taking part in a longer movie where you lay back and forget everything for a few hours. It's just the player and the game and we want people to immerse themselves within the atmosphere," Roldán explains. When it comes to what players can

expect to take away from the experience, Roldán hopes that players will get to feel the “story that we wanted to tell without text or words and also leave them wondering with their own theories.” The artist adds that “I want them to end the game and leave with a good memory about it, so that when it comes to mind, they remember having a good time with it.”



When it comes to making *A Tale of Paper: Refolded* stand out from other puzzle platformers, Roldán remarked that “for us, the way you get to use the platforming abilities with the origami is very unique. For example, instead of adding a double jump, the player has to transform into a frog. This way you are constantly switching between shapes at your liking to traverse each scenario how you prefer or thinking which is better for each situation.” *A Tale of Paper: Refolded* also features three prequel chapters, each of which adds a couple of new mechanics. These are primarily focused on affording players the ability to better express themselves through a series of clever gameplay twists. According to Roldán, players are “given a more dynamic ability to traverse the different scenarios and have to avoid new dangers and obstacles in a different way.” Players, for example, can use a new ability in these prequel chapters called Stomp, which lets them engage with hostile Roombas in a manner which allows for all sorts of creativity. “Stomp is the most interesting for us, as it adds a twist to the Roomba encounters because now the players will be able to attack the Roombas and stun them for a few seconds instead of just having to outrun them,” the developer notes.

This particular approach to game design can be traced back to the shared experiences of the team over at Open House; almost everyone working on the project has studied at the same university. “We are a small team and *A Tale of Paper: Refolded* is our first game,” Roldán says. “Our experience comes from the game development university that we all studied at and by having played multiple indie games and consumed various media that we use as inspiration.” In terms of design philosophy, the team is all about innovation, aiming to transport players to new places or worlds apart. “When it comes to making games, we want to create experiences that have elements or that are in their totality original and different,” the artist explains. “We mainly focus on single player experiences that tell unique stories that can reach a variety of players.”



According to Roldán, *A Tale of Paper: Refolded* was inspired by a number of other successful puzzle platformers, *Little Nightmares* in particular. This puts players into the shoes of a tiny person exploring a huge house, perhaps better described as a dusty old mansion. In any case, the setting is truly fit for a horror show. “The first idea was born when we took as inspiration *Little Nightmares*,” Roldán recalls. “When it came out, we loved the concept of exploring a world where everything was oversized in relation to the main character.” The team had no intention of making a horror game, so the decision was made to adopt a much lighter and more whimsical tone. “As we did not want to make a horror game, we took it in another direction with the origami theme in mind, inspired by the movie *Kubo and the Two*

*Strings*,” Roldán explains. The aim was to use the “paper factor to make our main character face common dangers that are not especially scary,” the developer says. “Roombas, for example.” The next step was to make this vision for the game a reality, a major turning point coming just after production got into full swing. “A very important date for us was in 2018 when we released the free demo of *A Tale of Paper: Refolded* onto Itch.io,” Roldán remembers. “The feedback and impressions we received were so positive that it really made us take the decision on making it a full game.” This would be where the Epic MegaGrants program entered the picture.



Epic MegaGrants provided the necessary financial backing to go from a demo to a full release, prequel chapters included. “It gave us the financial push that we needed to develop the expansion before having a publisher for it,” Roldán pointed out. The program also allowed the team to hire a composer for the project, something which turned out to be absolutely critical on account of the fact that *A Tale of Paper: Refolded* relies quite a bit on music to communicate emotion, at least in its current state. “We were also able to hire musicians, something that was a necessary aspect of the game, because it does not have dialogue or text. Our only way to express the emotions we wanted the player to feel was through the gameplay and sound. Right now, we can say that the original soundtrack is something we are very proud of,” the artist explains. Unreal Engine also played an important part in things. “The biggest noticeable thing was how Unreal Engine gives you the tools to make the game look beautiful in a very easy way;”

Roldán says. “Other engines might be a bit tricky to tweak until you get that professional look which you can give an indie game. Unreal Engine helped us achieve the atmosphere we wanted for the game with almost no headaches and we were very pleased with it.”

*A Tale of Paper: Refolded* was released earlier this year on August 19, 2022. The reviews have so far been positive, particularly those coming from the community. The game currently has a few dozen user reviews on the digital distribution platforms GOG and Steam, almost all of which are filled with praise, a point which hasn't escaped the attention of Open House. “We listen very closely to what the players say about the game and we use the feedback that the community gives us to fix any issues the game might have in order to put out a much better experience for everyone,” Roldán explains. “As for critics overall, we are very pleased with how the game was received.”

\* \* \*

Visit the [official site](#) for *A Tale of Paper: Refolded* to learn more! 🇺🇸



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## Illustrations

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Cover: NASA (Wait, what do you mean it is the *wrong* Saturn?!)