UNWINNABLE MONTHLY

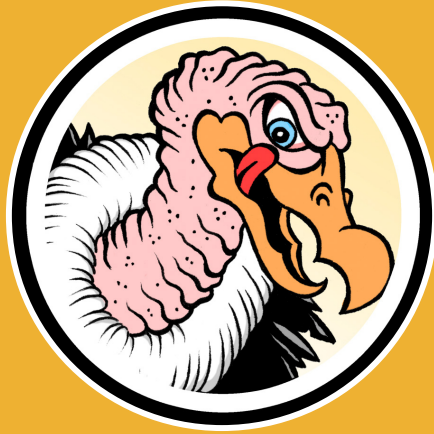# GREMLINS

UNWINNABLE

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Dear Reader,
Welcome to the final issue of the year! It's been a big one for Team Unwinnable, so I'm really excited for what comes next year!

This month's cover feature (cover by Kyle Patterson) is for the person responsible for this whole thing, Phil Russell. Were it not for Phil's little impromptu subscription drive at the end of last year we'd have never done gremlins. Also, I wrote about what gremlins even are.

As for our regular columnists I'd like to bring to you . . . Emma Kostopolus on turning the cute into horrors. Matt Marrone does some product reviews. Emily Price watched *Gremlins* for the first time and had some thoughts! Justin Reeve contends with real honest to goodness gremlins. Rob Rich hates it when gremlins play with his toys. Levi Rubeck might have one inside his computer. Ben Sailer goes to the other origin of gremlins, Mogwai. And Phoenix Simms is the only person who tackles *Gremlins 2*.

Stay safe, wear a mask and please, be good to yourselves, your neighbors, and your friends. Happy holidays everyone!

See you all in a few weeks in Exploits!

David Shimomura
Chicago, Illinois
December 11, 2022

Enter the Gremlins

For someone who writes a column focused on the past, there's a lot of classic movies I haven't seen. I didn't have good internet or cable growing up, so even music and cult YouTube videos from my own generation I mostly got to see in college (I think I heard Eminem and knew who he was for the first time at, like, nineteen?) But it's the older millennial stuff that people get really incredulous about. One of my most told stories is about a guy who found out that I hadn't watched *Space Jam*, and then spent 20 minutes (I am not kidding) describing the plot to me in intricate detail.

Stuff like that. Or, uh, *Gremlins*.

Below are my (live) reactions to the movie, time stamped if you want to watch along.

Pre-Mortem: What I know about the movie *Gremlins*
- Gremlins are little creatures that are the embodiment of chaos. They are what make things go missing and other mischievous stuff. Someone told me they were invented during World War II (?)
- I think it's a Steven Spielberg movie
- Brain emoji

What are my feelings about watching *Gremlins*? I don't really know. I am nervous that HBO describes it as a "horror comedy". I don't like that the little dude on the preview looks like a Furby. So I would say "lukewarm negative" – but hey, let's change my mind.

0:31: I am in love with everyone's costumes already, especially the two nuns who are in this scene for some reason. I respect that this guy is an inventor but, having just seen *Back to the Future* this summer this information makes me nervous.

2:03: Ok never mind, this man has invented a toiletry Rubik's cube and, it seems like, zero other things. Respect taken back.

6:41: The kid in the Yankees hat and the kid in a tree costume are better entrepreneurs than the inventor 100%. Also, the old man in this scene is an anti-corruption king.

9:27: Another costume-based comment but this teenager having a suit on under his winter clothes is the biggest jump scare of the movie so far.

22:45: I'm turning around on the inventions, really just on the orange juice machine. I like that you can see the actor cracking up as it explodes.

23:17: Every child in this movie has the voice and responsibilities of a 45-year-old. Let Christmas tree kid go on break.

25:18: This glass of water has the tension of Chekhov's gun.

25:28: Wow, I understand narrative structure.

31:30: The parents really have chemistry and I love that for them. Also, the dad definitely looks like William Shatner.

32:20: Did they base this film off the tribbles episode of *Star Trek*? (Post movie note: I don't know but I did find this forum post in which someone says "tribbles would crush gremlins any day," which, yes.)

33:43: Explicit WWII reference from the man about to drunk drive a tractor. I thought this might be an attempt to connect with veterans but "doubleyou doubleyou aye aye" kind of undermines the tone. I am legitimately curious about the grievances everyone in this town seems to have towards centralized government and the appeal to the prosperity of the past.

36:56: "We can talk about it... you know, on the phone."

38:02: This is my opinion of gremlins: I do not like them. They have bad vibes. If I had a gremlin in my house, I would call pest control. I still wouldn't do what everyone in this movie is doing, though, which is violating animal rights and/or the Geneva Conventions.

42:00: The main character, whose name I still don't know, is the biggest himbo in human history. He does not know what seasonal depression is. He's confused about the basics of how the gremlins operate halfway into the film. I do appreciate that everyone in this movie jumps to the correct conclusions about situations almost immediately, a very non-80s movie response and something that I predict is going to serve them well in the gremlins zombie apocalypse that is coming in the next 20 minutes.

53:17: Ok, even I have to admit: the little gremlin footprints in dust on the record player are great.

55:30: I am really taken aback by how much the tone has shifted in the middle here, and I'm having trouble deciding how much of it is supposed to be a comedy about horror movies. I think the movie thinks I am more unambiguously on the side of the people in this movie than I am (see above point about rights violations). Also, unsure how I am supposed to feel about microwaving a gremlin.

56:16: Boggle set confirmed.

1:09:00: I appreciate the whimsy of the mailbox gremlin. It occurs to me that they are the dark version of the inventions, things that add an unnecessary plop of joy/horror to an otherwise normal situation. I can say that the one-off environmental gags are 100% the best part of this movie. Evil gremlin chorus singers really are the spirit of Christmas.

1:15:27: At this point, I am not enjoying myself. However, I would watch an entire movie about the gremlins living their lives and doing people stuff. I am on team gremlin. I think they should destroy this town and make it gremlin city. I cannot believe I still have half an hour of this movie.

1:20:38: What. what. What. What!!!!????

1:23:45: Gremlins can mirror human activity without ever having seen it. Are they a hive mind? Do they all share the knowledge of every gremlin, and if so, does that mean gremlins have been to the movies before? Or are they actually capable of human intelligence but limited by their gremlin bodies? Can we separate human and gremlin intelligence from each other or is it more of a spectrum?

1:32:59: So, we've gone from horror comedy to bizarro horror. Main dude just got hit with a crossbow. It's actually a bit scary. But now there's a chainsaw parody. I can't figure this one out, folks.

1:43.00: Well, it's over.

In retrospect, my main feeling is perplexed exhaustion. I think *Gremlins* thinks it's doing a horror parody but is too disinterested in making any points about horror (beyond "it's ridiculous!") to actually make it a good one. Whenever I thought too hard about what was going on, I snapped back to the reality that it probably didn't matter, and Joe Dante just thought it would be funny to see a gremlin chain-smoking. I think that part of the point of the movie is to evade normal emotional registers and make you laugh from a line no one on earth should have ever said. *Gremlins* got laughs out of me, but they were the laughs you give when you can't believe someone just said what they said with their real mouth.

I do admire this movie's sheer ability to make me totally unsure what I should be feeling at any given time. What is the effect of *Gremlins*? Is the emotional beat about this girl's dad supposed to be sincere, or funny, or just weird? Am I supposed to be afraid of the gremlins? Why do I feel like the connection between them and veterans is more than just an origin story and is trying to be (totally unsuccessfully) respectful? In summary, what am I supposed to feel?

I don't have answers to any of these questions, and reader, I'm guessing you don't either. But the one good thing I can say for *Gremlins* unequivocally is that it was nice to watch a Christmas movie that isn't good vibes only, that in fact insists on having the most rancid vibes available the vast majority of the time. Stay safe everyone, and don't unplug your microwave. 🔖

Going Gremlin Mode: Cuteness and Horror

(Author's Note: Yes, I know that the phrase up for the OED word of the year is "goblin mode," but I humbly submit my remix as a cuter version)

A classic horror scenario; you come into contact with something that is, on its face, adorable. Maybe it's a painting, often it's a toy, but it's always something that looks entirely harmless. You take it home, play with it, put in on your shelf. Cue a slow descent into nightmare fuel, as whatever it is slowly but surely reveals itself to be a manifestation of pure evil. Or just kind of mischievous, in the case of the *Gremlins* movie from which this issue was themed. But no matter the scale of the terror inflicted upon you by the adorable monstrosity, you know that cute things are not to be trusted.

So, since this is a column about horror and videogames, I'd like to riff a little on the theme here and expand our thinking out to when cute goes wrong more generally, and why the adorable can sometimes be the most terrifying. To start, I think we need to briefly engage in a little horror taxonomy, and then I'll move into an example.

I assert (and others have probably argued much better before me) that horror can take two forms: the known and the unknown. The unknown is cosmic horror stuff (think Lovecraft), space and alien life (as in the Xenomorph), other things beyond our mortal ken. It's definitely scary to be confronted by something that your brain is utterly incapable of processing, something not

encompassed by the reality we understand. But what I've always found to be more compelling is the horror of the known. This is when an everyday object simply stops playing by the rules – haunted houses and cursed dolls are two common examples. Instead of presenting us with something entirely new, something to add to the fabric of our reality, the horror of the known rips a hole in the reality we already have. This is compelling because ultimately it means that we cannot trust that the reality we have lived in our whole lives will continue to hold up. The math, as the kids say, will stop mathing. It sows a healthy distrust in our everyday experiences, including, obviously, with adorable things like mogwai or stuffed animals.

Cuteness also has particular aesthetic value in horror because once the horror is revealed, we are not only terrified and maybe disgusted, we are affronted with how something we presumed to be innocent is actually evil. Lots of horror plays on this in different ways – babies like Rosemary's or the now omnipresent evil clown – but it all plays into the same emotion, a fundamental "how dare you." This adds another layer to our suspicion of everyday things (basically nobody likes clowns anymore).

To take a videogame example of this "cute horror" phenomenon, let's think about *Bugsnax* for a minute. I'm sure you've already read editorials about how the game is actually a pretty messed up body horror parable, but a brief recap of mechanics in case you're unaware: in the game, you capture various half-bug half-snack creatures, which you can then eat yourself or feed to your fellow adventurers. Doing so transforms the body of the adventurer into a manifestation of the snack. At first, this is presented as a goofy cosmetic mechanic, but by the end of the game, you learn the truth: that the Bugsnax are actually a hivemind parasitic life form who spread via luring people into

ingesting them and then becoming addicted. Thus, what seems at first to be a family-friendly experience ends up being a kind of messed up game (though, obviously, not graphic in any traditional sense).

The specific example of *Bugsnax* is interesting because it points out the horror of the known in an interesting way: the horror of the game lies in something you as the player have specifically enacted upon the other characters by feeding them the Snax. It's not only, then, the cutesy narrative that provides the vehicle for horror, but the very normal and known mechanic of making cosmetic changes to characters. Cosmetics are a part of videogaming so common now as to be taken entirely for granted in most contexts, and in most cases, we aren't made to stop and think about what those choices mean in the context of the game-world – we are gods who can reinvent characters in our image, or whatever image we so choose. By making the cosmetic change mechanic the key to the horror of the game, *Bugsnax* really effectively turns cute critters with Cheetos for legs into abominations that leave the player asking, "My God, what have I done?"

So, this issue about gremlins is also kind of, a little bit, about the horror of turning the expected on its head, which is something we can also see in videogames (*Bugsnax* specifically, but I've also written elsewhere about how *Slime Rancher* is pretty messed up if you think about it even a little bit). The horror of the known is something that many horror games explore, and surely, eventually, more games will begin to turn to the specific horror of the cute and cuddly. 🛡

In the Spaceship Over Glasgow With Mogwai

Mogwai are synonymous with post-rock. Formed in 1995 and named after the gremlin-progenitor from the film series of the same name, it's impossible to talk about the genre without name dropping the influential Glaswegians (and vice versa). However, their status as one the world's preeminent post-rock bands was achieved accidentally. In a 2008 interview with Chillville, multi-instrumentalist Barry Burns explains that no one in the band is comfortable with the term and that he hates The Wire (one of a handful of magazines commonly credited for helping to coin the phrase post-rock) because it "overanalyzes everything."

For anyone familiar with Mogwai and post-rock, this might sound equivalent to, say, Metallica denouncing themselves as metal. The more you understand about Mogwai though, the more their resistance to categorization makes sense, despite whatever benefits they've enjoyed by being an unwitting cornerstone in an entire genre's development. They are a case study in radical authenticity, often copied but never duplicated, and rarely understood as well as they should be.

I first heard about Mogwai through British guitar magazines while living in England during high school. Since this was before my family had high-speed Internet and they never came on TV, everything I knew about the band up to that time was through written word. While I don't recall those publications ever using any post-whatever adjectives to describe the band's sound, I understood their songs were predominantly instrumental and they used a lot of guitar pedals.

Beyond that, I had zero idea what to make of Mogwai. I was a young metalhead with no context for any other bands that sounded like them, and all the details I could glean from those magazine stories seemed incongruous. What could this band that wore Slayer T-shirts but played Fender Telecasters and were frequently mentioned in the same breath as boring Britpop bands possibly sound like and who was the audience? I wasn't sure if their music was anything I'd be interested in, but I could tell they were more compelling than a run-of-the-mill indie band (a term that had different sonic connotations across the pond than in the United States).

Years later in college, I got into post-rock through bands like Explosions in the Sky and Russian Circles. In the process of tracing my way through the genre's history, I eventually found my way back to Mogwai and learned that not only were they not a weird Britpop band, but they were considered one of the historical cornerstones of post-rock (whether they care for that designation or not). While my sense that they were different was accurate, I was wildly mistaken about who their peers even were to begin with (certainly not bands like Blur, as this infamous shirt design made abundantly clear). I started my exploration of Mogwai's catalog with their sixth album *The Hawk is Howling* (2008), a record that's generally considered middle-of-the-road relative to the rest of their discography, but one that remains a personal favorite of mine. Their tasteful utilization of tension and release lent a somewhat darker vibe to the proceedings than what was typical from American post-rock bands. Song titles like "I'm Jim Morrison, I'm Dead" also telegraphed dark humor and dry wit, which was a refreshing contrast to the genre's tendency toward tiresome self-seriousness.

Indeed, Mogwai weren't exactly like most other post-rock bands. While Sigur Ros claimed they were going to change the way people thought about music (though to be fair, who's to say they didn't succeed), Mogwai were much humbler and more self-aware. Their sound is grandiose, but their feet are planted firmly on the ground, possessing very little patience for pretentiousness and no compunction for puncturing inflated egos. In terms of

attitude, they felt more aligned with the spirit of punk rather than indie rock, which spoke to my taste and values much more directly than most forgettable post-rock also-rans (who don't need to be named in this column).

On their second album *Come On Die Young* (1999), which was recently rereleased along with their debut *Young Team* (1997), Mogwai planted their flag in the ground on the opening track "Punk Rock." It's an ambient wash of guitar noise that swirls underneath a sampled clip from a late-1970s CBC interview with Iggy Pop wherein "the godfather of punk" expresses disdain for the term punk rock being used to dismiss music that the masses had misconstrued as degenerate. As Stuart Berman wrote for Pitchfork in 2014, "As much as it overtly asserts Mogwai's allegiance to the rock iconoclasts of yore, the track also betrays the band's own frustration with being misunderstood."

At the risk of overanalyzing the track, it's easy to see why Mogwai felt the need to make a bold opening statement on the record. They didn't fit with Britpop (which the more mainstream magazines I read seemed to align them with) but they also didn't want to be overhyped as the future of post-rock (which much cooler magazines that I was not reading were hailing them as the future of). It's also likely they were keenly aware of the tension between their rising stature and the British rock press's ability to destroy bands as fast as it builds them up.

The specific sample they chose to make that statement was not a coincidence. In his new book *Spaceships Over Glasgow: Mogwai, Mayhem, and Misspent Youth* (the title being a reference to a lyric on "Take Me Somewhere Nice" from the second track on their 2001 third record *Rock Action*), guitarist and rare vocalist Stuart Braithwaite writes, "Iggy was the living embodiment of that complete don't-give-a-fuck attitude." Sonically, Iggy Pop might seem like an unlikely influence for a polished and pensive post-rock act. Spiritually, however, his impact the "godfather of punk" on the band's approach is clear.

Too many generic post-rock bands (many of which have borrowed elements from Mogwai's sound without ever understanding what makes Mogwai
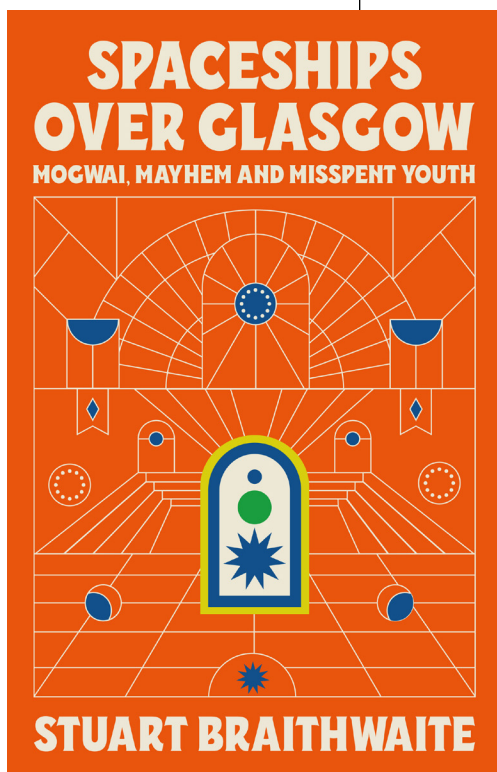
interesting) are content to color inside the lines, primarily borrowing inspiration from other post-rock bands, and doing so with insufferable pretentiousness. At its worst, it's beyond boring, lacking any of the energy or vibrancy that makes rock music, well, rock music at all.

Mogwai, meanwhile, have always stridently done their own thing while drawing upon a broad range of influences from across the underground rock spectrum, and they've done so with a self-assured attitude that has allowed them to freely explore what can be achieved with little more than guitars, bass, and drums. They've never been afraid to speak their minds (even if they rarely speak on their records) and the things that make them compelling are as intangible as they are readily apparent in their sound.

They are an example of finding long-term success by following your own vision, liking what you like regardless of what tastemakers might say, and pressing onward regardless of whether anyone gets what you're doing. They are more than just a rock band and more than just the reluctant elder statesmen for a genre they never felt any affinity with. They are, in short, the promise of punk made manifest. 🎺

Gremlin Girl Energy

"Could there be a female gremlin?"

*"Lipstick, boobies bitch, you had me [at] little gremlin va-jay-jay. I love it so much that it's not only in the movie, but it's **definitely** in the movie. There's no backsies on that one, no penny taxis, yes yes yes, in the movie – done! That's why we need a woman in the writer's room. Next!"*

- "Hollywood Sequel Doctor" skit,
from *Key and Peele*

And that's exactly how Greta made it into *Gremlins 2: The New Batch*. At least, I'm convinced of it.

I remember the first time I stumbled upon a Google image result that included Greta, the Gremlin It-Girl. I was disgusted at first (the eye-roll was reflexive) but eventually intrigued. This was several years ago. Now my opinions of her, when read under a more feminist-revisionist lens, are that she's charmingly camp, she's a 90s icon and she's absolutely that bitch.

Greta is both a problem and a potential solution to that problem. She's introduced by drinking what appears to be a gender serum and then immediately pursuing a man after she transforms. Obviously, the implications of this transformation are very essentialist and thorny (not to mention potentially transphobic, but I'll leave space for others to discuss this aspect other than for me to state that's definitely not great), especially when coupled with the fact that Greta is voiced by Joe Dante, the director of the Gremlins films.

Considering how deliberately Looney Toons-esque the sequel to *Gremlins* is, this puts Greta in line with a long cartoon history of characters who perform femininity as the butt of a joke. She's closely adjacent to the Humanoid Female Animal trope, with the dial turned almost all the way to the human-side of the Sliding Scale of Anthropomorphism for maximum va-va-voom male gaze action. Yet Greta's also a monster, which means she gets to be a neon green baddie that transgresses or at least comments on some of these norms.

As Jess Zimmerman eloquently said in the intro to Women and Other Monsters (which is not only about women, but those who are marginalized because patriarchy perceives them as feminine), "if stepping outside the boundaries makes you monstrous, that means monsters are no longer bound." Greta is definitely a caricature of femininity, but in some ways, she resists the typical male gaze. Think of the "New York, New York" scene, when the Gremlins present a stage that is Greta's face, with her ascending through a hole that telescopes open from one of the stage's eyeballs. There's almost an element of drag to her as she preens in a blood-red dress with a plunging décolletage and a matching fluorescent feather boa. And this might be deliberate, as there are theories that she's connected to Deagle gremlin, a gremlin who appears more deliberately in drag during the bar scene in the first film. Her beauty is, typical to the Gremlins franchise's hyperbolic style, quite literally in the eye of the beholder. And Greta is always feeling her fantasy. Greta is both the personification of a male writer's anxieties about what feminine chaos means for them and a figure that can be read as having a specific type of empowering energy: gremlin girl energy.

Gremlin girl energy can be characterized, in my experience, as a quality that someone has when they are perceived as feminine but refusing to conform

to any rigid feminine definition. Especially with regards to beauty standards and emotional regulations. Someone possesses this sort of energy they love themselves fearlessly, doesn't avoid any "ugly" feelings or hide any unsightly expressions they might make. One of Greta's most iconic and only lines (outside of suggestive moaning) is in fact "Don't be afraid of how you feel" and it's even been used as the slogan for her "Skullector Edition" Monster High Doll. Gremlin girl energy is ugly crying, ugly laughing, as well as pulling strange faces and poses without any restraint. It's definitely related in some ways to Oxford's word of the year, "goblin-mode" but is specific to feminine social codes.

This energy extends, of course, to other behaviors and actions too. Like indulging in junk food, shamelessly taunting or flirting and more. In some ways, gremlin girl energy intersects with Manic Pixie Girl energy. But unlike the latter, gremlin girls don't feel beholden to a brooding man who they act as a chaotic guide for. They simply do what they want when they want without worrying about external criticism or approval. And if a side-effect of behaving so is inspiring or infuriating others, well, what did you expect? This last statement might come off as somewhat petulant, but we'll get to that shortly.

HUSTLE COMPETITORS: Seen here are (above), Joe Robbins, Empire Distributing's vice-president, with Gremlin girl, Sabrina Osment during the course of the Chicago area's introduction of the new Gremlin Hustle; and (below) Bob Steckhauer, one of the seven winners of the Hustle competition receiving his $100 prize. With him are Gremlin girl Lynn Reid, Gremlin president Frank Fogelman and Circle International president Dean McMurdie.

Gremlin girls and their influence on geek and game culture actually have a long and ongoing history. Other than Greta and her Lola Bunny-like introduction to the Gremlins movie franchise, there was a real-life equivalent of gremlin girls in the arcade scene as well. Back when Sega was partnered with Gremlin Industries to increase their presence in the arcade market, they hired Lynn Reid and Sabrina Osment as a competitive gamer duo who were officially dubbed the Gremlin Girls. They toured 19 cities, in both the U.S. and Europe, challenging players to beat them two out of three games for Sega Gremlin's promotion of their game *Hustle*.

The Gremlin Girls also did this while dressed, according to arcade historians Keith Smith and Ethan Johnson, "scantily clad in T-shirts and short-shorts."

They would give victorious players a $100 bill and later a suggestively-worded certificate stating that winners "played around" and "scored" with them. Yet despite this provocative narrative, the Gremlin Girls were more than just their company's advertising gimmick (although they did rake in $1.5 million dollars-worth of orders for *Hustle* cabinets). They absolutely dominated in the competitive gaming scene, with apparently only several challengers out of 1,233 beating them during the tour. Like Greta being the sole surviving gremlin in the film, the Gremlin Girls were nigh untouchable.

The Gremlin Girls of game history defied the stereotypical perception of gamer culture being male-dominated. They did this a decade before publications like Electronic Games reported on the presence of women in arcades to boot! But they also represent the way that women have often been used as an attractive way to sell merchandise as well. Though they were obviously not as sexist as the employment and treatment of Booth Babes at latter day expos, the Gremlin Girls are not wholly divorced from that trade show practice. They share with Greta the problematic nature of binary gender and how perceptions within such a binary are skewed towards thinking the feminine version of something typically perceived as masculine – like a competitive gamer – are essentialist and discriminatory.

This carries on in today's gaming culture and with a surprisingly specific instance of the term gremlin being applied to e-girls, who often inhabit competitive online gaming spaces like Twitch. For the most part the energy associated with e-girl or gamer gremlins is similar to my initial definition of empowerment via exhibiting chaotic representation and behavior. Yet there are some key, less positive differences in this arena.

For instance, since 2016 in the *Overwatch* scene this label is often associated with D.Va mains but is connected to the character being perceived as a girl that shares similar traits to crusty old stereotypes of "hardcore gamers." Namely that hardcore gamers chug Mountain Dew, eat copious amounts of Doritos and fast-food, and relentlessly mock other players. The depiction of D.Va this way went viral enough that Activision-Blizzard accepted it as canon by giving D.Va an emote of her slugging back a Dew and chomping on snacks while streaming a game.

On the surface, D.Va very much has gremlin girl energy, but when it's mashed up with the hardcore gamer stereotypes it reads more as her being "one of the boys." Although one could also view this emote and the representation of Gremlin D.Va and e-girls as being a subversion of hardcore gamer culture. After all, hardcore gamers (or casual gamers for that matter) are not inherently gendered labels, even if we may have strong associations with those labels.

I think the trouble with current gremlin girl culture stems back to how dysfunctional emotions are often internalized by feminine individuals in a patriarchal society that likes to infantilize them. When people think of gremlin girls these days, they put emphasis on them being *girls*. After all, being a brat with no regard for anyone isn't a great reputation to aspire to. But being a brat that breaks boundaries and proudly broadens definitions of femininity? Now we're talking. But some creators manage to find another way to navigate the more problematic aspects of gremlin girl energy and what it can influence.

Emily Rifkin and Rebecca Warm's titular Gremlin Girl from their 2019 YouTube animated series is a personification of one woman, Franny's, anxious inner child. This gremlin, according to the co-creators, is meant to be a metaphor for how hyper-vigilant anxiety can constrict us. But this gremlin is not unique to Franny's experience. In the penultimate episode of season one titled "Round 'n Round", it's revealed that Franny isn't the only one with an inner gremlin voice. In fact, everyone has one, regardless of gender. And each individual's gremlin ruminates on something different, from how their date judges them to how small their existence is in the grand scheme of things.

There's something to be said about how Greta, despite being a fairly insulting, low-hanging fruit of a character, can open up discussions about how femininity in geek spaces and beyond is performed. There's a reason why she's one of the most enduring gremlins besides Gizmo, both in the film and in the fandom. Even if your reaction is more akin to Forster's at the closing wedding scene, a mixture of panic slowly giving way to resigned yet fascinated shrug, you have to admit Greta's a force to be reckoned with. A force we're still reckoning with. 🔱

Ranking the Gremlins Gizmos

When Unwinnable forced me to watch *Gremlins* for the first time since I was a kid, I was surprised at how much I remembered. There's the adorable/mischievous Mogwai, of course. The infectious theme music. And then there's the Bathroom Buddy.

The Bathroom Buddy is . . . well, why not let its inventor, Rand Peltzer – the goofy dad who buys Mogwai Prime and renames him Gizmo for his son, Billy, in the first place – describe it.

"It's the invention of the century, friends. It eliminates the need to carry heavy luggage and things when you travel. You got yourself your shaving mirror. You got yourself your toothbrush. You got yourself a toothpick. You got toenail clippers. You got [a] nail file. You got yourself a dental mirror. This is gonna revolutionize traveling."

Peltzer's products don't end with the all-in-one, hand-held Bathroom Buddy. He's a consummate salesman and amateur engineer who has filled his home with unique household innovations that, as his wife, Lynn, so kindly points out, work well . . . at first.

In honor of Rand Peltzer, we have decided to rank the unappreciated genius' six greatest gizmos, from worst to first.

The Peltzer coffee maker: This unremarkable looking machine spits and sputters and eventually produces a thick sludge. What is perhaps most

amazing about this machine is how close Peltzer's aforementioned wife leans into it while it's apparently brewing scalding hot liquid. Given the splattering explosions of his other kitchen aids, it's a wonder she still has a face.

The Peltzer orange juicer: Speaking of splattering explosions, this thing may or may not produce any drinkable OJ, but its spraying power is quite impressive. When Billy tries to make a glass, the orange pulp ends up covering the cabinets from wall to wall. Not only is it a glorious mess, it's foreshadowing for a different kind of muck that will cover the kitchen, thanks to a comically giant blender, which we're also going to assume is a Peltzer original.

The Peltzer automatic egg cracker: Who doesn't hate cracking eggs? If given the choice to do it ourselves in the sink or sit back and relax while an animatronic chicken appliance breaks them with its beak, the choice soon becomes clear: we should do it ourselves.

The Peltzer smokeless ashtray: This could rank higher for two reasons. The first is the sales pitch, given to a gas station attendant who for some reason has half-smoked cigarettes positively littering his desk. Forget smokeless; dude needs an ashtray – *any* ash tray. And the second reason: grandfather graciously accepts it as a parting gift when he comes to collect Gizmo at the end of the film. Dude doesn't pull any punches while ragging on 1980s American culture, so if the smokeless ashtray somehow passes muster, however barely, for the old Chinese critic, who can argue?

The Peltzer cordless phone: From Wikipedia: "Cordless phones became widely used in home and workplaces during the early 1980s. According to The New York Times, the number of cordless phones sold in the United States grew from 50,000 in 1980 to 1 million in 1982." In some ways, Peltzer was on the cutting edge of communications in 1984 with his remote-controlled whatchamacallit. How much worse could it have been, really, than some of the first few million models sold to the public? No need to answer that.

The Bathroom Buddy: The clear-cut No. 1. And it has to be No. 1, because, nearly 40 years later, the Swiss Army knife of self-grooming still captures the imagination. It's garbage, yes, but it's delightful garbage. Which could also be a succinct review for the film *Gremlins* itself.

So, what comes of Rand Peltzer? We know his son ends up with Phoebe Cates, so there's at least one creation of his that succeeds. But the last word we hear of him comes in *Gremlins 2*, in which he doesn't appear, and it's . . . not exactly promising. Still, we'd like to give an honorable mention to "a reversible toilet paper or something," which a visiting Mr. Futterman tells Billy his father is currently working on.

It's heartening that he's still plugging away six years later, at least. That being said, we hope Futterman's facts were as mixed up as he is, and that Rand Peltzer wasn't devising disgusting-sounding TP but was on his way to striking it big. And if he did, perhaps it was with something we now use every day. Something we take for granted, blissfully unaware of the minor problem it hilariously solved in the first place. Something that makes the illogical logical – even if the name Peltzer isn't plastered on it. 🎷

Stripe, Mohawk, Brainy, Linux, Windows

Our living room TV is connected to a computer that is Frankensteined together from older parts stuffed into a mini ITX case barely able to contain it all. I'm not certain that the graphics card is of much use but it's in there humming away, big fans blowing as we stream shows or occasionally games from the more robust computer in the other room. When it works it sings, but when it doesn't, my limited knowledge is tested and I fear gremlins are loose.

Computer technology is a vast field with so many sub-areas of focus and learning, seemingly too much for any individual to become an expert in without sacrificing almost every other area of their life. Whether it's hardware, software, or networks, each is a chain of machines and processes along which any single error can bring down the entire system. It's a miracle any of these has run as long as they have, and we are best not considering that miracle and its ties to nuclear armament systems and whatnot. Better to concern ourselves with the gremlins in our own home, for now.

Here the most recent gremlin attack came in the form of a computer that suddenly crawled to a near halt. It would turn on, but it wouldn't really shut down, just get stuck on a loop. Rainmeter (a program used to put a bunch of fun junk on my desktop) wasn't starting and the Explorer file system seemed to be on strike. My brain was empty so I hit up the hive mind, which revealed command line instructions to clean the hard drive, search for corruption and

realign the binary elements. But the gremlins were ahead of this preliminary attempt at resolution – preventing me from clean restarts, or booting up from my Windows 10 installation USB drive, aka my own personal nuclear option.

Of course, I forgot the first step of flushing gremlins from the computer: unplug all your USB shit. I only did this because I was dropping the Win10 USB in every spot I could in case the motherboard was faulty (a wee gremlin problem from years earlier, a dusty recollection in my greying grey matter). In doing so I removed a USB HDD used to store old DVD rips, and wouldn't you know it, the PC sprang back to life with Rainmeter and Explorer in tow again.

This wasn't exactly a solution – clearly the gremlin has merely been cast into the hard drive, which played its videos on a Mac laptop without shutting down the entire show there. So, the problem remains, crawling around somewhere between a corrupt file or a possible mechanical failure or a cable losing connection or a solder point that has failed or perhaps just user error and plugging into incorrectly powered USB ports or a virus downloaded despite self-proclamations of good internet habits. Worlds of options, with only A/B testing and swapping various bits and bobs that I'm lucky enough to have collected.


The truly sick part of all of this is probably how much I enjoy it. More often than even playing games nowadays, I find myself with a dumb problem that I can't wait to just web search and throw shit at. For a long time, it was running Linux on the TV PC. Installing the OS (usually Pop!) was always smooth as silk, but threads quickly got snagged after that. Being open source, most Linux distros and their attendant Firefoxes and Chromiums don't play nice with the digital rights management plug-ins required to use the various streaming sites. There are ways around this, but it's not just a click of course – the cost of open-source software is learning just a smidge more about what's going

on and then copy+pasting the command line you dug up from some random forum into the terminal and hoping for the best.

I love the idea of Linux and stuck with it far longer than many others in my position. Which is to say, to someone with just enough knowledge (and desire to not spend money on more gadgets than necessary) to get himself into trouble, it's software built by gremlins and used by gremlin hunters. Finding solutions that work is often more immediately satisfying than using the system I was working on. Until I hit that wall of gremlins after their pool spawning party, and an update borks my taped together solution for streaming, or the system keeps forgetting to send sound to the stereo instead of just the TV, or I can't get the controller to work when streaming through Parsec (dealing with two computers at once, a gremlin paradise). I broke down, I went back to Windows.

Which, as detailed above, isn't a perfect solution in itself. The joy of squashing gremlins isn't complete eradication. I don't necessarily want the dance to be over, but I'm not interested in fumbling my steps for too long either. Despite the challenges of Linux, I'm regularly drawn to the mission and potential of open-source software. And Windows is crawling with its own gremlins, claws out, ready to bring a night of streaming crashing back down to earth. Ữ
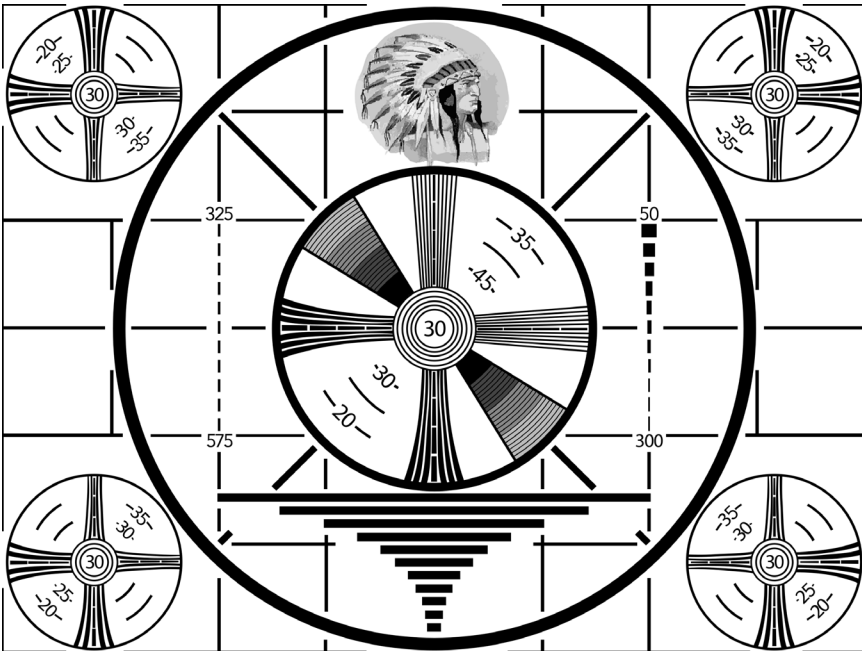
WHAT EVERY PILOT **KNOWS**

Gremlins on Board

Gremlins came out on June 8, 1984, to critical and commercial success, but well before there was the movie, there was the real thing. I'm of course talking about the little monsters that tear apart airplanes whenever pilots aren't looking.

You probably aren't aware of the etymology, but the word gremlin comes directly from aviation. This goes all the way back to World War II, at which point the term was used to describe the largely unexplainable mechanical malfunctions affecting various aircraft systems. Think along the lines of dead batteries, hydraulic leaks, popped fuses or even flat tires. Those little problems that turn up quite literally overnight. The reality was that pilots and mechanics were simply passing the buck for what most likely amounted to negligence, but these mechanical malfunctions were blamed on gremlins, mischievous creatures that make a mess out of machinery. The word first came into common usage among pilots of the Royal Air Force that were stationed in bases throughout the Near and Middle East. The earliest printed record happens to be a poem dated to April 10, 1929, that was published in the magazine Aeroplane.

Pilots have been complaining about gremlins ever since there have been airplanes and I can attest to the fact that people are still engaging in this

particular practice today. While some things have definitely stayed the same, there have on the other hand been a couple of notable developments, usage of the word for example going from a reference to a description. The term was originally assigned to those mischievous little monsters, but over the course of the last seven or eight decades, pilots have mostly been applying the word to the actual mechanical malfunctions. I mean the dead batteries, hydraulic leaks, popped fuses and flat tires. I've come across quite a few of these myself, but just so that you don't get any false impressions, I'm very responsible and don't pass the buck, even in cases where I find a mess made by someone else. The fact of the matter is that airplanes quite simply have problems that can't ever seem to be resolved, squeaky seats or a staticky radio for example.

I've never sat in a plane that didn't have at least a couple of gremlins on board. Similar to the vast majority of pilots including some near and dear to me, I did most of the training for my Private Pilot License on a Cessna 152. There were all sorts of gremlins in that particular plane, having been built way back in 1979, according to a copy of the manual that I dug up in my records. The manufacturer stopped making this model at some point in 1985, so the original equipment can be hard to come by these days, meaning that every single one of them still in the sky is a hodgepodge of parts. I can for example remember there being a problem resulting in a strange tinniness on the radio, but only while transmitting as opposed to receiving. Nobody could seem to solve this issue despite repeated attempts. The brakes also seemed to squeak no matter how many times the pads were replaced or the fluids drained and refilled. I'm not sure if this really

constitutes a gremlin, but you had to put some dead weight in the storage compartment in order to keep the center of gravity from being too far to the front, probably the result of some avionics that were pulled from the front panel over the years.

When it came to qualifying for my Commercial Pilot License, I had to build up a whole bunch of experience, but I was lucky enough to be given membership in a flying club which had a Cessna 172. This model of airplane remains in production to this day despite having been designed back in 1955. The plane that I was flying rolled off the assembly line at some point in 1964, but received a variety of improvements and upgrades over the years including some fairly substantial ones like a brand-new engine. The earliest models came with a notoriously unreliable Continental O300. When a cylinder head finally cracked, instead of opting for an overhaul, the organization chose to install a much better Lycoming O320, the same power plant as every newer model of the airplane. The problem was that all of these were made with a higher angle of incidence on the wing in order to counterbalance the added weight, so the center of gravity in this particular plane was shifted really far backwards. This had a few benefits like much better endurance and range, but also a couple of drawbacks like really poor performance in the recovery from a stall or spin. I also remember there being a vent in the cabin that would pop out in a sideslip.

I've been lucky enough to fly a wide variety of different airplanes during my career as a pilot. I could talk about the gremlins in all of these, but for the sake of your own sanity, I'll finish up on the Piper 24 that I just started flying. This airplane is pretty much without problems apart from a few leaky cylinders in

the power plant, but the aircraft was built in 1958, so I've just been looking the other way. I could also point to a heading indicator that clearly suffers from a serious case of gyroscopic precession. The backs of the front seats are basically broken as well, so you can extend them nearly 180 degrees, flush with the floor, at least for all intents and purposes. The plane features a constant speed propeller, but the governor has apparently given up the ghost on a couple of inconvenient occasions. The same could be said about the landing gear motor, forcing the pilot to make use of the manual extension lever.

You might not believe me on this particular point, but I assure you that gremlins are in fact real. I've seen them myself. Well, I haven't seen them, but I can definitely bear witness to the mischief carried out by these little monsters. The term is technically derived from aviation, but just about every single place out there in the world is inhabited by some sort of gremlin, so don't be surprised if you find something finicky about your furniture or maybe appliances, not to mention your family car. The fact of the matter is that almost anything could be attacked by gremlins, meaning that if you're not on the ball with maintenance, you might just find yourself trying to fend off some of these pesky little creatures. 🎵
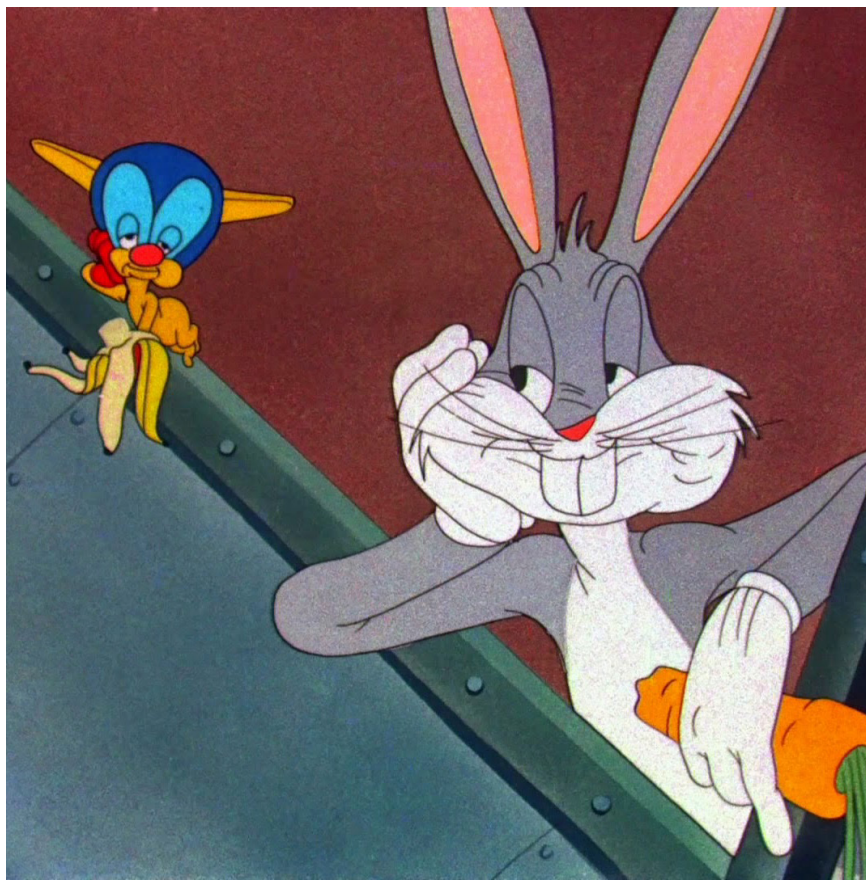
Gremlins in My Toys

The word "gremlins" probably conjures up different imagery for different people, though the critters from the 1984 film are the most well-known. But whether it makes you think of lanky monsters you need to keep dry, or whatever the hell that furry thing from "Nightmare at 20,000 Feet" was, there's one universal truth: gremlins make everything go wrong. But here's the thing: while pop culture most often connects gremlins with machinery errors, they can wreak havoc in other areas. Even transforming action figure production.

Admittedly I've only been back in the Transformers collecting game for about seven years (after a very long hiatus through most of my late high school through post college days), but I've come to understand just how prevalent those symbolic little fuckers are in the toy industry. Some of these gremlins play the long game, as seen with what many collectors refer to as "gold plastic syndrome" (GPS) - an issue with metallic gold plastics, primarily from the 90s and 00s, that break down on a chemical level over time. There's absolutely nothing you can do about GPS, other than prolong the inevitable.

Sometimes these toy gremlins hide in one particular figure for months or even years, eventually causing joints to droop and flop even if it's just been sitting untouched on a shelf. One day you hear a commotion and find someone has inexplicably face-planted. Or worse, caused a cascading effect resulting in multiple falls. Sometimes you think everything is fine, then one day you rotate a hip and suddenly a whole-ass leg is just sitting in your hand.

Though as irritating as individual toy gremlins can be, it's when they get into

the production like (something more in-line with their original machinery superstition roots) that causes the most significant problems. Misassembled parts; fused joints; piece that break in the box; painting errors; imprecise plastic cuts; there's so much that can go wrong on a production line and when it goes wrong on a large scale it can create a lot of friction between companies and their customers. Thankfully most of these problems can be fairly easily fixed with minimal tools and knowledge but having to perform plastic surgery on something brand new is still an inconvenience even under the most generous of circumstances.

And then there's my most recent gremlin encounter – or to be more precise, third-party transforming robot toy manufacturer Mastermind Creations' most recent encounter. To be clear, MMC is one of the best unofficial-Transformers-producing companies out there with some absolutely stellar designs and figures that often hit a sweet spot between accuracy, stylization, articulation and smart engineering. But hooboy did things go very wrong with their most recent release.

In short, the figure is a re-release of a previous (and excellent) toy but with a different color scheme and, most significant to me anyway, a new face sculpt. That face wasn't the only reason I opted to trade my previous figure in, but it was definitely a factor. And yet, something went horribly wrong during production and now all (*all*) of the figures made were manufactured with the much more neutral (and less interesting, I think) original face instead of the new one. But the old face was also painted with the new face in mind. So, it ends up looking like the smirk was half-heartedly painted on at best, or that the paint on the face was smudged at worst.

Someone speaking on behalf of the company has stated that things are being looked into, and methods of addressing the problem for customers (and future productions) are being brainstormed, which is great! It doesn't do much to help with the disappointment, though. And because the issue has affected the entire production – and due to the nature of toy manufacturing in general – it's not going to be an easy (or quick, or cheap) fix.

Gremlins sure do suck. 🛡

AN ODE TO LITTLE FREAKS

By Phillip Russell

Whenever someone asks me what my favorite Christmas movie is, I always say *Gremlins*. What follows is a confused look and then a question: *Is that really a Christmas movie?* I suppose it depends on how you qualify it, but the movie *does* take place during Christmas and that's good enough for me. It's of the same ilk as films like *Die Hard*, using the Christmas holiday more as a backdrop to tell its narrative while also weaving in anti-capitalist sentiments.

Both *Gremlins* and its sequel *Gremlins 2: The New Batch* are about little freaks that defy genre conventions. They're films that so clearly broadcast their influences that they create something unique all their own. I've always found this to be an admirable element of the two films. While they have some elements that haven't aged well, there's something to be said about the confidence on display in how Chris Columbus and Joe Dante created incredibly unique monsters with loads of personality that you both cheer on and fear.

On a surface level, *Gremlins* is a movie that evokes classic horror tropes seen in films where a pet or toy turns evil and wreak havoc on its owner's life. But when you dig deeper, you find a meta horror satire that attempts to comment on American excess and consumerism. It is through this lens that a greater appreciation of it taking place on Christmas can be found.

Gremlins 2 on the surface is a horror sequel that does the classic move of placing itself in a new location (New York City) and upping the ante by making super-powered Gremlin hybrids that terrorize characters in a megacorporation. But just like its predecessor, once you look deeper you find a much smarter film that is actually making a meta-commentary on the sequalification of the Hollywood film industry that is only more prescient today.

* * *

Growing up in the 90s, I was one of many kids that hopped on the Furby wave. Looking back on it, I'm not really sure what inspired me to want one. I wasn't really into dolls or stuffed ani-

mals, and my house was full of pets. Plus, it's no secret that those furry little things were creepy. I guess in some ways they were a different form of little freak, most certainly influenced by *E.T.*, *Gremlins,* and all the other little freak properties that had come before. But unlike its influences, the whole Furby brand felt a bit vapid and manufactured.

I have this vivid memory of sneaking my Furby into the bathroom when no one was looking. I took yellow and pink highlighters and colored its white fur into a neon mess. I cut the hair on top of its head into a tiny mohawk. It blurted random catchphrases while I waterboarded it to remove stray strands. I'm not really sure why I did this, maybe it was a way of making the Furby mine, to make it reflect more the kinds of music and television I was interested in at the time.

Whatever the case may be, every Furby owner I've ever met has stories about how when night fell, their Furby came to life on their own. After the violence I enacted on my own Furby, I began taking its batteries out before bed and facing it toward the wall. I felt as if it was watching me, waiting to exact its revenge. I wonder now if that has to do with seeing films like *Gremlins* and *Child's Play*, movies I shouldn't have been watching at that age which seemed to have bred an innate skepticism of toys in me for years.

In retrospect, the Furby craze could easily be the definition of a flash in the pan. While plenty of people that are in their early 30s can recount stories of either having one, being scared of one or not fucking with them at all. I'm sure most kids today would be left saying, "Fur-what?" While they initially captivated people for their seeming "intelligence," those who owned Furbys quickly saw through the guise. The reality was that Furby as a brand didn't have much to say. They are more of a footnote than anything else. This has so much to do with their hollow characterization that

wavered between goo-goo-gaga bullshit and E.T. without any of the charm.

While the *Gremlins* franchise primarily exists on the screen, it's interesting how much staying power the two films seem to have compared to much more wildly successful but short-lived phenomena like Furby and Beanie Babies. Just recently, a new tv series was announced for the franchise after over twenty years of dormancy. And somehow, Gizmo and Stripe made it into *Multiversus.* I'm sure there are a number of factors involved, but largely I think *Gremlins*' staying power is due to creating incredibly likeable monsters that are humanized with outlandish detail.

* * *

When I look at Gizmo I can't help but smile. There's a gentleness and curiosity in Gizmo's character that makes him likeable. Chalk that up to the magic of traditional special effects and puppetry, but there's also an allure to the character

that is largely due to the human details they imbued in him. It also makes Gizmo a perfect foil to Stripe, the gremlin counterpart to Gizmo. He's rash, mischievous, ill-tempered and downright ugly. But I'd be lying if I didn't also like these elements about Stripe, if I didn't cheer him on when he and his gang shot the old neighbor lady out the window.

At their heart, the *Gremlins* films are a bit of an ode to these little freaks. There's a much more boring version of this movie that exists that simply makes them villains. Monsters to be dispatched by our white-bread protagonist and soon-to-be girlfriend. The films that *Gremlins* directly inspired like *Ghoulies* and *Troll* are a testament to that kind of storytelling. But what Dante and Columbus understand in these films is that part of the allure of monster movies is actually liking the monster itself. The *Gremlins* franchise not only realizes this, it revels in it.

My favorite moment in *Gremlins* is the scene where the mob of gremlins takes over the town bar. Throughout the se-

quence, we see a wide assortment of gremlins, each with their own unique characterizations. There's the gremlin smoking three cigarettes at once; the gremlins gambling at the card table, a gremlin doing its best impersonation of a Richard Simmons routine, the gremlin in a ski mask trying to rob the joint, and more. This scene is firing on multiple cylinders. Each of the gremlins in the mob get a unique moment to shine that creates a memorable characterization that will live on long after the movie ends. But this scene is also furthering the film's deconstruction of American excess by taking it to the extreme. What the audience gets is not only a roaring pastiche of film and daytime television, but also a commentary on what all of that says about us.

* * *

When I pitched the idea of having a themed issue around *Gremlins,* it was mainly a joke. When it came to be a reality, I found myself rewatching the franchise a couple of times to truly drill down what it is about it that I like so much. I went through a number of ideas while conceptualizing what this essay would be about in relation to *Gremlins*.

What I keep coming back to, maybe selfishly, has to do with characterization and being shameless. In my own work, since graduating from my MFA, I've been struggling with negative thoughts in relation to my writing. These are my own personal gremlins, if you will. Little monsters in my mind wreaking havoc on a small scale. So much of these anxieties have to do with being found out, in a way. Of people realizing what my influences are, as if that is a bad thing. *Gremlins* presents an alternative way of being for me.

Both of the *Gremlins* films are clearly riffing off of tried and true tropes that have worked in the past. But even so, they're able to find a unique spin on these clichés that is in large part due to creating characters that reflect authorial inspiration back at the viewer. I think there's something to admire about wearing your influences on your sleeve in your artistic work. That's something I'd like to get better at as I get older.

There's a difference between riding a wave of popularity and actually showcasing within your own art the creative work that inspires you. What's clear about the *Gremlins* franchise is its creator's influences. The gremlins in large part reflect back to the audience Dante and Columbus's own artistic inspirations, in turn, creating a feeling that is unique to them. It's through this lens that they were able to create incredibly fun, sometimes scary and always absurd little freaks that has stood the test of time. Instead of towing the line of creative caution, I'm starting to think that adding a little water might not hurt. 🜲

ON GREMLIN-TOLOGY

By David Shimomura
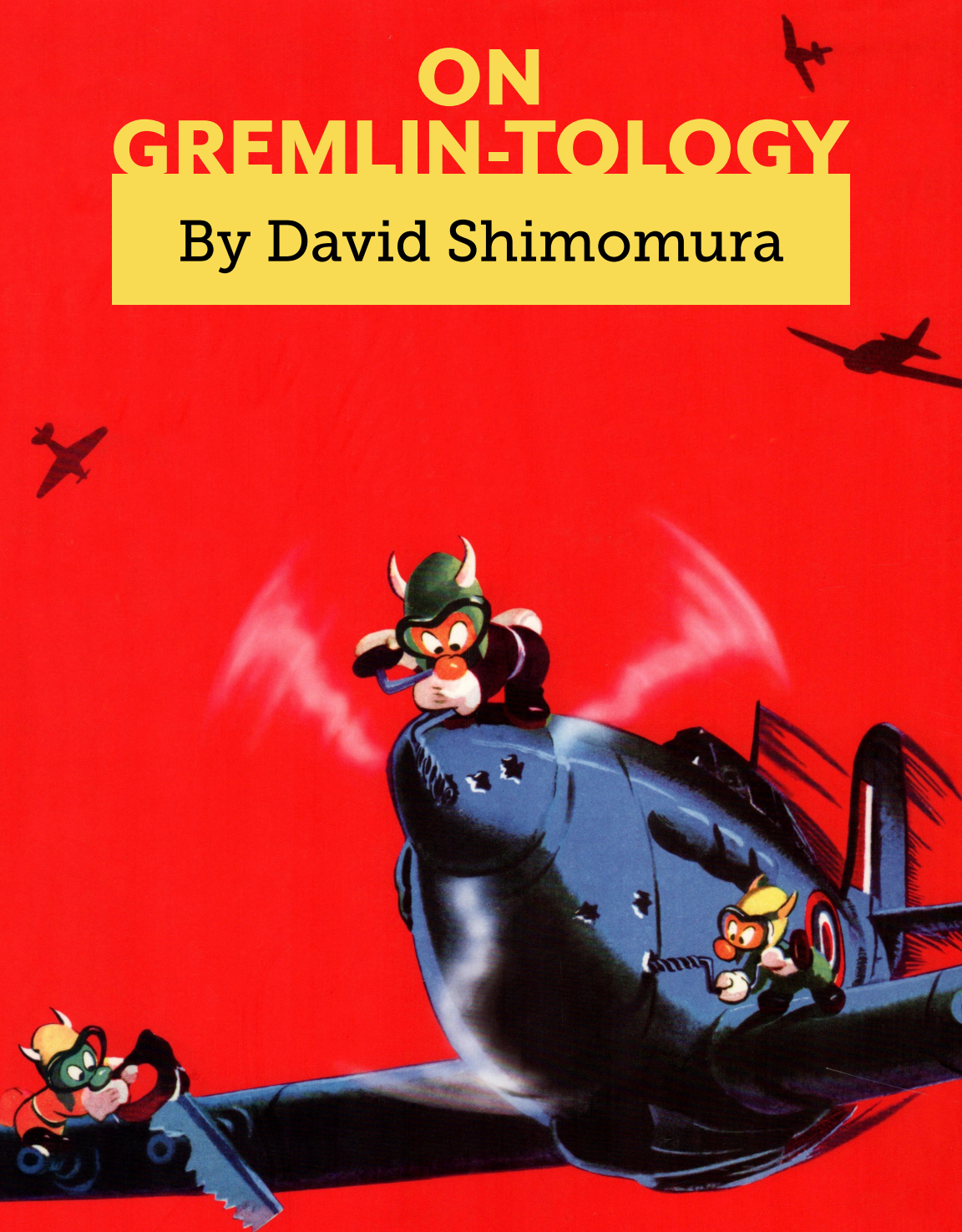
We all know about gremlins, right? Even among those who haven't seen Joe Dante's 1984 movie, *Gremlins*, there's an understanding that gremlins are little creatures that muck up the works, right? Of course, we don't *all* know but gremlins have been around long enough that the little monsters have penetrated our cultural-historical memory. I say, "long enough" because we're perhaps only a generation or two removed from a time before anyone anywhere could point to something and say, "that's a gremlin." So please, allow me to take us on a journey into what is a gremlin, where they came from and where they might go.

As always, my preference for themes for theme issues is to keep them high level, abstract, able to be attacked from multiple angles and in multiple ways. But of course, people want to know, what does the theme mean? To start to answer the question I'd say gremlins are "the little monsters that imperceivably foil you. Or perceivably so." As humans, we like to have answers as to *why*. Why did my brand-new air fryer work only once? Why did my car just sputter and stop? Why did that airplane go down for seemingly no reason? Gremlins.

Of course, there are *better* answers. That air fryer was a cheap piece of junk off the line. That car badly needed an oil change. And most worryingly, basically any number of things can go wrong in the sky. Planes are finnicky things that need dozens of things to plan simultaneously to keep everything flying. Sometimes, that doesn't happen. But in those moments, we, like the airmen who popularized the term "gremlin," need to pin the blame on something, offer some kind of definition that is pointed if less reasonable than "stuff happens."

Gremlins as a definable phenomenon are shockingly new and came about quickly. "Aviation" as we think of it today had only existed for 40 years before pilots, mechanics and even the government

openly acknowledged them. But this process is natural. It happens when humans, simple as we are, bump up against a new frontier. As we pushed outward into the "wilderness" of the woods and seas we found all manner of creature to answer our questions. The gremlin was simply the next one to find, we'd scoured the earth, mapped it to the poles and back, but now we'd found ourselves in the skies.

Even by modern standards, the closest we've gotten recently is perhaps Slender Man, an entirely invented figure who leaked out of his corner of the internet and has become a pop culture icon. Strangely, Slender Man also seems to be on the same 40-year timeline as gremlins were. But the key difference between them is that gremlins, while equally fictional, offer an *explanation*, not just a fright. We've long been creating boogiemen to keep us in line but explaining the unexplainable is the real of far more ancient and powerful things.

And naturally, there are better answers. Pilot error, mechanic error, factory faults, lightning, geese. All of these things were much more likely to be the cause of the strange and inexplicable incidents in the skies. But human error was not satisfac-

tory. Worse, it meant that dangerous, life-threatening errors were being made with regularity. Surely then, it was the fault of some opportunistic rogues we'd provoked by taking to the skies.

In this way, gremlins aren't *just* monsters that foil one's best laid plans. They're a handwave that our best laid plans are not so well laid. As creatures of an increasingly industrial, mechanical and automated age they remind us insidiously that humans are not the masters of our world we think ourselves to be. As we sought to conquer that last frontier, they were there to remind us that ultimately, we are not as mighty as we might think ourselves to be.

This kind of mythological scapegoating is certainly novel, if not new. Many of the other folkloric figures that answer the answerable tend to not do so in a manner that handwaves the obvious human errors at play. But this makes gremlins an especially beautiful creation of humankind. We made them not to feel better about the natural world, but instead to feel better about the reality where we are not especially good at things.

Strangely, there seems to be some level of denialism or revisionism as to this
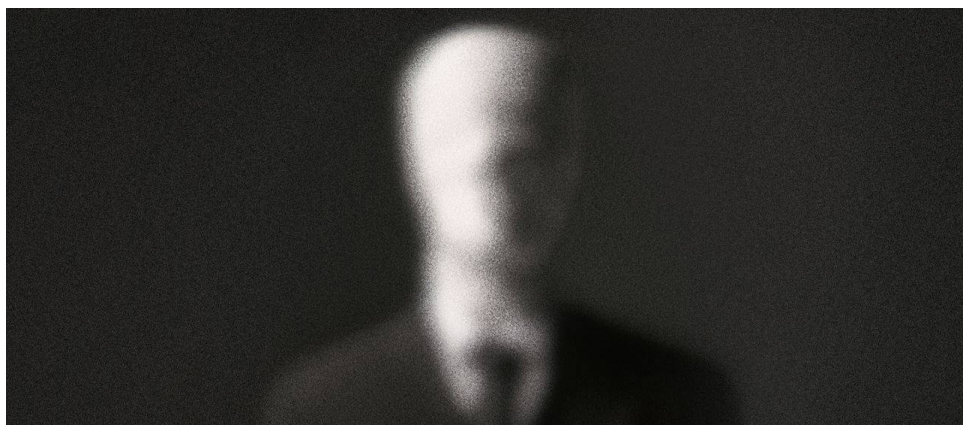
lack of ancient quality. While not exactly *modern*, gremlins in other media seem to be cut from a much more ancient cloth. Roald Dahl's *Some Time Never: A Fable for Supermen* show them to be quiet ancient, maintaining dominion over the earth long before humans. They're encounterable in *Dwarf Fortress,* a totally fantasy setting with relatively little machinery. And of course, in the eponymous film, they're the cast offs of the especially ancient mogwai.

Instead of reckoning with our fallibility, we've further entrenched gremlins into the collective human myth. We could say, "Oh yes, it was very weird and strange when we invented monsters so we didn't have to admit we made crappy airplanes." Instead, we invented monsters and found ways to perpetuate them. Maybe this is the ultimate gremlin act. As we've built more and more systems of increasing fragility, we've invented a new frontier for gremlins to wreak havoc in our lives. Some small error somewhere along the pathways and pipelines of the internet could keep you from reading this, from it being delivered, or even correctly uploaded. Someone, somewhere, yawning through their workday could easily introduce the tinniest error that

brings the dozens of services needed to facilitate your reading this. But no, it isn't that person, it's a gremlin.

And of course, as we see a new generation of people rising positions of power, we see the beginnings of the weaponization of gremlins. Why admit that you are actively ruining a company when you can blame Twitter for its own failures? Why admit to eroding democracy when you can create conditions for its erosion over time? And when the dams break and it's too late surely the explanations will not be that human choices were made. Surely, we'll hear that unforeseen forces acted to bring about ruin. It was the gremlins. It had to be.

So yes, gremlins are those little creatures who lurk and make things worse. But unlike the *true* monsters, gremlins have art. They have music, and dance and society. Gremlins are people. Accidental or purposeful antagonists whose actions set about a chain of events read at the end as "inexplicable" all the while being entirely explicable. And funnily, to find a gremlin is to eradicate it. To know that we were always the engineers of our own folly is to admit there was never a gremlin. Except, well, we'd have to do that first. 🎺

LIGHTING THEIR OWN PATH

By Ben Sailer

Gamers of a certain age will remember the first time they saw Mario leap into a painting in *Super Mario 64* (1996). It was a watershed moment that demonstrated what was possible with the power of Nintendo's newest hardware. The talk across the industry (or at least the videogame press) at the time was that side-scrollers were antiquated, now that the era of 3D game design had been fully ushered into homes around the world.

The ensuing decades would prove those predictions premature. Yet that specific shared experience among players, of seeing a visual effect that was previously impossible on a home console, remains a turning point in the medium's evolution. There were many other fully 3D games that had hit the market before, but until around that time, it still felt like a novelty rather than the norm. In that moment, it felt like an indication that something had shifted in the industry, and things would never quite be the same again.

Super Mario 64 has continued to inspire intrepid game developers more than 25 years later. The influence of this mechanic (and the predicted divide between 2D and 3D game design that never quite came to pass) is now coming full circle in *Candle Knight*, the forthcoming 2.5D side-scrolling action/adventure title from Mexico-based Dracma Studios. Set in the ruins of a destroyed castle, its mysterious protagonist (who is aptly named Candle Knight) can leap into paintings on walls.

Instead of using the paintings as a means of leaping between worlds though, players can explore puzzles contained in the paintings themselves, with the game world switching 3D to 2D.

"The idea came from a college project back in 2016 between Carlos Basto (Art Director) and [myself]," producer Héctor Parra says. "We wanted to tell the story of a curious candle who could enter paintings and go from 3D to 2D. We began working on that concept, but it had to be shelved as we got busier with other projects. As we graduated and

got experience making games, we formed a small team to work on a prototype; the team was formed with the idea of making unique PC games. Eventually, the team grew to be what it is today."

Parra further explains that the initial inspiration came from both *The Legend of Zelda: A Link Between Worlds* and *Super Mario Odyssey* (which borrowed the painting-as-transportation-portal concept from *Super Mario 64*). While only a small percentage of the game takes place within the paintings (and some are even optional for players to discover and explore), it's an interesting example of how Dracma Studios is putting new twists on time-tested design concepts to create something both familiar and fresh.

When watching the trailer for *Candle Knight,* it's immediately reminiscent of other side-scrolling platformers and adventure titles with labyrinthine environments and branching pathways (such as *Hollow Knight* and the *Ori* series of games). The main character himself bears something of a resemblance to the hero from *Shovel Knight*. These are certainly useful reference points for understanding what kind of game players can expect, but it promises to be much more than another indie Metroidvania also-ran.

From the moment the trailer starts, *Candle Knight*'s sweeping and immersive 2.5D camera pulls the viewer into the action. It demonstrates some of the interesting ways Dracma Studios are playing with perspective in the game, shifting from through-the-window and back-shoulder viewpoints to overhead angles to its two-dimensional painting puzzles. This flexibility allows their team

to do some things that most similar titles have not attempted, and it leaves us wondering what kinds of surprises will be made possible by deviating from using a fixed camera like most side-scrollers.

That creative camera work is no mere gimmick either. It serves a design purpose that is intended to pull the player into the world that Dracma Studios wants to create.

"My design philosophy is to prioritize immersion above all else," creative director and game designer Hugo Laviada says. "No matter how serious or silly the themes are, I want players to forget themselves while playing and feel like they're a part of the world we're presenting to them through unique and intuitive mechanics."

Perhaps the most innovative of those mechanics is the Ignis System (which was originally called the Heat System earlier in the game's development). It works by allowing the Candle Knight to make its attacks stronger at the expense of lowering defense, and vice versa. This encourages creative switching between offensive and defensive playstyles, leading the player to think strategically about how they approach enemies rather than choosing a singular approach for a full play-through.

The Ignis System also enables the Candle Knight to gain strength by finding sources of heat, adding yet another layer of strategy to how players progress through the castle. It calls to mind a memorable character from a certain Hayao Miyazaski film, which was an inspiration for the combustible character's design.

"I like to think of Candle Knight as a sort of incorporeal fire spirit that inhabits loose pieces of armor, driving them forward with the power of his own heat; if so, maybe finding other sources of heat in the game (standing near candle lights, the friction of your sword against enemies, etc.) could power you up further. It's similar to what the character Calcifer does throughout the film *Howl's Moving Castle*."

Even in its early incarnations, *Candle Knight* showed enough promise to catch the attention of Epic Games and receive a coveted Epic MegaGrant. This has helped Dracma Studios acquire development resources and expand their efforts to the word out about their title. Beyond the material benefits that come with increased cash flow, it also helped them raise their profile regionally, earning attention nationwide for what they achieved.

"They certainly helped us boost the development of *Candle Knight*," co-founder and executive director Mario Vallarta says. "We were able to pay for some marketing materials and for some licenses that we needed for the team. Also, being able to say that *Candle Knight* was an Epic MegaGrant recipient opened doors for us. We got a lot of national interest because of it."

The independent game development community in Mexico is bustling with energy, with Parra citing studios like Navegante, Mum Not Proud, 1 Simple Game and fellow Epic MegaGrant recipient Merlino Games as examples of noteworthy peers that deserve attention. It's a flourishing scene right now and one that is ready for global recognition.

However, while it's hard enough for indie devs anywhere to get exposure for their work, it's even more challenging in countries such as Mexico, where there are few local resources to fund game development. For up-and-coming developers like Dracma Studios, international travel to conferences and events can be cost-prohibitive as well. As a case in point, when the company was selected to appear at the Tokyo Game Show, they had to cover all their own expenses, despite receiving an outpouring of regional support.

As a result, much of the talent in Mexico's development community goes unnoticed by the rest of the world. Dracma Studios hopes their game can inspire others to expand beyond mobile development (which is popular in the country) and move more toward console and PC titles, setting an example that others can follow. In turn, by raising awareness of their own title, they can also help draw more attention toward developers across Mexico and Latin America.

"I think people tend to simply not hear about us at all, which is why initiatives like MegaGrants or Latinx in Gaming help a lot," Parra says. "Because otherwise, it's very difficult for Mexican games to gain notoriety outside of our region, which in its majority, plays a lot of AAA games but pays little attention to indies."

Something else that has helped Dracma Studios bring their vision to life is Unreal Engine's blend of power and user-friendly design. The engine's intuitive interface has allowed even non-programmers on the team to rapidly shape the game's development and quickly see if certain concepts will work before committing large amounts of resources to specific ideas.

"The thing about Unreal Engine is its sweet spot of being very easy to use and also allows us to test things very quickly, which allows our game designers (or even me, the producer) to just jump into the engine, if need be, and fix things or playtest," Parra says.

Players will take control of the *Candle Knight* themselves in 2023. In the meantime, Dracma Studios remains hard at work on the biggest game in their team's history. It's a passion project that's important to the company not only for their own sake, but also to help shine a light on the flourishing independent game development scenes in Mexico and Latin America. That's been a goal from the beginning, and as the new year approaches, it's one they are getting ever closer to achieving.

"We founded Dracma Studios with the goal of showcasing the talent in our country, to bring new opportunities to México and Latin America in game dev," Vallarta says. "Lighting our own candle, if you will."

* * *

Check out the official Dracma Studios site *to learn more and wishlist* Candle Knight *on Steam!* 🕯️
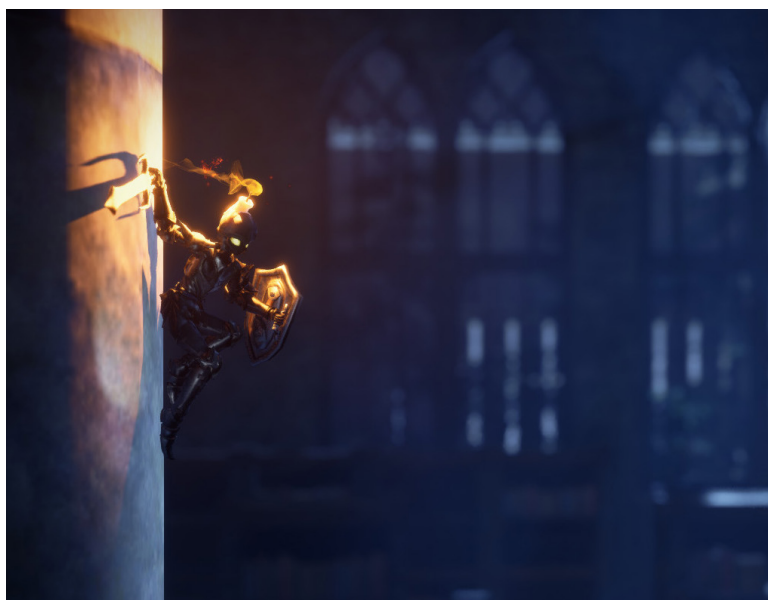
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Illustrations

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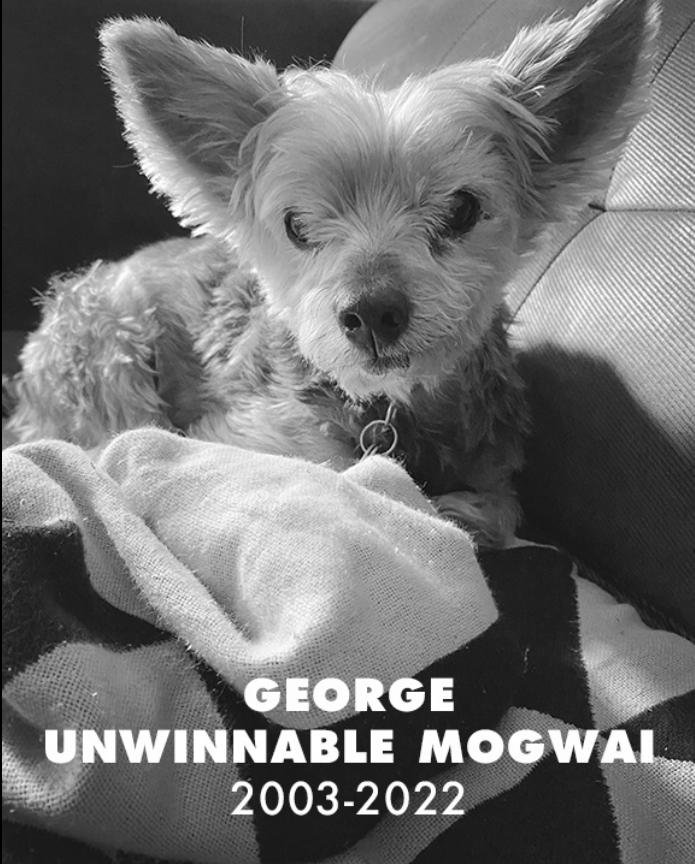
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