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The Boss Fight Books Anthology

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A Note from the Editor

Readers!

One of the tenets of Boss Fight Books: There's no right or wrong way to write about video games.

You can tell the story of how a game was made. You can tell the story of how a game was marketed and sold. You can show a game's influence on other games. You can show how players used a game in surprising ways the creators never intended. You can read a game critically as you would a book or film. You can narrate a playthrough. You can analyze mechanics. You can write for an imagined audience of game designers. Or superfans. Or lemurs. You can write a glorious takedown. You can write a feverish defense. You can discuss how a game's reception has changed over time. You can describe how a game lifted you up or tore you down. You can mine an obsession. You can use a game to typify a trend you're seeing in gaming. Or in culture. You can use the vocabulary of games as lenses through which to look at the world. You can conceive of your video game writing as

pure criticism. Or as pure reportage. Or as art itself. Or as a big embarrassing love letter.

These are just examples. I list them not to define limits but to point to limitlessness. Games writing is a medium, an opportunity. As Darius Kazemi writes in "Fuck Video Games," "You can *always* drill down, and there will always be more to discover about a medium." As Ian Bogost writes in *How to Do Things with Video Games*, "We can understand the relevance of a medium by looking at the variety of things it does."

Well, here in this anthology are some ways to write about video games. While our main series emphasizes the patience of focusing on a single subject, this book leaps between subjects and styles as manically and gleefully as a *Battletoads* speedrun. And in another departure from our other books, this anthology includes some fiction, which opens up the experiment to even more possibilities. What these essays and stories have in common is only that I think they're great and wanted to share them with you. Beyond that, they're much different from one another in style, approach, and content. I wouldn't have it any other way.

Yours,

Gabe Durham
Boss Fight Books
December, 2014

Ken Sent Me

Lost in the Land of the Lounge Lizards[1]

Matt Bell

I AM NOT Leisure Suit Larry,[2] except for when I am. For instance, when I was eleven, I was Leisure Suit Larry for several weeks while he taught me about sex and I helped him get laid for the first time in his life. Now I am 27 and although I am joining him once again, I can't help cringing at his many mistakes, his misguided

1 The title is two separate references to the same computer game, *Leisure Suit Larry in the Land of the Lounge Lizards*, a classic graphical adventure published by Sierra in 1987. "Ken Sent Me" is the password to get into the even seedier back-room of the already seedy Lefty's Bar.

2 AKA Larry Laffer, video game character and star of all of the Leisure Suit Larry Games except for *Leisure Suit Larry: Magna Cum Laude* (which is not considered a proper game in the series by most fans, as it wasn't written by Al Lowe nor was it very good).

attempts at pick-up lines and lovemaking. There is no way to change his destiny, and so the best I can do is get him there efficiently, with a maximum number of points and a minimum loss of life.

You see nothing special.

On at least one level, video games are about fantasy and wish fulfillment. Game after game, the player steps into the role of the lone space marine stranded on Mars or the amnesiac farm boy with a hidden talent for swordplay. During play, this archetypal protagonist must stand against impossible odds to save the day from invading hordes of goblins, aliens, or Nazis, all of whom must be defeated in a generally similar fashion. Even most non-violent adventure games still offer up juicy roles like private detective or cop. Rejecting this trend is part of what made Larry Laffer such a special protagonist. Instead of being some sort of superhero, he is a 40-year-old leisure suit-wearing virgin and little else. He isn't good-looking nor is he financially well off, and he doesn't have any qualities that could even be considered mildly heroic.[3] As an eleven-year-old, I'm not sure I knew what a virgin was, and certainly the game's humor was often completely lost on me. At 27, I can't necessarily identify with Larry any better, although he does bring back a fear from my teenage years: that I would die a virgin, that no one would ever want to have sex with me. Putting

3 This is a trademark of Sierra's early adventure games. Other Sierra series also featured bumbling protagonists, such as *Space Quest's Roger Wilco*, a janitor in outer space.

myself back into Larry's shoes means revisiting those years all over again. Like my younger self, Larry is awkward and embarrassing and mostly clueless as to the needs and wants of the opposite sex.

You're fairly certain this is a hammer.

An important part of playing adventure games is understanding that inventory items often have multiple uses, and not always the most obvious ones. Much of the gameplay is based on using the right items in the proper combination at the correct time to move the game forward. Like the gameplay it describes, this essay can be more than one thing at a time, depending on the situation. This is essay as guide, as walkthrough, as reflection on personal experience.

Sniffing the air, you're suddenly hungry for tuna.

It is only the illusion of free will that I have when I'm with Larry. I'm controlling his actions, but there are only so many actions possible. The full range of human possibility does not exist in his world. Navigation happens only in the four cardinal directions and is controlled by the arrow keys. Every action Larry takes must be distilled down to a short phrase and entered into a command line text parser which has a limited vocabulary and even worse grammar. HAIL TAXI. GET IN. STORE. PAY. GET OUT. BUY PROPHYLACTIC. GET IN. HAIL TAXI. BAR. PAY. EXIT. OPEN DOOR. SIT. ORDER WHISKEY. GET UP. GIVE WHISKEY. KNOCK ON DOOR. KEN

SENT ME. USE REMOTE. CHANGE CHANNEL. UNDRESS. WEAR CONDOM. FUCK HOOKER.[4]

...CONTAINS SOME ELEMENTS OF PLOT WHICH MAY NOT BE CONSIDERED APPROPRIATE FOR CHILDREN.

My original copy of *Leisure Suit Larry in the Land of the Lounge Lizards* was delivered at a family party by my cousin Chip on pirated 5.25" floppy disks. Receiving the game, along with copies of three other Sierra adventures[5] and their accompanying hint books, was easily a highlight of the summer—and an event that would send me on a streak of playing nearly everything Sierra put out that would last

4 This sequence of commands is the fastest way to successfully get from the beginning of the game to the first sex scene and therefore the first chance for losing Larry's virginity. The CHANGE CHANNEL command must be given seven times before it will succeed in its goal of distracting the pimp and allowing Larry to head upstairs to the bedroom. Larry doesn't want to die a virgin, but he doesn't pay for sex either. Also, sleeping with the hooker is entirely optional. Skipping the scene allows for a more virtuous ending to the game but also prevents the player from scoring the maximum amount of points. Outside of this moral dilemma, the only reason for being there is to get several objects that are only reachable using the fire escape outside her bedroom window.

5 All with similar names—*Space Quest, Police Quest, King's Quest*. Of those early games, the Leisure Suit Larry games have by far the best titles, most likely for no other reason that it would have been harder to sell a game called *Sex Quest*.

throughout the entire 90s. Suddenly, my dad's IBM XT computer became my primary gaming platform, despite its intended nature as a business machine and its severe hardware limitations: a ten-megabyte hard drive, sixteen-color monitor, and a variety of loud, industrial fan noises.[6]

Before these games, the only other graphical text adventure I'd played was also published by Sierra and, coincidentally enough, worked on by *Leisure Suit Larry* writer Al Lowe before he started his adult series. It was called *Mickey's Space Adventure*, and was exactly what it sounds like. I played the game on my Commodore 64, which at the time had better graphics than the IBM and a greatly superior sound card. The game itself had hand-drawn visuals which easily outshone the pixelated *Leisure Suit Larry*, although it was prone to crashing and required an insane amount of disk changes—another technological procedure as extinct as having to flip a record or rewind a videotape.

The point isn't that technology has changed, but that my tastes did. In one year, I went from guiding Mickey Mouse through the solar system to guiding Larry Laffer through the fictional city of Lost Wages. In less technological ages, puberty was expressed in other ways, but what was an uncommon experience when I was younger has become the normal way kids grow up. In 1990, I was hiding in the

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6 The computer room would become my bedroom around this time, after my parents decided that I was getting too old to share a room with my younger brother. I spent a lot of time there anyway, and there is no doubt that I wasn't just craving privacy by moving there but also a closer proximity to the computer itself.

computer room learning about sex from Larry and now it's a common social event for fifth graders to sit around their living room and play *Grand Theft Auto*, complete with the ability to beat prostitutes to death just to get some money back.[7] Despite the differences in game genre, I imagine the learning curve is just as steep, the translation from video game to real life incomplete and often unintelligible. These are women expressed as sexual objects, certainly, but also as mere gameplay devices, as goals to be conquered[8] or power-ups to be collected.

For the record, sleeping with the hooker in *Leisure Suit Larry* is worth eleven points.

You played ok, I guess!

There is scoring and then there is the Score, and although both are related they are not the same thing. Larry can score no more than three times (if you include a blowup doll) but you can beat the game even if he scores only once, in the hot tub of the hotel casino. There are two other women

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7 Sleeping with a hooker in G*rand Theft Auto* requires a car with a backseat, a secluded area, and about a dollar a second. It also adds 25 points of health, making it one of the only ways to increase your character's health above the normal maximum. Killing the hooker allows you to get a refund, but it's worth pointing out that money is rarely a concern in *GTA*. No one playing the game ever really needs the money.

8 See the aliens in *Space Invaders.* See the ape in *Donkey Kong.* For a different female archetype as game goal, see *Super Mario Bros.* or *The Legend of Zelda.*

in the game crucial to the plot, but neither actually sleeps with Larry, despite his best efforts. As for the Score, it starts at zero and can climb as high as 222 points.[9] I have never finished the game without scoring all three times, and I have never earned a Score of 222. By the time I remember that I don't have to screw the hooker or the blowup doll it is always too late to do anything about it. The sex scenes are major goals, the adventure game equivalent of boss fights and so I always save after them, not before.

You flip through the pages until you discover... Mmmm, nice centerfold!

Long before I ever saw any real pornography, I saw a pixelated Larry Laffer's sexual exploits on my computer monitor (including, among other things, my very first, very tame bondage scene). Always covered by a censor bar, there was still little doubt about what was happening. Fifth grade didn't have sex education, but it did have *Our Changing Bodies* and there were also some things I'd inferred from the PG-13 movies I'd just been allowed to start watching. I grew up in a very conservative household, and so my father didn't give me the birds and the bees until I was a freshman in high school. Even then it was abbreviated and awkward. I am perhaps a member of the first modern generation to learn about sex from a video game instead of from a movie or a book. Ditto for my first pornography. The first image I

9 Points are awarded for both critical actions (like MARRY FAWN) and also optional ones (like TALK TO FLASHER).

ever saw was an EGA scan I found on an uncle's computer, and the first movie I saw was an eight-second clip I downloaded off a bulletin board service in the sixth grade. My teacher that year had encouraged my interest in computers and taught me how to use our 2400 baud modem to dial BBS systems. This included using their rudimentary file shares which were, of course, full of porn. This was 1992 or so, and I was probably the first kid in my school to use the word "download" in conversation. I wasn't allowed to watch R-rated movies yet, but the computer and its modem gave me access to a world full of nerdy adult males who unintentionally made sure that I didn't miss anything I would have learned in front of the television if I'd been someone else's kid.

A sign near the bed reads: "Substantial Penalty for Early Withdrawals."

Adventure games are full of useful lessons about observation. Without LOOKing at every room, substantial details can be missed. There is an important hammer that I always fail to find because I forget to LOOK while I'm inside a certain dumpster, and many other objects that need to be picked up are only a few pixels wide, hard to find without textual clues. Also, much of the humor in the game is text-based, rather than visual, thanks to the low-quality graphics. LOOKing lets Lowe's writing come to the forefront, such as in this description of a diamond ring: "When you gaze into the diamond, you seem to hear the sound of wedding bells, and maybe diesel trucks." As a writer, Lowe has

a sharp, dry wit and a good eye for the most embarrassing parts of sex and the stereotypical male fear of commitment.

As Lowe has written him, Larry doesn't want to die alone, but he doesn't want to fall in love just once, either. There is risk involved in always wanting more, but Larry is a guy with needs. Also, he's a bit of a sleazeball. Believing he's capable of real commitment is probably just being naïve. Thinking back to my own attempts at commitment that outpaced the actual relationships I was in, I know exactly how that feels.

Larry, the whole idea was to stop doing that!

At the beginning of the game, all Larry can think about is losing his virginity. Once he has, he finds out that he's not quite as shallow as even he thinks he is, and vows to find true fulfillment by falling in love. Larry has been a sexual creature for five minutes and already he has regrets. He tried to warn me, but I didn't listen, and now I have regrets too.

Shame on you for trying to deceive a friendly game like this!

Every time the game begins, there is a quiz designed to keep anyone under the age of eighteen from playing the game and accessing its adult content. The quiz is multiple choice, and you are allowed to miss two questions before the game kicks you out and quits back to the command line. It can be harder than it sounds. I wasn't the right age

when the quiz was written, and now that I'm older I'm still not, because the quiz was written for an adult in 1987, not 2008. For example, some of the questions reference Archie Bunker, Spiro Agnew, and Oral Roberts. There is a fill-in-the-blank question that begins "O.J. Simpson is…" where "under indictment" is the wrong answer. Other questions ask what an Edsel is and refer to *Jaws* as a book, not a movie. Even with the generational gap, it's not impossible for someone my age to get through the age quiz, which is really no harder than a good game of Trivial Pursuit. As a kid, it was a whole different story. I had to use trial and error to learn and then memorize the answers to those goddamn questions, and that's probably why I still know some of them today.[10]

"Digressing," you answer.

All the narration is written in the second person. To the game's engine, Larry and I are the same person. His actions are my actions. His thoughts are my thoughts. His wants are my wants, and like in all games this is perhaps the truest of the symmetries. The game tells Larry he wants something, and because progress is tied to fulfilling Larry's wants I find that I want it too. I want to give the bum a jug of whiskey so that he'll give me his knife. I want to escape from the bed I've been tied to by my new bride. I want to order a whiskey to give to a drunk to get a remote control to distract a pimp. These are just some of my wants.

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10 Pressing Alt-X will also allow you to skip the age quiz and proceed directly to the game. I had no idea this cheat existed until I started writing this essay.

More than anything, Larry wants sex and then love.[11] Soon enough, I found that I wanted those same things, and unfortunately I wanted them in the same order Larry did.

This weird-o just bought a spearmint-flavored, plaid, rough-cut, colored, smooth lubber!!!

Terms I learned from *Leisure Suit Larry*: Condom, rubber, lubber, and the classier but harder to spell prophylactic. Hooker. Pimp. Penthouse (the hotel room, not the magazine[12]). Bondage. Flasher. Spanish Fly. Both STD and the now out of fashion phrase venereal disease. Also, a wide variety of euphemisms for human genitalia and their corresponding sexual actions.

Say, Larry! You really ARE glad to see ME!!

The Land of the Lounge Lizards is a dangerous place, full of possible ways to die or prematurely end Larry's quest. LEAVE TAXI without paying and the cabbie beats you to death. Step out into the street and a car runs you over. TAKE PILLS and get so horny that you violate a stray dog and end up in jail for bestiality. Forget to PAY the store

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11 Note however that the want for love is never expressed until Larry has sex for the first time. Only the empty feeling of losing his virginity prompts him to want a higher level of feeling. I do not think that this is an uncommon male experience.

12 There is a porno mag in the game, but it's called *Jugs*.

clerk for dirty magazines and jugs of wine and *blam*, you're dead. BUY DRINKS FOR EVERYONE at Lefty's and run out of money and although you will not die you will not be able to complete the game either. Even in EGA, it takes money to get laid.

Also, do not HAVE SEX with the hooker without first WEARING CONDOM. This is how I learned about sexually transmitted diseases.[13] Even now, this is a good reminder.[14]

He has nothing to say, but says it continuously.

There is another way to play the game, subverting its goals and finding your own fun. The game was designed long before sandbox worlds and emergent gaming, but some elements of those game design theories still exist in *Leisure Suit Larry*. For example, you can try testing the text parser to see what it's programmed to handle and what it simply can't compute. Type MASTURBATE. Type FUCK YOU. Type KICK DOG. Type LICK DICK.[15] Sometimes Lowe

13 The unnamed disease Larry catches causes his genitals to explode. It is worth pointing out that there is no line forming to see this particular hooker.

14 While playing the game again for research purposes, I found a new way to die. Do not LICK HOOKER either.

15 Two of these commands have custom responses, one gets the standard reaction to any particularly vulgar command, and one gets a response implying that the parser doesn't understand the command but which in this case sounds exactly right.

has written witty rejoinders to counter excessively crass or obscene commands. Other times, the boilerplate NO responses are unintentionally funny. Either way, there is a lot of fun to be had outside the bounds of Larry's adventure. This is where game narrative differs from book or movie narrative. In those mediums, there is generally only one way forward, a linear progression of plot and suspense. In games, there are often more options available to even the most narrow-minded player, and a player willing to step off the rails can find hours of entertainment the game's creators never even knew existed. It's another good lesson: You don't always have to do what you're told. Some of the best times happen when you're disobeying the rules of the game.

Your breath is enough to take your breath away. Pssft. Pssft.

Another, less important connection between Larry and myself: As an adult, I'm paranoid about having bad breath and resort to a constant barrage of mints and Listerine strips to combat this anxiety. Larry has the same problem, and failure to frequently USE SPRAY will result in other characters making jokes about his breath, including during the game's finale.[16] All that hard work only to have it ruined by a little halitosis.

16 The breath spray is only good for four or five uses. It is important to space them appropriately.

Dump this one down the tubes, and get him another body!

Most players never notice it, but there is a time limit for Larry's adventure. The game starts at 10:00 p.m. outside of Lefty's Bar. If Larry hasn't lost his virginity by midnight, there is a short cutscene where he kills himself, after which the only possible commands are RESTART or RESTORE. The two hours roll by in real time, and by then almost every player has slept with at least the hooker (and possibly finished the game, as it's not that long if you know what you're doing). Still, for the truly clueless, continued virginity leads to a sad, lonely death, a possibly terrifying moment in gaming for those computer nerds whose own clocks tick away just as steadily.

This Red Delicious is not suitable for your Granny Smith, but someone else might find it appropriate.

The final object of affection in the game is Eve, the seductive inhabitant of the casino's penthouse suite. Found naked in her hot tub, there is nothing Larry can say or do to make her fall in love with him and take him to her zebra-striped bed. Nothing, that is, except to give her the apple he's been carrying for most of the game. This is one of the easiest puzzles in the game, but also one of the most satisfying.

You had no idea fruit could be so exciting!

Lowe's humor is deeply rooted in both bachelorhood and chauvinist stereotypes, but the end goal of the game is as traditional as Jane Austen. In the end, two unlikely people will fall in love, and as the end credits roll, start a life together. The next time I saw Larry, in *Looking for Love (in Several Wrong Places)*, Eve was gone and Larry was back to bumbling his way from one bedroom to the next, and throughout the series the closest he comes to true love is the character Passionate Patty, who he shares several of the later games with. As for myself, I would eventually lose my own virginity, but not for ten years after Larry first lost his. By then, the Leisure Suit Larry series would be over, the 1996 adventure *Love for Sail!* marking the end of Larry Laffer's exploits as written by Al Lowe. My own misadventures would continue for a while still, but in the end I found myself with the same goal as Larry: I would attempt to find true love, and, as the narrator says, "please my heart and not just my other organs." What I learned was that it's not always about scoring whenever you can, that the Score is mostly for bragging rights and doesn't have much to do with beating the game. Better to ignore it altogether.

Barbarians at the Gate

Tevis Thompson

One of the most basic pleasures of video games is pandemonium. Players of *Grand Theft Auto* can attest to the joys of an unscripted five-star police chase through oncoming traffic. First-person shooter fans know that delicious moment of anticipation right before you are seen by the enemy and the whole clockwork world throws a fit. The very sight of you disrupts the established order of guard patrols and lame banter. Even the cuter encounters of *Angry Birds* and Super Mario are given to mayhem, leaving the dreams of pigs and turtles in pieces by level's end. It's as if nothing untoward ever really happens in the world of the game until you and your chaos come along.

Of course, there are plenty of games that go the other way. As agents of order we plan, we rearrange, we make our mental to-do lists. Puzzles in games satisfy our urge to put everything in its right place. Whatever is out of whack, we'll gladly put back in whack. Many turn-based RPGs keep their randomness calculable so our own diligence and strategy will hold sway. We still kill, but we're more

civilized about it. And if you've ever seen any elaborate *Minecraft* projects, then you know what a domesticated landscape looks like once a randomly generated world has lost its randomness. It's amazing how you can be traveling in the blocky wilds and then see on the horizon, before you even know exactly what you're looking at, the unmistakable signs of intention, craft, control. Your eyes, they just know: A human has been there.

Tower defense games take up the tension between order and chaos directly. They are essentially a series of last stands against an ungovernable horde. This horde has numbers, doggedness, good shoes, optimism. You have technology, currency, a land claim, your master plan. Your decisions are remarkably few: where to place your defenses, when to upgrade them, where and when to intervene on the ground. If you are efficient, responsive, and know how to best distribute your resources, your little kingdom will not perish from the earth.

Tower defense games are most satisfying when things are almost, but not quite, out of control. Plan poorly and you'll be quickly overrun; plan too well and the game basically plays itself. But when you can just match the rush with fortification, meet the swelling crowds with a steady hand, the sensation is something like watching waves crash against a rocky shore. You can see the tide and imagine what it would feel like if it washed over you and pulled you out to sea. But you can also feel the land beneath you, holding fast, not breaking, not this time.

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When I heard about the first *Plants vs. Zombies*, I had no idea why these two species were pitted against each other. Weren't both fundamentally disinterested in anything besides sun, water, and brains? I hadn't yet played a tower defense game, but the rooted vs. shambling distinction made sense once I did. These were old-school zombies, slow but relentless, versus genetically modified plants, bred to defend the suburban lawn. The main adventure did a fine job of introducing its roster of plant towers and zombie mobs along with believable circumstances (nighttime, pools, angled roofs), all while steadily tightening the screws. It looked like farming, it felt like war, and the whole package was both icky-cute and surprisingly cohesive.

The sequel is more of the same, which turns out to not be nearly enough. The subtitle says "It's About Time." It's not. It's about some new plants, some new zombies, a few historically themed gameplay changeups, and a boatload of freemium tweaking. Some critics have applauded its relatively unobtrusive implementation of free-to-play elements. By unobtrusive, they mean you can still play through the game without paying. They must also mean unobtrusive like air, since the freemium price tag is now everywhere and you can't help but breathe it in. Because *Plants vs. Zombies 2* isn't as luck-based as *Candy Crush*, that same sense of distrust and paranoia doesn't quite creep in. Instead, it introduces a constant economic calculation into your game experience, which always leads me back to one question: Is this really worth my time? (Okay, maybe the game *is* about time.)

My answer is ultimately no. In practice, this approach to free-to-play means grinding through old levels with added restrictions to earn stars and keys that unlock new worlds, plants, and powers. But this sequel just isn't interesting enough to sustain that, especially if you've played the first game. The core experience—the sun-gathering, the grid, the plants you come to rely on—is simply too repetitive. PopCap certainly tries to mix it up (there are nearly as many mini-games as plain old tower defense levels), and some of the new gameplay elements are compelling enough (the Old West's mine cart tracks that give your plants mobility, and the lane-changing player-piano zombies are particularly cool). But the attractively isometric, almost *Crystal Castles*-style map offers too many bite-size choices and not enough motivation to complete any particular one. The first game offered a cohesive experience in crisis management and suburban warfare that didn't allow you to progress until you had actually improved. *Plants vs. Zombies 2* says this: If at first you don't succeed, try, try a different level. Or please, enjoy this generous game-breaking power-up. We don't want you to experience a moment's frustration. To which I can only say, why bother defending the lawn at all?

Kingdom Rush Frontiers suffers many of the same sequel faults as *Plants vs. Zombies 2*. It is essentially more of the same, an expansion rather than a true sequel, and I wouldn't even call its few changes improvements. Yet it keeps a tight focus on what it does well: overwhelming numbers, simple but strategically varied options, onscreen bedlam. It cuts out all the resource gathering that drags down the

beginning of each *PvZ* level; it builds optional challenges around established elements, not one-off carnival attractions; and it focuses on space, its twisting paths and choke points, as the grounds for all strategic choices. This adds up to a far more distilled, resonant experience of being almost, *almost* out of control.

In *Kingdom Rush Frontiers*, your options for responding to any present emergency are very limited. You can't continually plug holes in the dam; you must think in broader terms, across the entire system you are building. Whereas *Plants vs. Zombies 2* fills the screen with clutter and demands your constant attention so that you are always reacting in the moment, like a waiter with too many tables, that moment is usually too late in *Frontiers*. Instead, you must continually analyze the traffic onscreen and plan long-term solutions rather than simply manage frantic busyness. This leaves you engaged but not so rattled, and it results in a small but significant difference: In *Frontiers*, you get to regularly sit back and watch the enemy waves crash against you. You set things in motion, you analyze and adjust, and all the while you are given moments to observe the chaos and be awed.

The trouble with all this is that the experience has no natural end. You don't come to tower defense simply to win—what is winning but a brief respite before the next attack, for defense has no end. You come to feel your order, your personal bureaucracy, a worthy match for the blooming, buzzing confusion of the world. Grapefrukt's *Rymdkapsel* takes a different approach to containing the tower defense experience by downplaying the defense

and focusing on the tower (or space capsule, in its case). It's more real-time strategy (RTS) game than true tower defense, and the enemy light beams that do come threaten with increasing speed rather than overwhelming numbers. It has only one scenario with three goals, not a series of levels, and as such is designed to end. Not end as in run out of content, but end by reaching its natural conclusion, completing its thought.

What is *Rymdkapsel* thinking about? Judging by reviews, you'd think it has something to do with minimalism, as this is what is most remarked upon and easiest to see in screenshots. But its minimalism is not just an aesthetic choice. What it reveals is *Rymdkapsel*'s fundamental concern with space, the forms we use to shape it, and how these forms fit together and allow passage.

In this case, the forms are tetrominoes. *Tetris* pieces have proven remarkably flexible over the years, from their puzzle piece origins to *Fez*'s repurposing them as hieroglyphics for secret codes to this more practical consideration as hallways and rooms. *Rymdkapsel*'s minimalism makes clear that all the familiar RTS elements it employs are secondary to how you use these pieces to lay out your space capsule. Everything depends on efficient paths for your minions so that they can both reach resources and man the towers in time. Since tetrominoes are randomized for each game and a single game is relatively long (compared to *PvZ2* and *Frontiers*), layout choices really matter. They cannot simply be undone and optimized. You're going to have to live with them a while.

Rymdkapsel shares with *Frontiers* a fundamental concern with space, but the potential chaos you have to stem in that space is internal. Ultimately, it is not rebuffing some external threat but managing your hapless minions that defines *Rymdkapsel*'s true challenge. You must seek a steady flow of traffic in your space capsule rather than the blockage typical of most tower defense games, and in this way the game literalizes that old adage: Get your own house in order. At least before you go invoking the castle doctrine.

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Tower defense games seem harmless enough, but there is a troubling current running through them, one that *Kingdom Rush Frontiers* makes particularly clear. The frontiers of its title (desert, jungle, mountain cave, tropical island) are untamed spaces peopled by stereotypical savages: nomads, tribesmen, and a variety of beasts that read as distinctly "other" (thick-skinned lizard men and Lovecraftian horrors from the ocean depths). Your sky-bound towers represent not only order but also civilization itself amid these teeming barbarians. They have numbers, sure, but even this is an implicit criticism. If only they could organize themselves as we have, do some family planning, then maybe we could talk. Instead, we invade their lands, set up camp, and declare new borders. "For the king!" your men declare. "For honor and glory!" What else can you call this but colonization?

Even *Plants vs. Zombies*, with its cultivated fields and suburban domestication, pits your civilizing impulse

against the unwashed masses, those who want nothing more than to deprive you of your refined, scheming brain. Even two of its sequel's time periods, the Pirate Seas and Wild West, are settings defined by their lawlessness. You must play the new sheriff in town, the new captain of the ship. Mastering every variable, dominating every field, watching the heathen waves crash against your agricultural might.

You don't have to contemplate the colonial logic of tower defense to feel something unsavory about the whole experience. I both enjoy this type of game and hope not to play another for a long time. If a control freak resides within you (and mine is irrepressible), then you will already know what it's like to feel completely engaged while playing but hollowed out and wasted afterward. I judge my video game experiences largely on what, if anything, still lingers hours and days later. Being compelled at the time of play matters, but that often turns out to be rather thin gratification. With tower defense, though, it's not that it leaves nothing behind. Part of my mind remains a clenched fist, still poring over mental maps. It's that this feels like a compulsion rather than an engagement with my imagination. I am left with something fearful in me roused, something that would be better left sleeping.

I'm full of plans and to-do lists in everyday life, but I prefer my games to be chaotic, mercurial. Perhaps I'm drawn to difference. Or maybe games provide a safer space to lose control. Of course, most virtual chaos is actually an illusion. Video games are still, in their programmed hearts, on the side of order. They are predictable, repeatable, and

mannered. The most dependable source of chaos remains the player. I delight in unintended consequences myself and love when games embrace randomness and resist mastery. Designers, though, worry too much about unduly frustrating players, about being unfair, when the most flagrantly unfair game in modern memory—*Candy Crush Saga*—has no shortage of players. I'm not advocating for more *Candy Crush*, but I do want something more lifelike and less gratifying out of games, something that doesn't play so expertly upon my desire for control. You have to wonder what might be gained if game developers were inspired less by the established order, by the towering edifice of *other games*, and more by the blooming, buzzing, barbaric world outside the door.

Navigators

Mike Meginnis

After they found the metal boots but before the dirt clod, Joshua's father bought graph paper at Walmart. Unfurled and pinned up on the wall where his mother's family pictures had once hung, it stood six feet tall by seven feet wide. The paper was hung in three rows, each printed with thousands of small gray squares. If Joshua crossed his eyes, the squares seemed to rise from the page. He crossed his eyes and uncrossed them, watching the squares rise and fall. "It's time we started a map," said his father. "Or we'll never finish this game."

This was the logical culmination of his father's theory of The Navigator. In games, where it was so often so easy to lose perspective, but also in life. When Joshua played their game, it was his father's job to keep watch, to tell him when he was doubling back, to remind him where he meant to go, and how. When Joshua's father had the controller, these were Joshua's jobs.

Their game was *Legend of Silence*, or *LoS*. *LoS* was different from their other games, because whereas in *Metroid*

or *Zelda* the player character became more powerful as he explored, the heroine of *LoS* was diminished by every artifact she found. The manual still called them Power Ups, but this was, father and son agreed, misleading: They should be called Power Downs, or Nerfs, or Torments, because this was what they did. The goal of the game was to lose everything so that one could enter Nirvana, where the final boss lay in wait, enjoying all the ill-gotten fruits of not being and not knowing. It was their favorite game, so much so that they often discussed what they would do when it was over. What they meant was what *could* they do. It was impossible to imagine After.

Joshua's father had not played any of their other games since *LoS*. Not even *Contra*, which had previously been their favorite, because it had a two-player mode and because they could not beat it: when one died, the other soon followed. He had tried to talk to other fathers about it at Boy Scout barbecues and overnight camps, but they did not listen.

After Joshua's father smoothed the graph paper to the wall, it exhaled softly and unstuck, sagging. He took their respective pencil boxes from the top of a pile of R-rated VHS cassettes on the TV stand. Inside were markers, highlighters, and colored pencils, watercolor pencils and pink erasers, and ballpoint pens, and no. 2 mechanicals.

"We'll use 64 squares for every screen," said his father. "That's eight by eight. Starting here, in the middle. Here." Using a red marker and a no. 2 mechanical, he sketched the first room of the labyrinth: its gold and velvet throne, its many crystal chandeliers, its candelabras. At the right

edge of the chamber he drew a purple pillow on a white pedestal where the heroine would lay her crown to rest if you pressed the B button. This opened the exit, which led to the next room. Joshua's father drew this from memory because they could never see it again without restarting their game. Once you left the throne room, the guards wouldn't let you come back. They did not recognize their queen without her crown.

"If we map the whole world," said his father, "we can stop getting lost. Then we'll really get cooking. We'll be through in a month." There were, his father had said, maps you could buy. But this would defeat the point, which was the journey.

You always started outside the throne room no matter how much farther you explored. The hall outside was like a decayed palace, hung with rotting standards, walls collapsing, suits of armor disassembled and scattered over the floor, brown with rust. The stern guards at the door to the throne room were responsible for keeping the rot from coming inside, in addition to keeping you out. Of course, much of this was open to interpretation, rendered in simple arrangements of squares. Sometimes Joshua thought this hallway was more like a palace waiting to be born than one dying. It was full of small monsters—green rodents, yellow bats. The first time Joshua walked this hallway, when his heroine was at the height of her powers, these enemies were trivial to kill. A single shot from the blaster, a blow with the sword. Now each journey through the hallway became more difficult as the heroine withered; it served as an index

of her progress toward not being, not knowing. Sometimes, recently, father and son couldn't even make it through.

Joshua made the heroine struggle through the hallway. His father stole bites of peanut butter jelly and drank from his Big Gulp with one hand as he drew what they saw with the other. 64 squares for every screen. Joshua struggled not to tell him there was cheese puff dust in his beard.

•

Tuesday nights were grilled cheese, but when Joshua came home the gas was off again. You could make grilled cheese in the microwave, but the bread would come out wrong—first soft and hot, and then too hard. He took the American cheese from the refrigerator and sat down at the television, which still worked. Sometimes he played their game without his father. Today he was upset enough about grilled cheese night he didn't want to play alone. He watched the cartoon channel. The map had grown again. It loomed in his periphery, slowly consuming the wall with its red, purple, forest green tendrils. Doors sprung up all over like a dalmatian's spots, doorknobs like lidless eyes. His father played without him too. Joshua unwrapped a slice of cheese and ate it in strips. He deleted all their messages, even the new ones, without listening. He unwrapped another slice.

His father came home with an envelope, unopened, in his fist. "They shut off the gas," he said through gritted teeth.

"Sorry," said Joshua.

"We can make grilled cheese in the microwave."

"No," said Joshua. "That doesn't work."

The electric bill was paid through Friday. They could still play their game. Joshua's father changed into his home pants.

•

Her name was Alicia. That was, in Joshua's opinion, the second most beautiful name in the world. The first most beautiful name was Trudy. Then third was his own name. Then his father's, Dustin. Alicia was not only a queen in the beginning but also a bird girl. She had large brown wings speckled with flecks of silver and white. After her crown and throne room, these were the next things she gave up. She flew to the top of a very tall room (eight squares by 54 on the map) and found a door leading to a smaller room, a single screen, housing the metal boots and otherwise empty. These boots sat on a white pedestal like the one they had given their crown. At this point in the game father and son did not properly understand its principles—they thought the throne room was an interesting fluke. Joshua's father made Alicia step into the boots. They couldn't tell what the metal boots were supposed to do. Joshua's father led Alicia out of the room, and he made her jump out into the emptiness of the very tall room. She fell to the floor, flapping her wings without effect. The weight of her boots was too much. Her wings bent and warped from effort as she fell through seven screens. Then she crumpled on the floor, half-dead, and enemies nosed her body, gnawed, and further drained her life points. Her wings would slowly

atrophy from disuse, shrinking, curling inward, dropping feathers in clots for the rest of the game, until there was nothing left. These feathers being pixels, of course—two each, twisting and angling this way and so on such that the viewer could see what they were meant to be. Then father and son understood the game. Joshua's father said, "This is a *real* game."

It was some time before they found the Elixir of Ice. This was a blue potion that poured from the mouth of a gargoyle who looked like Alicia, but with horns and healthy wings. The Elixir of Ice made crystals in her blood and other body fluids so she couldn't run as fast as she used to, or swing her sword as well, or draw her gun as quickly. Joshua could move the same way if he tensed all his muscles painfully. Once they were up until two in the morning exploring the dark caves in the bottom-right corner of the map, which were riddled with hungry purple mole-men and waxy stalactites dripping fat drops of poisonous water. The boss of this area was a worm with sticky skin, which collected various enemies and hazards—spikes, mole-men. Joshua could not kill the worm because without Alicia's wings it was difficult to leap over the many differently-shaped obstacles that clung to it. Joshua's father pulled him into his lap, took the controller from his hands, and finished the fight with her sword. In the next room there was only darkness and a large blue stone. They thought they would have to leave their sword there, a gift for King Arthur. When Joshua's father pressed B, Alicia struck the stone instead, which shattered the sword, leaving only a small length of blade

and the hilt. The exploded fragments hung twisting in the air like stars or a junkyard mobile.

"How will we kill the enemies?" said Joshua.

"We still have the gun," said his father, chest rumbling against Joshua's back, voice low and wooden in his ear.

"We'll lose that too," said Joshua.

"Then we'll run away," said his father. Joshua saw he was losing his hair. His skin was waxy like the stalactites.

•

They tried to cook together. They made meatloaf with 73/27 beef and Great Value saltines. They stirred the raw beef and the rest with their bare hands, then wiped them with paper towels and washed away the pink sticky residue, Joshua feeling all this time like the worm. The ketchup brown-sugar glaze scorched and made a black, brittle shell on the meatloaf.

They made stir-fry with bits of egg and too much soy sauce, too much salt. They made macaroni casserole and forced themselves to eat the cheddar scabs. They made pizza bagels: marinara, mozzarella, pepperoni slices. Three days in a row it was peanut butter jellies. Joshua took to sleeping on the couch while his father mapped the game. They were searching for the dirt clod.

"What do you think she'll do with it?" said Joshua.

"I don't know," said his father. "She could eat it."

"Why would it matter if she ate it?"

"You ever eaten dirt, Joshie?"

Joshua shook his head no.

"It could make her sick, for one," said his father. "That's just for a start."

"I think she'll cover her eyes with it," said Joshua. "Or maybe she'll put it in her mouth, but she'll hold it there, and plug her nose with it, so she can't scream, and she tastes it all the time." He imagined his mouth packed full.

"Like being buried alive," said his father. He patted Joshua's head. "You feeling okay, buddy?"

"Sure," said Joshua. "You want me to draw this room into the map?"

His father said yes.

His father said, "We've got 70 percent of the game mapped, but we still don't have half the items."

His father fell asleep on the couch. The TV screen reflected in his glasses, the game's movement making him seem awake. Joshua sat down in his lap, took over. He found the dirt clod beneath a false floor in the Chamber of Commerce, where dollars and coins flew at Alicia from all sides and clung to her body, briefly rebuilding her wings in their own green image. The dirt clod was on the floor, among several other dirt clods that looked identical, but smaller. "Wake up," said Joshua to his father. His father opened his eyes.

"You found it."

Here is what she did with the dirt clod:

She dirtied herself, browning and smearing her clothes, removing their luster. Clouds of filth hovered around her.

"Huh," said his father. He fell back asleep.

Joshua examined their clothes—his father's, his own. Both were crusted with cheese puff dust and stained with

cranberry juice cocktail. It had been nearly a month since they'd done the laundry. Joshua did not like folding the clothes but he didn't like when people looked at him either, at school or anywhere. His jeans were wearing thin in their knees and groin, and their cuffs were already ragged. He paused the game and went to the kitchen for something to eat.

The sink was full of dishes slick with grime. The table was piled with pop cans, some empty, some half-full. There were gym coupons on the table for Gold's Gym and LA Fitness, fanned out like playing cards. The cupboard was empty except for macaroni and pumpkin pie filling.

The phone rang twice before Joshua could get to it. He thought he had known it would ring before it did ring, which was why—he thought—he looked at the phone when he did.

"Hello?" said Joshua.

"I'm sorry," said a woman's voice. "I have the wrong number."

"Who was that?" said his father, awake again.

"Some lady," said Joshua. "Wrong number."

"Crazy bitch," said his father. He closed his eyes.

Joshua would stay up for the next hour trying to find the old answering machine tape, or something else with his mother's voice, to see if it sounded the same.

The next morning they ate off-brand Cap'n Crunch for breakfast. Joshua's father spilled droplets of milk on the gym coupons. They wrinkled and turned gray. They would stick to the table like glue. Holes would open in the

paper. His father said, "We're going to move into a smaller apartment."

Joshua nodded.

His father said, "Lower rent."

Joshua nodded.

His father said, "More money to play with."

•

In the concert hall at the top left of the map they found the oozing earplugs, inside the conductor's podium, which they broke open after killing the orchestra. When Alicia put in the earplugs, the game went quiet. Her footsteps and the footsteps of her enemies made no sound. The music was no music. Joshua fired her gun. The shots did not burble as they used to.

"Do you think it's going to stay this way?" said Joshua.

"Yes," said his father.

They moved into the new apartment. None of his father's friends could make it to help. They shared a jug of blue Gatorade as they unloaded the borrowed pickup truck. First thing, Joshua's father taped their map over the sliding glass door that was their western wall, or most of it. The map was growing. It cast a dark, faintly colored shadow on the empty carpet, like a bruise. Then it draped the couch, which they pushed against the southern wall. They set the TV up opposite, and loaded the refrigerator with everything left from the old one. A jar of mayonnaise. Several pickles. Lipton tea, still soaking the bags. Potatoes.

White bread. His father said, "Do you want the couch or the bedroom?"

Joshua searched his father's face for the answer. It wasn't there. It was possible there was no answer. It was possible he could say what he wanted. He said, "I'll take the couch."

His father said, "Okay."

They moved his father's weights into the bedroom, his still-boxed ab roller, his clothes, and several shoeboxes, all duct-taped shut.

They plugged in their game as the sun set. It shone brightly through the map, casting a grid over the kitchen and their faces, and in that grid a brighter bruise, or a fog, like melted crayons. Joshua's father was blue and yellow in his face, from water and poisonous acid. Joshua's hands were green and brown from the plant zone. The throne room was cast on the refrigerator's side.

They guided Alicia from the throne room's exit, down through one of the gateways opened by the dirt on her clothes, and then others unlocked by other infirmities. Joshua wanted to open some chips, but his father said they should save them for later. Soon they found the chamber of the orange cork. Joshua's father pressed the B button and Alicia took the cork. She drew her gun, solemn as pixels can. She fitted the cork inside the gun, pushing hard until it only stuck out a little—a flare at the end.

"Now it won't fire?" said Joshua.

His father shook his head.

"She's defenseless."

His father nodded.

Their game became one of evasion. Alicia could still duck, could still jump. They spent the rest of the night running from enemies, seeking alternate routes—climbing previously neglected ladders, ducking behind rocks. When they could not duck the monsters they ran into them head-on, took the hit, and then used the brief invulnerability this granted to escape into the next room, where they would do it all again. Joshua's father paused often. He offered the controller to his son, who refused it every time. They were both sweating.

Some hours later Joshua woke up. He wiped his drool from the knee of his father's home pants.

"You're up," said his father. "Look what I found."

"She's on the floor," said Joshua.

"I found the lead belt. You see?" It was a narrow band of pixels on her waist. She was propped up on her elbows, and her legs bent at the knees. The belt's buckle (unseen, but he knew it from the manual and the attract mode) pressed firmly to the floor. This was the weight that held her down. "This is all that happens when I try to attack," said his father, and she pushed her arm up feebly, the blunted remains of her sword outstretched. It seemed less an assault than an offering. "And she can crawl." He made her crawl.

"We are so screwed," said Joshua. "Dad, we're never going to get anywhere like this, and we still need the sunglasses."

"Maybe we can't win," said his father. "That's life too, I guess."

It was not clear how they could leave the chamber.

After some crawling around on the floor, they discovered there were bricks in the wall, low bricks that could be destroyed with her blunted sword. The world of their game was riddled and undermined all over with tunnels just large enough for crawling. These tunnels were sometimes visible to the players, but often not. Often they were obscured by rock or tree roots, or lava flow, or water. The only way to know she still moved was the slow scrolling of the screen. Joshua said, "Where do you think the tunnels came from?"

"I bet the sticky worm made them," said his father.

Trees rolled by, and their stumps. Ever-burning candles. Caverns and rock formations. They saw what they had seen before from new angles. Joshua drew the tunnels into the map, which had filled most of the graph paper. They were black lines, spiraling toward the center of the map as his father made his way. But there were many dead ends in the tunnels. Father and son knew they had hit a dead end when the scrolling stopped. Then they turned back.

When Joshua woke again he was alone on the couch. His legs were tangled in his lone wolf blanket, his shoes and socks removed. He wiped the drool from his chin and nose. The couch was crusted on its arm with his snot. He went to the bathroom. The previous tenant had left a framed picture of Greta Garbo, smoking, on the wall. There was a small peacock feather in her hat. She looked happy.

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Joshua's father talked about places they could go for vacation. Santa Claus, Indiana was a top contender. They had

Holiday World, which was also a water park now. "World's biggest wooden roller coaster," said his father.

"No kidding," said Joshua.

It turned out having "money to play with" meant paying the utilities on time.

Father and son experimented with a mostly vegetarian diet. Peanut butter jellies were the same, and so were chips, but no hamburgers and no fish sticks, except on Friday, which was Hardee's Night. They could afford to rent two videos a week at the Blockbuster. One was always a Dad movie, rated R. One was a Joshua movie, rated PG-13 or lower. The Dad movie was usually new, from the shelves that lined the walls and circled the rest. The Joshua Movie came from the inside shelves.

Sometimes Joshua's father called relatives and talked about Joshua's mother, though he tried not to let on. He thought he was speaking in code. "The Queen," he would call her. "The Duchess." Joshua listened carefully for clues where she was, what she was doing. "(Something something) pay phones," said his father. "(Something something) Atlanta."

Atlanta was the capital of Georgia. It was a big city. This was not nearly enough. Joshua couldn't even find his own way through *Legend of Silence.*

Their map was almost complete. The sun cast it on their coffee table, on their shoes, and on the clothing they scattered on the floor. Soon they would be done with their game. His father connected the NES through the VCR and bought a blank tape so they could record the game's ending.

His father offered wisdom at strange times. Joshua was on the toilet when his father knocked on the door. "It's busy," said Joshua.

His father said, "Never settle for less than you deserve. But whatever you can get, understand that you'll have to give it all up someday. Prepare yourself for that, as much as you can."

"Okay," said Joshua.

"Okay," said his father. "Do you think you should have an allowance?"

"I don't think you can afford to give me one."

"Okay."

•

They were near the center of the map, just above the throne room, when they found the sunglasses. This was the last thing they needed. Joshua's father pulled him onto his lap. He put the controller in Joshua's hands. Joshua pressed B. Alicia put on the glasses. The screen dimmed. She crawled further toward the center of the map. As she crawled the colors faded to black. She passed through a gate, which she unlocked with how nothing she was, how faded, how silent, how crawling. She fell through a hatch into what had been the throne room. It was no longer the throne room.

"It's changed," said his father. "I'll have to change the map."

He would use the black Sharpie. The screen was black now.

A white, blinking cursor at the screen's center, as in a word processor. After a moment's hesitation, it made blocky white text on the screen.

You are in Nirvana, it said. *You are not in Nirvana.*

You have come here to destroy your enemy. Your enemy has been waiting for you in Nirvana. Is your enemy in Nirvana? Yes or No.

"No," said Joshua's father. Joshua chose no.

No, said the game. *Your enemy is not in Nirvana, and neither are you. There is no you.*

"What's happening," said Joshua.

His father held him close. He rubbed Joshua's tummy through his Ninja Turtles shirt.

You might pursue your enemy, said the game. *Do you want to pursue your enemy? Yes or No.*

"What do you think?" said Joshua's father.

"No," said Joshua. "We should not pursue our enemy."

"Good," said Joshua's father. Joshua chose no.

No, said the game. *You have no enemy. You have no you. The labyrinth is gone. The weight falls from your body. Your body falls from your soul. Your soul falls from your absence. The absence is not yours. Do you fear? Yes or No.*

"Are we afraid?" said his father.

"Yes," said Joshua.

You will forget fear. Do you love?

"Yes," said his father.

"Yes," said Joshua.

You will forget love.

Congratulations. You win.

"Game over?" said Joshua.

"I guess so."

His father squeezed him tight. Joshua wondered what they would do now. The need he felt was like when he stepped on the sliver of glass, and his mother pulled at the skin with her tweezers, and pushed them inside, until she found the glass. It was like when she told him to get ready, to squeeze his father's hand. Clenching his teeth, closing his eyes, waiting.

JILLOJUN

Anna Anthropy

I COULD WRITE a second book about *Jill of the Jungle*, or JILLOJUN (DOS filenames being limited to eight characters), Epic MegaGames's second release. In fact, when I was approached about writing a book-length treatment of any game I wanted, *Jill* was the first thing I thought of. Then I decided to turn back a page.

Tim Sweeney developed *Jill* using the profits he made off the *ZZT* games—and when you live with your parents, any money you make is profit. The Jill of the Jungle trilogy is also shareware: the first episode's free, the second and third—*Jill Goes Underground* and *Jill Saves the Prince*—cost money.

Jill of the Jungle is Tim's response/homage/rip-off of *Super Mario Bros.*, shaping Epic MegaGames' early angle as the source for Nintendo-like games on the PC. Jill bounds like Mario through colorful diorama landscapes, collecting delicious apples and either evading or fighting enemies.

But the PC is a different machine than the Nintendo Entertainment System. While Mario dodges three-color

enemies, Jill explores a 256-color world. Her simplest opponent, the firebird, is an undulating gradient that melts seamlessly from white to yellow to orange to red to black, almost a living screensaver. Jill's purple-blue skies are occasionally bifurcated by hot pink sunsets. Under the game's Sound Blaster musical score burbles a brooding bass that alternately tenses and snaps. Game actions are occasionally punctuated by voice samples: a garbled "YEA-EAH!" or an oddly-clipped villainous "AHAHA."

To twelve-or-thirteen-year-old me, this must have seemed like a whole other world from Super Mario. In fact, a message in the unregistered version of *Jill* indicates that Mario (along with other contemporary game mascots) is throwing in the towel, unable to compete:

> ITALY (UPI) TODAY, WORLD-RENOWNED "MARIO" RESIGNED FROM HIS POSITION AS SUPERHERO AT AGE 72. THIS IS THE LATEST EVENT IN AN UNPRECEDENTED CHAIN OF EVENTS CAUSED BY JILL'S INCREDIBLE POPULARITY. "WE JUST DON'T STAND A CHANCE AGAINST HER, SO WE ARE GIVING UP," SAID MARIO, "WE ARE NOT COOL ENOUGH."

As an adult, I can see how *Jill* is molded in Mario's image. But it's the places where the game fails to imitate Mario—and become something more interesting—that stick in my memory. Jill doesn't toss fireballs, she throws a knife that flies out and then, boomerang-like, comes back

to her. She tosses it from the shoulder, so it zips right over the game's shorter enemies—like those frogs, the fuckers. By maneuvering herself during its return trip, she can make her knife arc and curve and maybe, with enough skill, bop that frog before the knife settles gracefully at her feet.

One of the boxed versions of the game—manufactured once Epic could afford shelf space at computer stores—contains a hint guide written by John Pallett-Plowright. John has this to say about the frogs:

> Why do the frogs keep killing me? They are a rare species of Carnivorous Jungle Frogs. Rumor has it that they have mutated to be able to leap tall buildings in a single bound, and they seem to dodge knives (infuriatingly). If they keep killing you... well... cut 'em up! (Easy to say!)

JILL OF THE JUNGLE

Jill is a blonde, white woman in a green one-piece bathing suit, kind of like the stars of the old colonialist pulp jungle comics. The game provided a weird, distorted view of sexuality to me as a twelve-or-thirteen-year-old kid. The Down key makes Jill crouch, showing her pixel cleavage to the camera. She scurries up vines with this kind of sexualized thrust that shows off her ass.

But this was still one of the first games little-me had ever played that featured a woman protagonist, and the subtle femininity in many of Jill's movements was a big deal to me: her femme slouch, booted legs planted wide,

the hand on her hip when she gets impatient waiting for the player to press a button. (*"Are you just gonna sit there?"* she demands.)

Jill seemed embodied in a way most game protagonists I inhabited had never been. When Jill falls into a pit of water—deadly when she's in human form—her hand grasps out of the water as she drowns. If she's defeated by an enemy, she kneels, crumbling into a pile a bones, rather than being flung abstractly off the screen the way Mario is.

Jill transforms, not by changing the color of her sprite, but by physically transforming her body—which you can probably imagine must have seemed pretty liberating to a young trans kid. She can become the gradient firebird, flying and shooting rings of flame and avoiding water. She can be a frog, her controls replaced by the (identical) commands "Hop" and "Leap." She can turn into a fish that can navigate the normally-fatal waterways and shoot "Fish-Bullets." (John Pallett-Plowright: "What is a 'Fish-Bullet'? I don't know—Jill fires them by flinging them with her tail, though.")

Coming to the game from *ZZT* you could tell how formative that game had been to Tim Sweeney's design sensibilities. *ZZT*'s influence shows through in structural ways—the use of Keys and Doors as pacing mechanisms to create branching paths within a larger, linear structure—and in more superficial ways, like the flashing messages at the bottom of the screen or the digital graffiti tagged on the game world. In one level, Tim spells out his name in disappearing platforms. In another is the message, "*LONG LIVE ZZT.*"

There's a very *ZZT* sense to the economical way the game reuses and repurposes images. The birds-eye view of lakes and forests that make up a world map later in the series serve as the background of an earlier level—"The Plateau"—so it's as though Jill has a panoramic view of the jungle from high up. Individual squares of the sunset are cannibalized for use as tiling backgrounds and patterns. As with *ZZT*'s ASCII characters, context makes and remakes the thing.

Episode One of the Jill trilogy—the one most people played as shareware—is probably the most reserved of the series. Jill starts in a hub level full of portals to other levels—the thing in the shape of a hut, for example, whisks her away to the hut level. The levels are fairly representational—"BOUND THROUGH THE BOULDERS," "EXPLORE THE FOREST"—with a couple of weird puzzle areas like the Knights' Puzzle and Arg's Dungeon.

> Who is Arg? Take your pick:
> A) Elvis in disguise
> B) What you say when you can't complete the level
> C) Jill's boyfriend
> D) One of the background puppets on Sesame Street

But it's the ending of Episode One where the game starts to let its weirdness shine. At the top of the plateau, the final level, Jill transforms into the firebird. Moving under her own power, she takes off into the night sky, soaring past purple planets and Saturn-ringed worlds to arrive

at an alien landscape of enormous blue-purple mushrooms, unlike anything else in the game.

The ending text:

> Five hundred miles away from her starting point, Jill wanders into a strange and mystical grove of mushrooms. Transforming back into her human form, she stops to ponder the situation. This is a place unlike anything seen by the eyes of a human.
>
> What unspeakable forces of nature lie beyond the grove? Can a lady like Jill uncover the mysteries of this place, and escape without messing up her blonde hair? Find the answers in: Jill Goes Underground, the startling sequel!

How could you not send away for Episode Two?

JILL GOES UNDERGROUND

Episode Two, *Jill Goes Underground*, is one continuous level—Jill's nighttime journey, like the sun's voyage under the earth to reemerge into the sky the next morning. Jill plummets from the peak of the purple mushroom grove from Episode One to the bottom of a pit, and travels from predicament to predicament until she returns to the sunlight.

Jill Goes Underground's levels, more abstract than the first episode's, is a series of set pieces that plays as though Tim, having successfully attained the semblance of a console run-and-jump game, was now free to explore the

individual elements and interactions of his game more thoughtfully. There are lots of mazes and puzzles having to do with both manipulating switches and gates and with understanding the precise height and shape of Jill's jump.

And then there's Heck.

You'd think, now that Jill's traded her green bathing suit for a red one, she might be better camouflaged here. But no, Jill dies again and again to the gauntlet of huge, flying, fire-spraying demons—one of the episode's new monsters—and, lost soul that she is, Jill rises again and again to further suffer at their hands. The world doesn't reset when Jill dies, so surviving Heck becomes a matter of attrition. With infinite lives, you *eventually* slay enough of the demons that you can get through alive. Unlike in *ZZT*'s hell, no one offers you a chilidog.

The game winds down in the Land of Eternal Weirdness, a sort of puzzle apartment building where pieces of the game's sunset have been appropriated to tile the walls, squares of tree leaf have been used to camouflage the approach of those fucking frogs. When you see the demon waiting for you at the end, you jump. *Never again, I thought!*

It's the game's ending, appropriately, that has left the biggest impression on me. The last chamber is a stone pit, with Jill at the bottom. But she can see above her, within reach, a High Jump power-up. It looks like a red arrow pointing up—the way out. As she jumps to grab it, she sees another one, along with graffiti on the walls: "WAY UP ABOVE."

The jump power-ups are cumulative—every time she claims one, her jump gets a little higher, allowing her to grab the next one. And to see the next part of the message:

WAY UP ABOVE

YOU BEGIN TO SEE

THE LIGHT

OF DAY

The gradual motion, the deliberate slow pace of this last scene, marries the game's play and its story in a way I find extraordinary. Way up the pit is a plateau where the story continues: "*AND THE THOUGHT FINALLY ENTERS YOUR MIND.*"

With another leap Jill is standing in front of the pink-red sunset again, below the words "*You Are Free.*"

JILL SAVES THE PRINCE

It's a way better ending than that of the third episode, *Jill Saves the Prince*, anyway. Here, she marries the titular Prince after rescuing him from some Lizard-Men who want to bulldoze the jungle and put up condos. You encounter the Lizard-Men exactly twice in the game—first on board their ship, where you have to avoid them, sneaking for Keys while they march back and forth, and then again in their castle, where you're armed, and they die without protest.

The brown-and-purple Lizard-Men look so ugly and flat next to Jill, so MS Paint next to the glittering firebird. Jill, in this episode, is wearing blue.

I mean, look, credit to Tim for trying to "flip the script" by having a woman protagonist rescue a male damsel, but I liked Jill a lot more when she didn't have to have a love interest, and was fighting for no less great a cause then her own survival in *Jill Goes Underground*. That's something games never tell girls: that their lives—without any modifiers, without romantic leads—are worth fighting for.

The Prince that Jill rescues from the Lizard-Men's castle would go on to play Onesimus in the licensed Christian game *Onesimus: A Quest for Freedom*. Epic MegaGames licensed *Jill of the Jungle* to a Christian game developer called ArK Multimedia Publishing. Their version of Jill is based on Paul the Apostle's Epistle to Philemon, and follows the journey of Philemon's runaway slave Onesimus as he attempts to find Paul and convert to Christianity. Or, at least, it follows the journey of Onesimus through a jumble of levels taken from all three of the *Jill* games.

It's not the last time *Jill of the Jungle* would be repurposed: 1993's *Xargon* is a more masculine and boring reskinning of *Jill*, where lasers replace boomerang knives and one-man submarines replace Fish-Bullets. In *Xargon*, handsome archaeologist dude Malvineous Havershim, clad in a wife-beater and jeans, explores locations like "The Dungeon of Death" and "The Dismal Looking Castle" on his quest to destroy the robot factories of the villainous Xargon. He receives advice from a talking eagle.

Jill became Serious; Epic MegaGames became Serious. The company dropped the "Mega" from its name, became Epic Games, and published games about muscular dudes fucking with chainsaws. But for a brief, wonderful moment in my childhood, *Jill of the Jungle* represented all that games could be: silly, colorful, loud, garish, femme.

Jill of the Jungle has a high score table, to remember how many apples you ate in your last game. It's not empty the first time you run the game, though: A bunch of names are already there, each holding a lofty score of 100 points. From top to bottom, they read:

LOOK
OUT
WORLD
HERE
COMES
EPIC
MEGA
GAMES

How Mega Man Got His Pistol Back

An International Look at "Bad Box Art"

Michael P. Williams

When I was a kid, I didn't often have the luxury—much less the sense of spontaneity—to purchase video games without first doing my research. My monthly subscription to *Nintendo Power* was a great source of information, but the featured walkthroughs and "Pak Watch" previews were a poor substitute for actually playing Nintendo games. Luckily for me, my family didn't live far from a video rental store. West Coast Video, a chain founded in my own city of Philadelphia, began stocking video games along with VHS tapes. I saw this video games section grow rapidly from a dedicated shelf to an entire rack, and finally to a complete section of the store. Eventually, West Coast Video and the recently moved-in Blockbuster became not only cheaper alternatives to buying games, but also libraries—places to find video games that had long stopped selling in stores.

Unlike retail stores, where games were often locked inside towering plastic cases, video rental stores gave me full access to the packaging. Often enough, video games boxes were my first impression of games, and their imagery influenced the way I approached their contents.

In the late 1980s through the 1990s, the video game boxes that I mostly loved, sometimes hated, and often tried to imitate with pencil and paper, differed vastly from their counterparts in Japan. In some extreme cases, box art might be mutually unintelligible to players on opposite sides of the Pacific Ocean. With the help of the internet, it has become an easy task to make side by side comparisons of North American, Japanese, and occasionally European box art. Discussions about transoceanic box art differences usually highlight the subjectively poor artistic merit of North American artwork compared against its Japanese predecessors, though defenders of the Western aesthetic are not in short supply. Box art comparisons, then, tend to become simple arguments over which region did it best, though recent matchups have also demonstrate subtle changes in the box art of American and Japanese versions, like how Nintendo's beloved pink puffball Kirby tends to look angry and battle-ready on North American boxes, but seems to be having a jolly time on those same adventures in Japan. These slight variations, however, are nowhere near as noticeable as the radical splits in box art during the early days of console gaming. I began wondering just why box art localization has shifted away from highly idiosyncratic repackaging—why the inspired, sloppy, thrilling,

ridiculous, or just plain baffling box art styles of yesteryear have mostly disappeared.

•

No one in my family seems to remember just when we bought an NES. I maintain that it was a present for my fifth birthday in 1987, though true to its original Japanese name, it soon became a "Family Computer." My earliest memories of playing Nintendo were swapping controllers with my sister to play *Super Mario Bros.*, cheering when my dad finally knocked out the celebrity final boss of *Mike Tyson's Punch-Out!!*, and attempting to make urban legend into reality by trying in vain to shoot down that mocking dog in *Duck Hunt*. None of these, however, can hold a candle to the events of April 3, 1988. That Easter Sunday, I awoke to a special kind of egg hunt that could only have been dreamed up by my mom. Golden (plastic) eggs had been scattered throughout the house, and I had to track each one down to unlock a hidden treasure. Inside the shiny eggs were all sorts of strange artifacts: an hors d'oeuvre skewer in the shape of a sword, a toy apatosaurus, a small metal key, a monster finger puppet. After I had assembled all of these items, I was given the ultimate prize, *The Legend of Zelda*.

I instinctively knew it would be special. The heraldic box art was already whispering to my imagination. The upper left of the regal escutcheon on the box was a window to something shinier than any of the eggs I had found that Easter morning—the aureate cartridge itself. For

me and countless other players, *The Legend of Zelda* was a golden ticket into the world of epic gaming. Japanese players, however, did not receive anything close to this special treatment. The box art of the original Famicom disk version, *The Hyrule Fantasy: Zeruda no Densetsu*, shows an anime-style Link crouched in front of the Hyrulian landscape. The game itself was an elongated yellow floppy disk, a pale comparison to the shiny cartridge released in North America.

The box art conceived for other fantasy questing games in North America took cues from *The Legend of Zelda*'s packaging. Its own golden-carted sequel, *Zelda II: The Adventure of Link*, shows a large jewel-hilted sword, and Square's *Final Fantasy* took the typical role-playing imagery further, showing a crystal ball above a crossed sword and battle-axe. The Japanese Famicom boxes have vastly different imagery. *Rinku no Bōken* shows the elven hero slightly matured and adventuresome, and *Fainaru Fanatajī* depicts a fey swordsman in ceremonial armor in the now timeless style of series artist Yoshitaka Amano. Neither of these cartoonier approaches seems to have found favor with early marketers of Japanese games localized for North Americans. Instead of the heavy anime stylings of Akira Toriyama's *Dragon Quest* series, for instance, the *Dragon Warrior* games feature scenes that could have been lifted from the covers of generic Western fantasy novels. These box art localizations exchanged cute for cool, childlike for adult, and play for adventure.

The larger adventure genre similarly translated approachable and ethereal Japanese box art into more

intimidating and straightforward North American terms, sometimes with hilariously bad results. Perhaps the most infamous example of North American box art localizations is *Mega Man*. The character immortalized by this cover is far removed from the version on the Japanese release of *Rokkuman* ("Rockman"). Instead of a friendly robo-boy with an arm cannon who battled other bipedal robots, North Americans saw an adult in safety pads awkwardly wielding a pistol on a futuristic pinball landscape. Beyond the sheer incompatibility of this art with the game's content, the box art version of Mega Man is off-model, with strange bodily contortions and a misshapen helmet. His hangdog, almost haunted expression tells us what we can easily ascertain—there is nothing mega about this man.

Ultimately, North American NES players didn't adapt the old adage about not judging a book by its cover—despite the fact that the gameplay of *Mega Man* had little to do with its packaging, the game sold poorly. But the North American manual for *Mega Man* tells a different story, and one closer to its Japanese origins. After skipping past the steroid-fueled welcome from Capcom's partially eponymized mascot Captain Commando, the reader gets a glimpse at how Mega Man was envisioned for Japan—a plucky hero who is more playmate than action figure. Here in this 1987 package begins a long-standing tension between the Japanese Rockman and Western depictions of Mega Man.

Mega Man 2, released in North America in 1989, is the true prototype of a Mega Man game. It eliminated the useless scoring system of *Mega Man*, established the

three-by-three stage select grid with eight robot masters (each weak to another's signature weapon), and standardized the power-up appearances that would continue throughout the series. While it was a hit in North America, its success was probably not due to its box art. The work of artist Marc Ericksen has received some derision, but not nearly as much as its predecessor. The hero of *Mega Man 2*'s box looks closer to its digital version, but he is still depicted as an adult human who, for some reason, continues to use a handgun. In an October 2012 interview with Nintendo Age, Ericksen sheds some light on the peculiar circumstances of how this box art came to be:

> What we saw was this little pixelated figure of the famous Mega Man running around on the screen shooting. Bang, bang, bang, he's shooting [...] with his arm. So I said to the art director, "What is he shooting? What is he shooting with?" The art director said, "He must have a pistol because I don't see that he's got a rifle so he must have a pistol."
>
> "So... a pistol? You want me to do a pistol?" And he said, "Yeah, let's put a pistol in there." Add to the fact that they only had, like, a day and a half for me to do the painting and what you wound up with was not the greatest result but certainly a result that was not my fault. It was one of those things. Here's my opportunity: I'm saying to everybody now that was not my fault!

While *Mega Man 2*'s gameplay does reveal Mega Man's Mega Buster arm cannon as he fires projectile weapons, the "get weapon" screen clearly shows the hero with two hands. If the game itself remains ambiguous on Mega Man's anatomy, then Ericksen cannot be blamed for this design choice. Moreover, that localizing functions operate on unforgiving schedules was not news to me. Translators Ted Woolsey and Tom Slattery of *Chrono Trigger* each spoke of time constraints, with Woolsey labeling the deadline "that ever-present elephant in the translator's brainpan." Similar pachyderms seem to have stampeded through box art localizing professionals' brains as well. Unlike game translators, however, box art localizers like Ericksen were not taking the Japanese art and directly filtering it through North American sensibilities. Instead, the digital gameplay became inspiration for new, Western style artwork.

Concept artist and illustrator Lawrence Fletcher echoes some of Ericksen's experiences as a freelance artist for video game companies. From 1989 to 1992, Fletcher created box art for publisher Vic Tokai, illustrating video games such as *Kid Kool and the Quest for the Seven Wonder Herbs*, *Clash at Demonhead*, and *The Krion Conquest*, a game mostly notable for how deeply its gameplay resembled that of the Mega Man series. The Japanese originals are generally unrecognizable from Fletcher's artwork, with *Kid Kool* providing the most fascinating example. Fletcher's illustration shows a greaser/punk teenager menaced by alien critters and an otherworldly wizard. The Japanese version, *Kakefu-kun no Janpu Tengoku: Supīdo Jigoku* ("Kakefu's Jump Heaven: Speed Hell"), shows a photograph of a spiky-haired

Japanese child in overalls emerging from a cartoon television. Fletcher described to me his experience at Vic Tokai, and in particular his work on *Clash at Demonhead* in detail via e-mail:

> The sales/marketing manager at Vic Tokai […] was an American. He was well educated in Japanese culture and the gaming industry, and spoke Japanese fluently. […] The objective of the cover was to have American style art. We had briefings and I was told what the games were about (gameplay, theme, character, enemies, and so forth). Not too much art from other Japanese games was shown to me. I don't think they wanted to copy or reference those styles. I was given a general idea of what elements should go into the cover imagery. But I was allowed to arrange the composition and how it should appear stylistically. So yes, I was give some creative freedom. I presented sketches to marketing, so they could have input and approval before I submitted the final illustration for publishing. So the art direction was a collaborative effort, but managed by the marketing team leader.

Just like with Ericksen, the original Japanese art was not provided as inspiration for the North American artwork, and in the days before the internet, it would have been difficult to find, even for skilled searchers fluent in Japanese. The localization of box art, then, was a far more circuitous process, full of information gaps and rough ideas.

In essence, while game translators were shaping stories to foreign audiences, box artists were completely rewriting them from broad outlines.

Both Ericksen and Fletcher have commented with candor on their experiences as concept artists, but other video game packaging artists aren't as easy to track down. Perhaps part of this is the relatively low credit that is given to artists, or that their freelance work eventually became the property of the video game companies themselves. Ericksen noted on his website Retrogameart.com that seeking credit for his hard work proved challenging, and "involved overcoming gaming company policies stating that there would be no credits given for the illustrators on the packaging." Using physical evidence like logsheets, invoices, and purchase orders in conjunction with "technique comparison guides"—in which he documents stylistic similarities between work already identified as his, to work yet uncredited to him—Ericksen has been able to claim his creative role in many otherwise anonymous pieces. Fletcher, on the other hand, has sought a less official but more popular approach—amending Wikipedia articles to credit himself as the cover artist.

Whether or not the contributions of other golden age box artists will be remembered, it is clear that their heyday is long over. Ericksen relates how the game industry changed for him and others: "The imagery and gameplay for video games were reaching a critical mass for the concept that they could be used as cover art for the game boxes themselves. It was that concept that drove most of us out of the market." Despite Ericksen's assertion, Nintendo releases

had already experienced success using images directly from video games. *Excitebike*, *Urban Champion*, and most famously, *Super Mario Bros.*—whose cover actually depicts Mario's impending fiery death—all used spritework from their games to create beautifully minimalist box art. While Ericksen's work on the Mega Man series began and ended with *Mega Man 2*, his version of the character provided a key transitional state in Mega Man's North American development, as Mega Man continually transformed to reach eventual reconvergence with his Japanese ancestor Rockman. Though rather than evolve, Mega Man seems to *devolve* as he shrinks in size and achieves ever-increasing levels of neoteny.

The cover art for *Mega Man 3*'s North American release in November 1990 shows Mega Man as a bratty cyborg homunculus—a cross between *Mad*'s "Alfred E. Neuman and Chucky from *Child's Play*," as humorist Andrew Bridgman observes on the Dorkly feature "Leaked Memos Explain Why Every Mega Man Cover is Terrible." But he finally has his Mega Buster (both on-box and in-game), and he is closer to Rockman than ever. May 1990 had marked the PAL region release of the first *Mega Man*, with artwork akin to a live-action adaptation of the gameplay. This European version of Mega Man serves as an obvious missing link between *Mega Man 2*'s and *Mega Man 3*'s art styles. *Mega Man 3*'s depiction, by the way, was acceptable enough that the likeness was adapted only slightly for the first Game Boy installment, *Mega Man: Dr. Wily's Revenge*, released in North America in December 1991.

By *Mega Man 4* (January 1992), the hero has grown more compact, but still bears very Western facial shading and an angular, jester-like face. The box art of hero of *Mega Man II* (the sequel to *Mega Man: Dr. Wily's Revenge*), released for the Game Boy the following month, retains the sinister Hamburglar grin. After this induced hiccup in series numbering, *Mega Man III* (Game Boy) and *Mega Man 5* (NES), both released in December 1992, show slightly gentler versions of Mega Man. Their round, cherubic faces make them look more like mischievous go-getters than trickster goblins. On the European side, *Mega Man 4*, *Mega Man III*, and *Mega Man 5* were all released in 1993, and each of their covers is nearly identical to the North American versions, with one key difference—Mega Man's face has been made more anime-styled and overall more gentle.

A slew of expanded universe Mega Man titles were released in North America in the following years:

Mega Man IV (Game Boy, December 1993);
Mega Man X (SNES, January 1994), where "X" is not the Roman numeral 10;
Mega Man 6 (NES, March 1994);
Mega Man Soccer (SNES, April 1994);
Mega Man V (Game Boy, September 1994);
Mega Man X2 (SNES, January 1995);
Mega Man 7 (SNES, September 1995);
Mega Man X3 (SNES, January 1996).

The Mega Men on these games' boxes all hesitantly imitate anime styles, but leave telltale signs of Western ambivalence. Their faces are ruddy with somewhat defined features, and, while the artwork of Mega Man X installments generally obscure Mega Man's torso with body armor, they are all muscular heroes. Original character designer Keiji Inafune's Japanese images of Rockman, on the other hand, have barely progressed through the series. The first *Rokkuman*'s stout, chubby hero remains boyish in later incarnations, even as he becomes smoother and more streamlined, with little trace of visible musculature.

Mega Man finally becomes unambiguously unified with Rockman on the cover of *Mega Man 8* (PlayStation, January 1997). VentureBeat community writer John M.'s retrospective on the series' North American box art delivers an uncomfortable truth. "Finally, Capcom decided to stop pretending this game wasn't Japanese and used the Inafune-style art on the cover." In fact, Mega Man had only appeared in his anime form in the United States once, on the box art for the Game Gear *Mega Man* (1995)—a game published by U.S. Gold, and not by Capcom. While it is more than plausible that recycling Japanese artwork proved less costly than developing new concept art, U.S. Gold inadvertently embraced a new cultural shift that Capcom had seemed reluctant to admit. The 1990s were the decade of anime.

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I saw my first manga in 1994, when I was in the seventh grade. A girl who I had a crush on showed me an issue

of Yukito Kishiro's *Battle Angel Alita* in English translation. We both knew that the violence and sexuality of this story classified it as contraband in our Catholic school, so we would sneak off to empty rooms to read and reread it, copy the character designs in our sketchbooks, and puzzle over its foreign mysteries. What we didn't realize was that this foreignness been around us the whole time, thinly disguised with American overtones. Japanese animation, in fact, had managed successfully to cross into American televisions many times throughout the second half of the 20th century. But these programs coexisted with and were disguised as American shows—names were Westernized, episodes were edited and repurposed, and sometimes entire plots were changed. Anime as a genre had not yet received popular attention.

But the mid- and late 1990s saw the beginnings of anime as both distinct and mainstream, as a product that Americans wanted to buy because of its unAmericanness. Modern classics like *Dragon Ball* and *Sailor Moon* made their initial, heavily edited American debuts in 1995. *Dragon Ball*'s more famous sequel series *Dragon Ball Z* was picked up for two seasons from 1996-1998 in syndication before finally migrating to Cartoon Network's "Toonami" programming block, where it coexisted with *Sailor Moon* and American shows. Toonami—a portmanteau of the English *[car]toon* and the Japanese *tsunami*—not only provided space for anime shows to exist, but made them coequal with American animated properties. Eventually, the sheer volume of imported anime washed away many American

programs, and Toonami became the premiere place to find popular anime on TV.

The late 1990s, then, represented both the emergence of anime aesthetics as viable, and the decreasing reluctance of companies to take risks in importing Japanese products. Americans were finally coming to grips with the gradually increasing cultural force of "Cool Japan," a trend identified by Douglas McGray's watershed article "Japan's Gross National Cool." Even Nintendo's and Sony's successful invasions of American living rooms were just two of the many ways in which droplets of Japanese culture gradually trickled into the American mainstream. Noting the changes in the successive characters representing Mega Man on a decade of game boxes is an excellent way to observe North America's increasingly difficult struggle against unadulterated Japanese styles.

Ultimately, the battle was conceded with *Mega Man 8*, and victory was confirmed with August 1997's release of *Mega Man X4* in North America. Despite efforts to fuse American and Japanese styles to define the character of Mega Man—both through gradual box art compromises and even a Japanese-American animated series (*Mega Man*, 1994-1995)—Capcom finally yielded to the Cool Japan zeitgeist. Later Mega Man subfranchises like Mega Man Legends (1997), Mega Man Battle Network (2001), Mega Man Zero (2002), and Mega Man ZX (2006) have all imported their lead characters' anime stylings with little compromise.

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Video games have played a considerable role in Japan's successful cultural evangelization, but North America has also been a large producer of video games, many of which were sold overseas. Just as early North American imports were repackaged with Western style art, so were imports to Japan redesigned to appeal to Japanese consumers—often in completely opposite ways. While "cute" characters like Rockman became the ungainly "macho" hero Mega Man on that first fateful box, so were hypermasculine American characters made less threatening to Japanese players. The muscular barbarian Kuros on the cover of *Wizards and Warriors* (NES, 1987) was transformed into the goofy, "super deformed" knight Elrond for the Japanese localization, *Densetsu no Kishi Erurondo* (Famicom, 1988). Other examples of very American imports in the late 80s and early 90s, like Jaleco's *David Crane's A Boy and His Blob: Trouble on Blobolonia* (released in Japan as *Fushigi na Burobī: Burobania no Kiki*, "Mysterious Blobby: Blobania's Crisis") and *Maniac Mansion* (*Maniakku Manshon*) showed similar deformations to the box art characters, who shrank to half-height as their heads expanded in size.

But just as the West was gradually opening itself to Japan's superflat, *kawaii* aesthetics, Japan began exploring new alternatives to the bubblegum cuteness that North Americans typically associate with Japanese art. By integrating elements of the grotesque and the weird, Japan began complicating *kawaii* ("cute," "loveable") with *kimoi* ("gross," "creepy"). Journalist Patrick St. Michel's article "The Rise of Japan's Creepy-Cute Craze" notes that like Japan, America too had a love affair with so-called

kimokawaii characters, citing popular 1990s cartoons like *Beavis and Butthead* and *The Ren & Stimpy Show*. Many of these characters owed much more to the bilious gross-out humor of the 1980s, what fellow Boss Fighter Ken Baumann called "booger culture"—Garbage Pail Kids cards, Madballs, Wacky Packages stickers. Japan did not necessarily embrace these more visceral aspects of grossness. Rather than revel in body fluids—snot and urine were grossly popular in children's humor—Japanese *kimokawaii* has tended to emphasize the integration of the strange, the ill-at-ease, and the downright creepy with more traditional ideas of cuteness. Along with importing cute-ish characters like SpongeBob SquarePants, Japan has made their own creations like Kobito Dukan ("Illustrated Dwarf Encyclopedia"), whose inhabitants resemble hairless, mutant geriatrics wearing Pikmin costumes. The dwarves were popular enough to star in *Kobito Dukan: Kobito Kansatsu Setto* ("Dwarf Observation Set"), a 2012 game for the Nintendo 3DS, with a sequel in 2013, *Kobito Dukan: Kobito no Fushigi Jikken Setto* ("Dwarf Mysterious Experiment Set").

But *kimokawaii* is more than just a clever subversion of cute—it's a reflection of how cuteness actually exists on the spectrum between the beautiful and the grotesque. Pop culture critic Inuhiko Yomota's book *"Kawaii"-ron* ("Theories on 'Cute'") cites numerous examples of *kimokawaii* characters that would be horrifying if encountered in reality, like Steven Spielberg's E.T., or the Christ babies who occupy Renaissance painter Carlo Crivelli's religious artwork. Looking at these latter characters, which meld the innocence of infancy with world-weary stares, I cannot

help but imagine them wearing little Mega Man helmets and wielding pistols. But the creepy part of *kimokawaii* can wear off with familiarity, and gross-cute things can become loveable in spite of their ugliness—or even because of it. Yomota considers both the popularity of pugs as well as Japanese costumed mascots (*yurukyara*) as hallmarks of endearing *kimokawaii*.

It seems, however, that the two *kimokawaii* booms missed each other by just a few years. As America was beginning to embrace Japan's cute anime styles as equal, and occasionally superior to, homegrown artwork, so was Japan beginning to discover the joys of grossness that Americans had already begun to abandon. Had the two trends crossed paths sooner, the *kimoi*, transitional Mega Men of the early 1990s might have found themselves the object of Japanese affections.

While the Domino's Noid-like hero of *Mega Man 3*'s box has not become a Japanese favorite, his grandfather has experienced an intriguing resurgence. Originally planned as a character for the unreleased *Mega Man Universe*, "Bad Box Art Mega Man" was a fairly close imitation of the original North American box art, his face twisted in the comedic grimace of a belabored standup comedian. He might even pass as a Kobito Dukan dwarf in a Mega Man costume. When the character made his debut as a bonus character in the Playstation releases of *Street Fighter X Tekken* (2012), he retained his pistol, but he had changed his name to "Mega Man" and had since sprouted a beer belly. His facial features, moreover, had become harder, more masculine, and less overtly "gross." Capcom managed to

perfectly lampoon American stereotypes with this obnoxiously avuncular warrior, while reclaiming one of its biggest artistic mistakes as a neo-*kimokawaii* asset.

North America too has embraced its history of bad box art, though with a bit more reverence than Japan. With the release of digital download-only *Mega Man 9* in 2008, Capcom went back to basics. Beyond designing the game in an 8-bit style with the gameplay mechanics of *Mega Man 2*, Capcom also commissioned artist Gerald de Jesus to create "virtual box art" reminiscent of the early Mega Man titles. The futuristic space-armored Mega Man pictured in de Jesus's artwork wields both a cannon arm and an oversized handgun, as a bionically enhanced, eyepatched Dr. Wily looms in the background. Writing for his blog at capcom.com, Capcom representative Chris Kramer explains that "[i]t was quickly decided by the marketing group that if we were going to release a game that looked like it came from 1987 that we should run the whole marketing campaign as if we were working in the games industry in 1987." This version of Mega Man is both a sincere homage to the character's earliest North American roots, as well as an ironic riff on their failures. De Jesus later contributed a new piece for the release of *Mega Man 10* (2010). This version of Mega Man is armed with an exaggeratedly large rifle instead of the pistol, and is further aided by his brother Proto Man (now reminiscent of *Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles*'s Shredder), as well as a space marine version of frenemy Bass. In the expanded "triptych" illustration, de Jesus has transformed the cybernetic Dr. Wily of *Mega Man 9* into a full demonic robot. De Jesus gushes on his

blog that "[*Mega Man 10*] was such a fun and awesome project to work on!" and recognizes the force that drove him to design this image. "I just wanted to continue with the spirit of the bad interpretation of Mega Man covers."

The return to retro proved attractive to players disappointed by the graphical upgrades to *Mega Man 7* and *Mega Man 8*, but whether nostalgia can continue to support this core subseries of Mega Man products remains to be seen. Despite *Mega Man 9* and *10*'s deliberate hearkening back to the glory days of Nintendo gaming, each brought with it two decidedly post-2000s features: a lack of physicality, and downloadable content available at additional cost. Likewise, their box art was faithful to the appearances of earlier installments in the franchise, though their spirit was one of playful mockery. The covers of *Mega Man* and *Mega Man 2* lack the self-awareness of Bad Box Art Mega Man and de Jesus's work. While art, fashion, and trends may appear cyclical, they feel closer to constantly scaling, ever-changing fractals that recapitulate their histories endlessly.

North Americans may have once seen anime as too foreign to become mainstream, but anime itself evolved from techniques pioneered by quintessentially American animators like Walt Disney. The fluid, rubber-hose-limbed style of *Steamboat Willie* and other 1920s cartoon features has been largely abandoned in the United States, but it managed to inspire generations of important Japanese artists, like *Astro Boy* creator Osamu Tezuka. Big names like Tezuka, in turn, would develop a codified manga/anime aesthetic that would not only rival American animation, but would influence it greatly. The styles of shows

like *Samurai Jack* (2001) and *Teen Titans* (2003)—both Toonami successes—ultimately trace their origins to early American 20th century animation in two major ways. All of these anime-influenced works are double cousins of themselves, by way of both Japanese anime and American cartoons. But it would be overly simplistic to reduce the constant give and take of art to easily traceable linear evolutions. The transnational exchange of ideas and styles has always been dynamic, and with the advent of the internet, that conversation has grown ever faster and more difficult to observe in real-time.

The box art industry has also evolved. While the localization of game art still continues, contemporary side-by-side comparisons rarely echo the disparities of the 1980s and 1990s. Rather than demonstrating the artistic license taken by localizing artists who often received direct inspiration from 8-bit pixelations, newer matchups of "before and after" shots of games like the Kirby series seem to reveal the underpinnings of *glocalization*—that is, the integration of globalization and localization—with art concepts imagined at global levels of marketing, and then modified to fit the tastes of local consumers.

Even with greater awareness of local preferences in globally marketed products, companies can still make radical departures to exploit the weak points of markets. Capcom certainly gave Japanese consumers predictably Inafune-styled artwork for both *Rokkuman 9* and *10*. For the North American releases, however, Capcom capitalized on the nostalgia embodied by localized box art of the early Mega Man games. Out of context, this imagery would be alien

to Japanese players familiar only with their domestic box art. These same players, nevertheless, were given an official venue to score some digital Western swag: desktop wallpaper from the "overseas version" of *Mega Man 10*. Capcom has managed to leverage both global and localized products across the globe, first by capitalizing on the cachet of Japanese culture in the West, and then by exploiting Japan's burgeoning fascination with *kimokawaii*. The once tense relationships amongst international products have relaxed as different markets have carefully made space for both domestic and foreign brandings, as well as hybrids between them.

Meanwhile the cultural forces that have made *Mega Man 9* and *10* (and the North American art tradition that inspired them) "so bad that they're good" are equally complex. Ironic appreciation competes against, intermingles with, and threatens to undermine the sincerity of its appreciators. Unexamined nostalgic sincerity, in turn, can turn mawkish, making any attempts at parody look mean-spirited and "childhood-destroying." *Mega Man*'s box art creator most likely had greater artistic talent than many of the box's detractors, but the end result is still full of conceptual and technical flaws that a fair critic cannot ignore. Each new installment of the Mega Man series has attempted to refine gameplay to meet player demands, just as box artwork across the globe gradually tried to remarket itself to changing aesthetics. The flaws of 1987's *Mega Man* as a game and as a piece of concept art not only inspired later series improvements, but created teachable moments for future designers, as well discussion points for gaming fans

to debate. Without Mega Man as he first appeared, in fact, battles over "bad box art" would be missing a fan-favorite contestant.

It should come as little surprise to faithful fans that the artwork of this now 27-year-old franchise encapsulates all of these cultural and economic complications. The story of Mega Man began with an innocent boy robot repurposed for battle, and has since evolved into a detailed mythos spanning multiple sagas helmed by several protagonists across two alternate universes. But this expansive narrative only exists because the franchise's namesake himself is a chameleon that adapts masterfully to new situations. As a video game character, his greatest ability lies in facing danger head on, conquering robot masters, and assimilating their abilities—with no small amount of costume-changing finesse. Likewise, as a series icon, he has taken on different forms and personas to meet the ever-changing tastes of potential consumers. While some of these have been misfires—and here I absolutely must mention his ludicrous appearance in the 1989 Nintendo-produced cartoon *Captain N: The Game Master*—he has still managed to channel the worst of them into ironic yet nostalgic appeal.

Whether Mega Man can maintain this appeal for another 27 years is difficult to forecast. Capcom has left the franchise languishing, cancelling several promising titles like *Mega Man Universe* and instead offering only Japan-exclusive mobile phone titles like *Rockman the Puzzle Battle* (2011) and *Rockman Solitaire* (2012)—both of which are Mega Man themed games that bear little resemblance to core series games. Meanwhile a 25th anniversary,

cross-series "social role-playing game" *Rockman Xover* (2012) remains unreleased in North America due to negative feedback. *Street Fighter X Mega Man* (2012), the most faithful Mega Man game since *Mega Man 10*, began life as one of many unofficial fan games before Capcom stepped in and absorbed the project. But despite the developmental neglect, Capcom hasn't yet completely abandoned the beloved Blue Bomber. The upcoming appearance of "classic series" Mega Man in *Super Smash Bros. for Wii U* (2014) may mark a resurgence in his popularity worldwide, and perhaps even precipitate a return to his deepest gaming roots.

Regardless of Mega Man's ultimate fate, original creator Keiji Inafune has since moved on to develop Kickstarter success *Mighty No. 9*—a spiritual reboot of Mega Man. Inafune's game represents not only a new iteration of the Mega Man character, but a radical transformation in how games are conceptualized and marketed. Kickstarter backers from across the planet raised $3,845,170 to make Inafune's project materialize, and a few backers opted for rewards granting them a chance to give direct input to the design team. If the global crowdsourcing of high-profile, multinational games remains a sustainable enterprise, then it is fans who will control the fates of these products before they even reach the market. The role of games companies, then, will shift towards pitching ideas to a worldwide public, rather than simply creating goods and filtering them through regional sensibilities to make them desirable products.

Box art localization will be one of the necessary casualties of this shift—especially if games continue to trend

toward fully digital products without physical counterparts. Art like that of the Mega Man franchise will be artifacts of a time when the barriers between creator and consumer, and between foreign and local were more defined. There is a brave new horizon of interactive co-creativity looming. I'd like to believe that if Mega Man has a place in this world, it will because fans like me want him in it.

The Jon Lennin Xperience

Rachel B. Glaser

Jason still read actual books. He was skeptical of internet stars. Someone's cat would suddenly be famous, and Jason wouldn't understand how. His sister was into reality video games and it was all she talked about. She didn't call them games, she called them Xperiences.

"I got to a funny part in *Dating Kanye*," she told Jason. "I was tired and snuggling on him, and he asked me which I liked better, dinner or lunch? Well, I didn't say anything, so he tweeted the question and immediately got 400 responses!"

Jason liked old things. Baseball, newspapers, rock and roll. He liked going to the post office. For his birthday, his sister got him an unreleased Beatles Xperience and it stayed in his sock drawer, a computer chip in a ziplock bag. They lived together off her money. In high school, she had serendipitously created the popular phone app *Fun Face*.

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After *Fun Face* was sold, they moved away from their parents and for two years tried different cities until settling in a lonely loft space in Brooklyn that Jason thought was ruining his life. He took history classes at the New School and played chess in the park against men he was afraid of. His sister ran around museums and had boyfriends and practiced her lousy pool game in bars. After *Fun Face*, no one could tell her what to do.

Jason was older than his sister, but it no longer felt like an advantage. Somehow he had fallen distractedly behind. The few relationships he'd had were brief and he'd never been able to give a girl an orgasm. He had even read articles on how. It was a major character flaw of his, he felt. It made him nervous about the rest of his life.

Sometimes he went out to bars with an acquaintance from his class, but the music was so processed. "It sounds like a baby swallowed a synthesizer!" he said, but Blake did not react. Jason watched people play laser pool. All the girls he met were strangers.

While Jason lifted weights in his room, his sister virtually dated rap star Kanye West. Other girls across the country were doing the same. Jason walked into the kitchen/dining room/rec room (it was all one crazy mess), and saw his sister talking to Kanye at a restaurant.

"Hi, Jason!" she said to him, in a voice he'd heard around all her boyfriends. She wore the tight gloves with sensors.

"Hey."

"Move in closer so you can be here."

Kanye was huge on the wall. His sister was there too. The scene did look very real, but dreamy like a Pixar movie. Some spaghetti sauce had even stained the white tablecloth where they were eating.

"Can you taste that?" asked Jason. His sister's spaghetti spiraled around her fork and spoon.

"No, not really."

Kanye looked at his sister with dewy, rendered eyes.

Jason got a job scanning old newspaper articles into computers at a library. His time split nicely between history classes and this newspaper job, and though he still didn't have any good friends, the city bummed him out less. He spent his free time in Central Park, feeling good about trees, feeling left out by trees, watching people play frisbee. His sister was having trouble with Kanye and Jason often came home to them fighting in Kanye's flashy apartment. One night, Kanye had left and Jason's sister remained, wandering. She shut the game off with her foot. "He's being an idiot. It keeps ending. Every way I try it. I keep resetting to earlier levels, but it doesn't matter." She looked helpless and wild.

"I bet that's just how the game ends. With the relationship over," Jason said. "They don't want girls to spend the rest of their lives in this game." *Did they*?

"I know. Maybe. I hadn't felt like that about someone in a long time." She took a computer chip out of the game machine. "This is him."

"You should date someone where you can taste the food."

She gradually let go of Kanye. His sister was pretty and social; it wasn't long before she had a new boyfriend. Ryan was an amateur boxer/website creator. They hung out in the living room playing boxing Xperiences. Then she was never around, always at Ryan's, and the loft greeted Jason in its empty way. He was putting away laundry when he found the ziplock bag with his birthday present and examined the computer chip. Video games had gotten so small. He used it to reflect dizzy spots of sun. He pretended it could blow up the world.

Jason was reluctant. The bag was labeled *Jon Lennin Xperience* in smudged marker. Why had they spelled John wrong? Was it mistranslated? He held the chip up to one eye. It looked like a bad little space town. It took him awhile to fit it in the game machine. He switched it on and held the controller.

It was a scene of buildings. It seemed irrelevant. The buildings were computer generated with the same strange glow from the Kanye game. A flock of birds flew by and it was stunning. The buildings were so real—each brick! Light

refracted off water-droplets clinging to a window's screen. Then, the scene dissolved into rolling grassy fields, ancient Japanese cities. An instrumental Beatles medley played and Jason felt moved in an embarrassing, immediate way. Giraffes swayed in a jungle. The Beatles ran through the scenes and it really looked like them. Alive like them.

For a while, he only watched the intro. He'd shut off the game at the menu screen and leave for Manhattan with a good feeling in his face. A person heat. He didn't tell his sister. He'd found an easier way to exist and it wasn't illegal.

He wrote his parents an enthusiastic postcard but didn't mention John Lennon. Jon Lennon. Jon Lennin. Maybe that was a copyright issue. He'd always loved the Beatles, it was the first music he'd heard. It was family car music. He'd never had to grow out of it. He could play "Norwegian Wood" on the guitar and "Blackbird."

He memorized the opening sequence: the sudden descent of the birds, the wink Ringo gave before diving into a glimmering pool. (And the alternate version: George sharing an ice cream with Paul.) One day lingering at the menu screen, Jason just went for it.

Sometimes he was Jon looking out at the world, sometimes he was behind glass at the recording studio. He was Ringo once, searching a mansion for his missing drumstick. He saw Paul naked in the shower, laughing. He spoke into the

controller and usually people responded. He was the car driving them down the street.

He learned to use his sister's video guitar and the sensey-gloves and wore her dimension glasses. It was insane. Jason would pause the game to eat quick meals of anything then rush back to the game.

They jammed on expensive guitars on someone's balcony.

"Hey Jon! Check this out," Paul played a predictable riff.

Jason played it back and made it better.

Occasionally, he could switch point-of-view by pressing the select button, but usually he was locked. There was no manual, but pressing A and B simultaneously brought up a hints screen that occasionally had background or tutorials. There were levels. He could save his progress. Some of the levels were so long he forgot he was in one.

One night, instead of showing up to his concert, Jason dragged Jon to a dock and watched boats. The wind swept Jon's hair across his glasses. Jason pressed Y + L to search his pockets. A box showed up at the side of the screen that taught Jason to smoke with the X and Y buttons. A pretty girl walked over to him and was rude. Jason carefully climbed Jon down the dock into the water. The sensey gloves were heavy as he swam Jon around. It felt odd.

When he dragged Jon back on the dock, there was a small crowd and he was surprised to have passed the level.

Jason's sister was glad he was finally playing. "Great graphics," she said, stopping by for clothes. She gave him a mysterious look. "Hey, I met this girl I want to set you up with!"

"I don't know."

She laughed. Jason was Jon, looking at everything he saw.

It felt good to sing with the band. The lyrics were already memorized. He sang them while a little dot ran the score, marking his pitch. He skipped his New School classes. He scanned newspapers in a haze.

Jon spent whole days with photographers and was interviewed. He went sailing with George and his family. There were button combinations for everything. Jason opened a beer, made the peace sign, cleaned his glasses. He drove cars, restrung guitars, dined with celebrities. Jason helped Jon eat the food and then paused it to eat a rushed meal of rice and ketchup.

When the next level started, Yoko was already in the picture. Everything was going so fast! Jason hadn't even met Cynthia, Lennin's first wife (*though once Julian had called*

on the phone and he hadn't known what to say). He'd been waiting so long for a real girlfriend, what a loss not to see it evolve! Devastated, he skipped Jon's recording session. He wandered around Jon's New York ignoring people. He took Jon into a restaurant and ate plates and plates of meaningless food. When he took Jon back to his apartment, the door was open and Yoko walked out in his old bathrobe. "The first man, my strength."

She had rearranged everything in a far more suiting way.

Her cheeks were enormous and warm. She nestled against him and he carried her to the couch.

"I moved the couch to where it could see better," she said.

"I know. I saw. I love it. I love you."

He had never said that before.

Yoko lay naked on the bed. Jason put on one of her albums and she laughed. Her laugh was like something he'd heard at the zoo once that had made him want to go back. They kissed and Yoko ran her hands over his back. "Love man, sexy Jon, double love." He put a hand on her butt and she didn't stop him. As she teased him and spread her legs, Jason realized he'd have to get her off to get to the next level.

He tried to get a tutorial, but there was none.

"What's wrong, Jon?"

He paused it.

He looked out his huge windows at the rooftops below, the city across the river, the clouds in the weather. The

video game was stupid. He turned away from it and did some stretches. He tried to lift weights, but he had gotten bad again. He went off to his room for no reason.

His bed was the same bed he'd had growing up. It was unmade. On his dresser, an old corded landline phone sat next to a box TV. His sister called it "The Museum." There were some old cassettes and a lava lamp too. Normally, video games didn't need you to do this. He had played some growing up and none were anything like this. But he was good at the Xperience. His quick learning of button combinations had helped him. He was at level 22. He was a good Jon.

He unpaused the game. He slid on the gloves and spoke into the controller. "You look very beautiful, Yoko." She curled around to kiss him and he kissed back. He moved his glove down and stroked her belly and her thighs. "You look like a mermaid," he said, "an actual mermaid, with legs." She laughed and the A button activated Jon's fingers.

The view scrolled to Yoko's vagina. He could tilt the controller and see her face, but it was blurry. The vagina looked very real. All the flaps made Jason nervous. He pressed Y + X and Yoko made a low noise. He reached up toward her breast, but could not reach. He continued pressing Y + X and watched Jon's hands move on Yoko. It was going good. She wiggled closer and he pressed Up + A, A and she yelled "Ow!" Jason quickly turned off the game. He was trapped again in the huge apartment. He threw down the sweaty sensey gloves. He got his keys and left.

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He took off jogging, but felt awkward. People stared. They could tell he was a bad runner. He ran past them. He was hungry. He ate a hotdog at a stand. Food! Wind! After his sister ended it with Kanye, she'd felt a new appreciation of actual life. He felt that and cursed the game, but he loved the game. It wasn't a stupid game. It wasn't a game at all.

The park was crowded in a good way. He took his phone out and called his sister. She answered immediately.

"Hey!!! I was just talking about you!"

"Why?"

"I'm out with Ryan and Jessica! Jessica is the girl I want you to meet."

He could hear laughter in the background, probably Jessica's, he thought.

He met up with them in the Lower East Side. His sister's boyfriend shook his hand as if there were something deep and understood between them. Jessica wasn't bad looking. His sister got up to give Jason her seat so he could sit next to Jessica. She laughed when he sat down.

Jason ate his food eagerly—"like a homeless person!" they teased him. His sister told glorified versions of stories from their childhood. The famous one with Jason climbing a huge tree, refusing to come down, and his sister trying to saw through it. Jessica was half-Jewish half-Muslim and she talked about why that was complicated. His sister made bad jokes and they all took turns making fun of her. Jason felt relieved to be around people.

He and Jessica had a good laugh over *Fun Face* and the young cult surrounding it. Jessica was smarter than he had originally thought. She had studied all over the world. It turned out they had been to the same hostel in Berlin. They talked about all the dog shit in Berlin. Her eyelids fluttered when she laughed, and he decided he liked it. They talked about old musicians no one knew about. She knew who Leadbelly was, which impressed him. Talking with her invigorated him and he itched to run home and play the Xperience.

Jessica bumped into him as they walked out and he could tell by his sister's lit-up face he was supposed to hold Jessica's hand or something, get her number. And he would have, normally, a few months ago, but he had the eerie feeling that Yoko was waiting for him, at home in the loft, and she was an *icon*—who knew *him*! who *loved* him!—and he began to feel unsure about wasting his whole night with Jessica, who wasn't going anywhere. She'd be around next week, next month, another time. Thinking about the Xperience he felt so bold that he kissed this Jessica, full on, in front of his sister and her boyfriend, then blushing, ran from the kiss and ducked into the subway.

At the loft he threw his sweatshirt on the floor. He took off his jeans. He walked over to the game. He was a famous musician. He probably had a great body. He started from an earlier level. He was in Paris with the band. He was cold and put his clothes back on. He listened to Ringo talk to Mick Jagger, but Jason was thinking about how once on

TV he'd seen a big fish that looked like Yoko, this feminine catfish. He wouldn't try to explain it.

When he got Yoko on the bed, they kissed and rolled around and Jason got Jon's hand going. He did the button combination for smoking and Yoko liked that. He mumbled nonsense into the controller. He did the button combinations Jon used on his guitars. Yoko was making noise. He started whispering to her about the catfish. He couldn't help it. She laughed. His hands hurt. He wanted to put his face in it but he couldn't. It was wide open. It was beautiful. Was it from a photograph? He watched it as he touched it. He kept at his button combinations. He did the one for rewinding a record, the one for waving goodbye. He was afraid he was going to break the controller. He wasn't afraid of anything. His gloved hand touched her thighs, he reached her breast. She was loud. He was pretty sure people could hear from the street. The controller was warm and everything narrowed onto Yoko. Then she let out an amazing sound, like a trumpet dying. The wall fluctuated color. Yoko whispered something in lazy Japanese and the game announced completion of the level.

Jason stared long in the mirror at Jon. He was growing a beard and it was going well. He knew all the combinations, he could rub his eyes, tuck his hair under his ears. His sister kept calling him, but he couldn't stop now. He made pancakes in the kitchen with Yoko. Sean had showed up in level 25. Jason was a father.

They were living post-Beatles, in a long level of daily life. Loving Yoko, feeding Sean. Jason was fully immersed. He wrote songs that were not part of the level. He had Jon-thoughts about love and humans. He had them even on pause, while getting ready for bed. He had it matched up. He would get Jon into bed and press *sleep* and then he'd get himself into bed. In the morning, there was Yoko and Sean waiting on the wall.

In the end he had to kill Jon. Of course he didn't want to! It was deranged, unfair. Level 27 started off not as Jon, in a tiny bedroom. There was no mirror for Jason to see who he was stuck in. There was a gun under the bed. The door was locked until he picked up the gun. The window was locked. This character's only control was pulling the trigger.

He reset it back a level. He got Yoko off (it was easy now) and laced his shoes. He'd forgotten to put on pants and Yoko laughed. "Let's just stay here!" Jason said.

"No," she insisted, "we have to go to the studio!"

It always went like that. If he dawdled too long the game would freeze and he would have to shut it off and reset it.

Jason paced in the small room. There were loads of Beatles records, but no way to play them. Who was this asshole? Even in this tense situation, Jason marveled at the Xperience. There were cat scratches on the bedposts and real

wood grain on the floor. Jason walked up to the desk, but all his fingers could do was pull a trigger. If he held the gun he could walk out the door, but once he got to the hallway, he felt nervous and walked back into the room. He fired the gun and it went off, shot a bullet in the wall and he watched the huge puff of plaster. He tried to shoot his foot, but it would only shoot the floor around his foot.

He shot up the roof, but there was no sky. He shot the records and the pillow. The gun was unlimited. Eventually, a nondescript woman opened the door. "Are you missing your map?" she asked mechanically. Time hadn't been spent on her face. Her eyes were dots. Her mouth, a slot. "It's right here," she said, picking a paper from the floor and handing it to him. "Here," she said and left.

Jason looked at the map. He could not stop this. He walked into the hallway and out the door. He had never played a more twisted game. There was a yellow line he followed. Why couldn't he stay as Jon? He'd rather get shot then shoot. He'd definitely rather that. He considered quitting. He was at the very end, and the end was so fucked up, it wasn't like being a soundman for one level, this was chilly and dark. He thought about Jessica and all the other warm-blooded girls, the people on the street hearing Yoko's orgasms. He followed the yellow line.

It was so unrealistic, the gun in clear sight. This wasn't how it had been. He wanted a cigarette, in the game, but he wasn't Jon. He was some freak who only had one move. He considered stopping the game to get an actual cigarette. Nonsense. He approached Central Park. He followed the line. He got to the point. He waited. He shot at cars and

trees and no one did anything. An unlimited gun! Glass broke like how glass did, car tires ran flat when he hit them. A tree just took the bullets, absorbed them, did nothing.

Jon and Yoko got out of a limo and Jason put the gun on them. The gun traced them shakily. A vibration in his gloves made him twitch, the wall brightened white and he shot Yoko, it was a mistake! The whole thing was wrong! But the bullet ran through her not touching. Jon was stalled in place and Jason's face got hot, why was this his responsibility, this stupid world! The glove shook, the wall went white. He shot Lennin and he fell. There was blood and Yoko screamed and Jason pressed Select Select Select and switched to Yoko whose view was dripping tears, and select into Jon whose view was pavement, and the medley started up again, the view soared away, he felt such disappointment—he was being forced out of the experience! But the medley continued, and won him over. Screen shots from the game flashed on the wall, and it was nice sort of, it was sad, and then there were all the names of strangers who had made the game, loads and loads of Asian people, a few Americans too, the meaningless names of animators, assistants, advisors, interns, actors, researchers, archivists, singers, fabricators, programmers, designers, musicians, producers, lawyers. It kept going. It reached the end. It was around 9:00.

The Big Metal Stomach

Mike Lars White

At nine years old I was able to produce a boner, but I didn't know what to do with it. I tried rubbing it. Nothing happened. It just turned red. So I decided to hump a pillow. That was nice. It made me feel like the guy with fluffy hair that was humping Morgan Fairchild in the Cinemax movies I'd been watching. I started humping pillows in the living room, right in front of my parents as they sat in their armchairs reading the New York Times. "Watch this!" I cried. They didn't care. They were hippies. For months I'd been begging them to buy me a dog, but they wouldn't have it. They were vegetarians but they hated animals. "They shit everywhere," said my father. So I asked for a cat instead. They said they didn't like the smell of cats. Besides, who would look after the dog or cat when we went on vacation? No, it was too much responsibility. "No pets," they said. Now that I was humping pillows and becoming a pervert, however, it seemed to me they no longer had much of a choice. I needed a pet to be healthy again, to be like the other children. "Don't you see what's happening?"

I said. "I watch too much TV." Every day I came at them with a different argument. After awhile I began to notice a new expression on their faces. It was guilt. I had them. If they couldn't buy me a pet, they would have to buy me something else. And this is how I ended up with the ColecoVision game console.

One month later and my basement bedroom had turned into a sort of terrorist training hideout. I'd always had friends coming over—neighborhood kids, classmates, kids of my father's coworkers—and we'd always found things to do. But with ColecoVision our lives had purpose. Now if we ate or drank something, it was fuel for gaming. If we went for a swim at the municipal pool, it was to cool our fingers for more gaming. The electronic noises were reconfiguring our neural pathways. Our thumbs and eyeballs were being re-geared for greater sophistication. When the aliens invaded the planet, whom would they choose as the prime specimens of humankind? It would be us, the electro-athletes.

The year was 1985 and Coleco had the best graphics of any console on the market. "Sorry, Atari" was the tagline from the TV commercial. Since it was *my* Coleco, I had the privilege of practicing more than anyone else. I set all the high scores. The only other player to come close was a half-Chippewa Indian named Littlepaw. My ego was so big that I encouraged Littlepaw to beat me. I needed the competition. Sometimes I let Littlepaw sleep over at the house. Mornings he would show up at the breakfast table with a blanket wrapped around him like a toga, reeking of urine—he was a bed-wetter. After a couple bowls of cereal

the two of us would return to the basement and play a few warm-up games. When our other friends showed up, we'd let them play. We'd sit at the back of the room and smile at their inadequacies. They seemed to be having fun, which for us was beside the point. A true gamer was after power and domination. Inevitably someone would ask if we wanted to play. "No, no—you go ahead," we'd say. If we got bored, we might step in with a pointer or two—especially if there were girls present. Finally one of us would reluctantly grab the controls and yawn. Then we would destroy everyone's hopes of having a future in video games.

It wasn't long before Littlepaw and I felt the need to test our skills on a larger playing field, a place where money was at stake. Our town's most important video arcade sat in a row of buildings just around the corner from the Red Carpet bar. We made our debut there on a sunny day in the middle of June.

It was dark and wet inside the arcade, filled with a blue electronic haze. There was a row of games on each side of the room, with a token machine at the back where a manager sat behind a little desk. I noticed right away that Littlepaw and I were the shortest people in the house.

We set to work. Littlepaw went for *Tron* and I took over the *Track & Field*, the game where you drum two "run" buttons as hard and fast as you can. After that we played *Super Mario Bros.*, *Paperboy*, and *Galaga*. It was all warm-up at this point, getting used to the new environment… Then we noticed a small crowd gathering around the *Centipede* machine. Some guy was setting a new record. I remember he was wearing a baseball hat with a nicely

shampooed rattail streaming out the back. We walked over to watch him play.

"This guy is good!" said Littlepaw.

As soon as Littlepaw said this, the guy stopped playing. He turned around, grabbed Littlepaw's shirt and shoved him across the room.

"WHO YOU CALLIN' *GUY*!"

It turned out the guy was actually a girl—a bony Latina girl with a rattail.

The manager showed up. "Take it outside!"

Rattail's friend was standing over me now. All bad acne and buckteeth. She was a foot-and-a-half taller and outweighed me by at least 50 pounds.

The manager decided to join us outside. He gathered the four of us in a circle around a parking meter.

"What's this about?" he said.

"This shitfuck called me a guy!" said Rattail.

"It was a mistake," said Littlepaw.

The manager didn't look well. He was running his fingers through his hair, clenching his teeth as if about to vomit.

"I just said she was good at *Centipede*," Littlepaw went on.

Rattail Girl was still in battle mode. Her friend was red-faced, clutching her boobs and fuming. I couldn't believe the manager wasn't defending us. For a second I thought he was going to let the girls throw punches. Instead he asked them back inside the building.

They didn't move.

He pleaded with them. "Please ladies, please go back inside. I'll handle this."

Finally the girls left, after spitting at our shoes.

The manager turned to us, wiping his forehead: "I'm gonna have to ban you from the arcade."

Littlepaw: "What?"

I thought I was dreaming.

"You're both banned," he said as he walked back to the arcade. "Don't come back!"

We walked home.

The whole thing was nonsense. I could only imagine how emasculated Littlepaw felt. The arcades weren't ready for us. Either that or Cloud Two, Minnesota was the wrong place to be chasing our dreams. Minneapolis was just an hour away, and that was where Prince had thirteen girlfriends, where Prince was five feet tall and nailing his father's girlfriend at age twelve. For the next couple weeks we were listless and unmotivated—Littlepaw much more than me. I felt sorry for him. With no desire to play Coleco or visit another arcade, the two of us settled into our usual summer routine of sitting at the municipal swimming pool, making trips to the snack bar. Littlepaw would eat popcorn while I watched our friend Bjorn's sister rub suntan oil all over her body. I wondered if she would ever care that I was a Coleco champion. I daydreamed about her and me, about doing something that would impress and overwhelm her, I'd be exactly like Ferris Bueller. I started thinking about the idea of sex, about how it worked… when a log of feces floated by.

It was a human turd, right there in the swimming pool. A few people screamed, everyone jumped out. The lifeguards had to bring out one of those nets for collecting leaves and moths. "It's just like in *Caddyshack*," I said to Littlepaw. "Except instead of a candy bar it's a real shit."

We would have hopped a train and escaped Cloud Two for good, if not for the miracle that happened next.

Our local Coburn's grocery store had just acquired a new video game, replacing the old *Pole Position* machine that had been sitting near the entrance since as long as we could remember. The day we first spotted the new machine, Littlepaw and I were walking out the store with our Sunday donut bags.

I remember thinking it wasn't a real video game. It was more like a film. All the usual crude 1980s pixelated graphics had been replaced by rich, fluid Disney animation. "*Dragon's Lair*," said the voiceover. "The fantasy adventure where you become a valiant knight on a quest to rescue the fair princess from the clutches of an evil dragon." A series of grotesque cartoon characters flooded the screen—skeletons, lizard kings, purple-lipped ogres running around with squiggly daggers. At the end of it all was a blonde princess named Daphne, filling the screen like ribbon swirl in a marble. She was all lips and skin, wrapped in transparent black lace. You only saw her for a second as she drew her legs up and squealed as if penetrated from a surprise angle. My heart collapsed when I saw her. I would have had a boner if not for the chill rushing up my spine. Daphne was the woman Tawny Kitaine and Heather Locklear aspired to

be, she was the inspiration for all the Ratt and Van Halen songs that have molded my psyche.

I'd already shoved two quarters into the machine before Littlepaw had a chance to think. Now I was controlling Dirk, the valiant knight. On my first game I didn't even make it into the castle. I lost two lives trying to get past the tentacles that slapped out of the moat and tugged Dirk underwater. On my last life I managed to sword the tentacles, only to fall off the drawbridge as it drew up behind me. The game was hard as fuck.

Littlepaw managed only a little better. He got into the castle, but in the first room a set of snakes crept out and strangled him.

We were out of quarters.

Our minds were doing cartwheels. *Dragon's Lair* was unlike anything we'd ever played. It wasn't nearly as intuitive as moving a spaceship back and forth at the bottom of a *Galaga* screen. All that Disney animation was guided by a fairly rudimentary set of actions—you either shoved the joystick up, down, left or right, or tapped the sword button or the jump button. But your timing had to be near perfect in order to slip into the next animation sequence. Basically, you had to memorize the moves.

On the way home Littlepaw and I were jumping all over the alleyways, kicking gravel at the garage windows. We had found a new purpose.

The next day we asked my mother for money—for Grab Bags.

"But it's Monday," she said. "I thought Grab Bags were on Sundays."

"No. They're every day now," I said.

She refused us the money. Said it wasn't healthy to eat Grab Bags every day.

Littlepaw had an idea. He told my mother that we could try the *barbecue lettuce burger* instead. It was a new innovation that was just a little more expensive than the Grab Bag, he explained.

Mother believed it. She gave us four dollars each.

Dragon's Lair, Day Two. We both managed to get past the snake room, only to fall into an abyss when the bricks crumbled beneath Dirk's feet. We discovered that if you nudge the joystick left and then forward, Dirk somersaults onto firm ground, but unless you immediately jump over to the one remaining brick, he won't make it. This took another two days to figure out.

We needed more money. We told our mothers that the barbecue lettuce burger came with a salad for just a dollar more. And since we did such a good job eating all that lettuce, why not allow us an ice cream cone for dessert? When we ran out of these excuses, we settled on the truth. "There's a new game at Coburn's," I announced one day. "Can we have money to play?" That worked too. Whether they believed us or not was irrelevant. We had the quarters, and more quarters meant faster learning, which in turn meant longer and longer sessions at the joystick. Soon it was morning, noon and night with the skeletons, ogres and slimes, the Giddy Goons, Dirk's yelping and Daphne squealing "save me!" as the dragon's tail snatched her back through a trap door.

We were catching more and more glimpses of Daphne now. I was salivating. I was Pavlov's dog. An earthquake or a revolution couldn't have torn me away from that machine. Meanwhile the grocery store traffic flowed around us like a *Koyaanisqaatsi* assembly line. Mothers and daughters arrived in their Buicks and brown Oldsmobiles. Stuffed shopping carts rolled by as the sun glided from east to west outside the deli windows. By evening, mobs of drunk college students gave way to the divorcees and the liquor store customers. Some frat boy or bum would walk by saying, "Hey look at these dorks—they're getting good."

By the end of July we had reached one of the most difficult levels in the game—the room of the Dark Knight. He stabbed his sword into the floor, sending crooked networks of electrical charge down a wide checkerboard of death. It took more than a week to memorize the intricate set of acrobatics required to traverse the grid without letting so much as a toenail come in contact with an electrified square.

More worlds opened up—an underground river rapids where Dirk paddles a rowboat through whirlpools and stalagmite growths, a *Tron*-like gauntlet filled with giant rolling marbles, and the cave of the Lizard King—the castle's architect—who chases you through piles of broken china.

The wheels of progress were nicely oiled. I went to bed every night content in the knowledge that new *Dragon's Lair* universes would unfold before me, forever and ever, just like new television shows. I was feeling good about myself. And then Littlepaw had to ruin everything.

"I beat the game," he told me one day.

I didn't believe him.

"So what are you saying? You just go in and slay the dragon?"

"Yeah," he said. "You kill the dragon and save the princess. What did you think happens?"

It hadn't occurred to me that you could *beat* an arcade game. It was then I realized that Littlepaw was a greater talent than I, and that he was possibly more intelligent too. At the same time, he must have been coming into Coburn's on his own time without telling me. It angered me at first, but in the end I was too focused on the game. I could capitalize on Littlepaw's friendship now. He could help me get to Daphne.

It took me two weeks. I insisted on doing as much as possible on my own, and only needed Littlepaw's help on four or five key levels. More often than not a few words was enough—"go left and then right really fast" or "wait till the last second, then jump up."

The day I first entered the dragon's lair it was like I'd burst out of a bubble, like I was breathing different air. All that pain, death and torment fell away, leaving only this perfect glowing uterus of luxury. Inside the lair I was surrounded by piles of gold and sparkling jewelry. Dirk jumped on a little treasure chest and rode it like a skateboard down a mountain of coins, landing right at the base of the dragon. Daphne was there. She was floating inside of a crystal ball, sleeping. The dragon was sleeping too, snoring and exhaling smoke.

Daphne woke up. She spotted Dirk and had one of her spontaneous orgasms. My eyes watered... She was

half-naked, high heels, blonde hair tumbling down. She shoved her ass out and squirmed, and then she read her lines—badly—like an actress in a porn film: *"Please save me. The cage is locked with the key. The dragon keeps it around his neck"* ... pause, clever smile ... *"To slay the dragon, use the magic sword."*

A shaft of light revealed the magic sword, stuck in a purple gem. I flicked the joystick. Dirk rushed forward and tugged at it—like Excalibur—until it came out, glowing and sparkling. The dragon woke up, furious, breathing fire. And then he chased Dirk all over the lair, through canyons and grand avenues that meandered through the endless expanse of treasure. It dawned on me that the lair is actually one of the easiest stages in the game. It's more a victory lap than anything else, full of open spaces, room to celebrate. I was euphoric, dancing away from the dragon at every turn, hiding behind treasure chests, jumping over piles of rubies and emeralds, and all the time avoiding the inevitable...

When the moment of truth finally arrived, all it took was one jerk of the joystick and a tap of the sword button. Dirk jumped out from his hiding place and thrust the sword into the dragon's stomach. The dragon slumped to the ground and died. Daphne cheered. Dirk grabbed the key from around its neck. By this time Daphne was standing up inside her crystal bubble—bristling, squirming, anticipating. I took my hands off the controls. It was a show now—all for me. Dirk smiled and inserted the key. The glass shattered. Daphne was exposed now. She combed her hair back, crouched down and leapt into Dirk's arms.

Together at last! Dirk was cross-eyed and dizzy. Daphne kissed him on the cheek and they were framed by a heart. The end.

That night I could barely sleep, I was filled up with my accomplishment. Buzzing, endlessly fantasizing. I was a winner now, a champion. What would Bjorn's sister think of me now?

As soon as Littlepaw heard that I'd beaten the game, he showed up at the house with a new mission.

He wanted to go to the arcade.

"Just for fun," he said. And with that he slapped two twenty-dollar bills on the kitchen table.

"Where'd you get that?" I asked.

"Does it matter?"

And so we marched downtown with more cash than we'd ever had in our lives. Littlepaw insisted on spending it all in one day, which seemed insane at the time. In a way I felt honored by the suggestion. I stopped caring about how he'd gotten the money. The important thing was that we were a hundred feet tall now. We walked through Cloud Two, Minnesota as *Dragon's Lair* champions—walked past the comic book store and the record store and the Red Carpet bar, past the Norwest Bank and the Radisson Hotel. Nothing could stop us, not even those two budding lesbians and their pansy manager. Could we really be banned from an arcade? It was ridiculous...

When we got there our mood was perfectly congruent to when we'd first visited. There were no particular games to conquer, no hoops to jump through. With $40 we could behave like celebrities. We could lose games *on purpose* if

we wanted to. So when we arrived at the token machine and noticed that there was a new manager on duty, it was just more icing on the cake. I was surprised he didn't notice us when 160 tokens came spitting out the machine.

There were too many tokens to count, so we just filled our pockets. Front pockets, back pockets, side pockets. It was like carrying machine gun rounds.

To describe what took place over the next five hours is like trying to describe a primary color. We were bathing in a drug called Joy. We played everything. For five hours that arcade was hovering above the earth in a cottony world of limitless tokens. It was a Journey song. It was carefree, limitless possibility like I've never experienced before or since.

When we walked out, the sun was on its way down over the Mississippi. Our fingers reeked of metal and our ears were ringing.

That night my mother reported $40 missing from her purse. Littlepaw had stolen the money, of course. I'd been clueless the whole time. I had the same reaction as when Littlepaw told me he'd beaten *Dragon's Lair*. I was angry for about two minutes, then I realized what a genius he was.

The two of us didn't hang out much after that. I ended up joining the Cub Scouts and Littlepaw got heavy into shoplifting. Six years later I was an Eagle Scout and he was in prison.

Three Video Games That Feel Horribly Like Life

Ken Baumann

I

While my cats were coming down off ketamine, I finished *The Walking Dead: Season One*. Kubrick, gray and white, and Bosch, black and white, repeatedly banged their faces into the wire mesh of their kennels as I tried to ignore them by enacting catastrophic human mistake after catastrophic human mistake in this fucking game about zombies. I'll back up a bit: I bought *The Walking Dead* game after reading some positive reviews. It was described as well written and emotionally affective, and I feel emotionally affected by a video game about as often as I'm emotionally affected by a bowel movement. So: rarely. But I bought the praise and bought the game, then played the first section a few days before getting our two cats neutered. Something strange happened. I played through the first two hours feeling like I had not made a single good decision. I told

my wife, semi-jokingly saying, "This game feels like life." Aviva defaults into a sturdy hatred for all games, no matter their configuration, but my reaction intrigued her. As I progressed through the dystopian Georgian nightmare, Aviva watched. She was drawn in. The game transcended its gameness for both of us. Later, after a main character is suddenly shot—point blank; no foreshadowing; a video game death that was so arbitrary that it felt sacred—I caught myself reconsidering one of the in-game conversation choices leading up to the shooting. I was driving our cats to the vet, and the sun was lighting the smog up like a filament bulb, and I was thinking, "Should I have said something different to X back there? Could I have saved Y?" I was deeply anxious. The game continued, its horrors mounted. I regretted my decision to forbid myself from replaying sections; I wanted to bumble through the game irrevocably, like life. The game kept developing this sheen of awful reality—you panic over decisions that ultimately don't matter, your intentions are misinterpreted, trivial details take on undue emotional intensities, you fuck up, you forget, you give up, you mourn. The game ended, and my cats finally fell asleep, and I sat with this feeling of hollow certainty, underscored by a more evil ambiguity—I've lived through the experience, but did I really save anything?

II

Again, an enthusiastic review lead me to play *Spec Ops: The Line*. I was wary of the game to begin with—first person shooters make me feel fried, as if some hidden nub that

keeps me socially operative gets cored out by a few hours of tapping buttons and killing brown avatars. The genre's got a lot of problems, in other words, all of which are obvious. But the review promised that this game is different. I ran through the story in a few long bouts—I struggle to play video games less than three hours at a time—and by the time the credits rolled, I vowed to never play another military FPS again. *Spec Ops* installed an ethical dilemma in me that, while small, still has an effect on my daily life. It's probably the only video game to have done that. I won't recount the plot—I hear the harried cries of SPOILERS! SPOILERS! as I type—but the story felt like a new form of the Narcissus myth, roughly shaped through Colonel Kurtz's meaty hands. It's critical of war and pride and violent intervention, and it's supremely self-critical of first person shooters and of video games as a whole. I'm a glutton for indictment via art—see: my love of Michael Haneke—so this felt like a necessary modern product of "entertainment." *Spec Ops* smuggled meta-criticism and philosophical questions into this dopamine-abusive medium, which is a rare feat. It felt urgent and doomed, like days do. I'm happy I played the game, but I'm unhappy I had to.

III

I played the first act of *Kentucky Route Zero* a couple days ago. Within a few minutes, I knew that I'd love the entire game. It's a brilliantly designed experience that unfolds like a languorous evening in a stranger's large house, if the house was a haunted labyrinth surrounded by lamplit Southern

swamps. The experience reminds me of certain portions of earlier, stranger games like *EarthBound* and *Chrono Trigger*, which were produced before video games had many patterns to conform to. *Kentucky Route Zero* feels like a portal in and out of a warbly dream state rather than a set of problems to be solved then swiftly forgotten. It's only been 48 hours or so, but I have a foggy grip on the first act's events, which I think is the point. But I vividly remember certain images, sounds, textures: a burning tree, a newly empty room, a jilted recording, the phrase used to describe the pink goo in a fish tank… The game is bent to conjure a transfixing mood within the bounds of point-and-click. It feels more driven by David Lynch than Shigeru Miyamoto. After a haunting shift from one in-game territory to another, the screen cut to black, the first act over, and I prayed for the game's developers to mete out the next parcel of mystery. I'm excited for the game to keep progressing and for its mood to build, even if I'll never quite remember exactly where it took me.

No Quarters Given

Jon Irwin

SPACE INVADERS

On a brisk afternoon in late January, 30 Assembly Square looks the part of a forgotten shrine. The entire lot sits empty save three cranes and a huge drill-dozer. Dirt and rocks have been stacked into small hills, the use of which remains unclear. Bales of hay soak in muddy water. Massive beams rust on the ground. Chain-link fencing surrounds the premises, commingling with thick tree trunks, the wood grown around the metal.

This is the former site of Good Time Emporium, an arcade in the guise of a sports bar that Dan Hayes opened here in Somerville, MA, in 1991. The name lent a certain mystique to the pleasures found within; peek inside and one expected a vision of exotic spices, of black magic charms hidden behind velvet curtains. During my first and only visit, in search of that eponymous feeling, I confess to an implacable arousal of the senses. My quarter plunked into Capcom's *Gun.Smoke* and I could smell the gunpowder. It had been a decade, at least, since playing the game.

Woozy with nostalgia, or my pint of Sam Adams, the second level's knife-throwing boss cut me to ribbons. This was a good pain.

I had moved to Boston for graduate school. Growing up outside Detroit, I spent a fair portion of evenings at a neighborhood arcade, submerged in its amniotic pulse. The East Coast promised new goals beyond high scores and a quarter well spent. Still, after learning of the Emporium, I felt better knowing a nearby arcade—this umbilical cord to my past—existed, just in case.

Alas, that cord was cut. On June 30, 2008, Good Time Emporium shut off the power, ceding its real estate to the highest bidder, a Swedish furniture retailer. I felt the loss of unearned regret. This was no childhood hangout. Not to me, at least. Above the lot hangs a massive billboard: "Massachusetts! A Great Place to Live and Work." When I stand outside this corralled void, only a scattered piece of litter moves in the breeze. It's the weekend, and the workers are where they should be on the weekend: playing elsewhere.

I search the rubble for clues of the Good Times no longer being had. I find only orange peels, a cup from Louie's Kitchen, an empty Bud Light can. Construction scraps, nothing else. But then I bend down and pick up a scratch ticket—not an instant winner, but instead a pre-paid phone card. African Dream, it's called. The used-up slip gave the recipient a paltry two dollars of talk time. Calling Africa from the States is pricy; the resulting chat must have been brief. But I understand the motivation. In their own way, however possible, everyone's always trying to get home.

TIME PILOT

Across the country, memories of former arcades vastly outnumber those still in service. According to Steven Kent, author of *The Ultimate History of Video Games*, 1982 saw 1.5 million machines playable between 20,000 full-on arcades and hundreds of thousands of secondary locations such as pizza parlors. Twenty-five years later, the number of arcades hovers around a couple thousand, one-tenth of its peak. Occasionally, older cabinets of *Ms. Pac-Man* or *Galaga* are strewn about for retro chic, languishing in unwashed corners of pool halls, a pale echo of what once was. Your corner pub more likely hosts *Big Buck Hunter* or *Golden Tee*—hunting and golf games. The replacing of ghosts and spaceships with golf balls and fauna strikes me as somewhat depressing, a move away from the imaginary and toward the emblems of 24-hour sports cable. For the kids, most states also offer a smattering of Chuck E. Cheese's pizzerias. But the amusement chain—once vital and necessary—has devolved, relying on cheap plastic hammers and ticket-spitting redemption machines to woo children with underdeveloped coordination. It is a sea monkey born from Tyrannosaurus parents. Let us speak of it no longer.

What, if anything, survived the meteor shower of Moore's Law? And for how long can these few hearty ecosystems of blaring 80s music and too-bright neon, of joysticks and plungers and cathode-ray tubes, resist the inevitable?

I've seen the decomposed corpse of the past; I now seek evidence for an optimistic future. People tell tales of a new arcade to the west, an anomaly in our present culture of

instant gratification and emulated experience. To the north, the grandest of them all still thrives, a 60-year-old pleasure center lorded over by a present-day Peter Pan. Perhaps these survivors present clues, a lesson on moving forward.

But first, we go back.

MAJOR HAVOC

So I'm home for the holidays. I'm driving my mom's Chevy Equinox, a car that sounds like a bad video game from the 32-bit era, that emboldened moment from 1994 to 1999 when full motion video gave way to chunky tetrahedrons as the gaming de rigueur. Anyway, I'm headed to my mom's house, who lives in Birmingham, MI after a successful lunch with my dad, who lives in Rochester, MI.

I mean "successful" in that during this particular 30-minute period, my father, his skin somehow bronzed even in winter, limited to one his cursory referencing of a younger woman's breasts. His face looked older, more crinkly. He might have said the same about my own. When I was twelve, after he moved out, I'd visit his apartment on the weekend, the one outfitted with a new Super Nintendo just for my visits. The only game I ever played with him was *John Madden Football '93*. He loved it. Then, thinking the new iteration better, I traded my cartridge in for the next year's version. The new character animation, though smoother, made passing far more difficult, due to the extra frames causing lag between input and action. My dad grew frustrated, lost interest. It strikes me now that my dad always bought console games for me, but never took me to

an arcade. Maybe he worried he'd lose me in all that noise, more so than he already had. Today I still feel guilty about *Madden*, how I took away the single gaming experience we'd ever shared. His guilt lay elsewhere.

The traffic light burns red. I step on the brake and gaze to my right. Twenty years ago, this patch of cement was home to Tel-Twelve Mall. I spent much of my youth at an arcade here, now a forgotten quarter-acre of real estate dominated by the women's clothing section of Meijer, a Midwestern Walmart. The place I knew was demolished in 2002. A new open-air mall soon rose from the broken ground: connected big-box stores lining a parking lot painted with wider spaces. The closest thing to an arcade now is the game of chance Subway customers play every time they order a Cold Cut Combo.

In the mid-90s, if I was not playing basketball on a seven-foot hoop at Nick Zinn's house, or making home-movies on my dad's VHS camcorder, I was here, my Shangri-La: a darkened room filled with fluorescent light and upright monitor displays bedecked with coin slots and multicolored buttons. This was my first arcade. My mom and I would eat in the adjacent food court. She's always said it's hard to cook for two, but she would then, most nights. Other nights we'd come here and each grab a plastic tray, indulging on Arby's or Taco Bell or Rikshaw, a Chinese place my xenophobic palate was not yet ready to handle. Once finished, I'd ask to go to the arcade. My mom always said yes, with the disclaimer: "Leave your tray." She didn't want the strangers surrounding her to think she came alone.

And so I'd test my burgeoning masculinity on fighting games like *Mortal Kombat* and *Killer Instinct*. (That I played as Sonya Blade in one, or as B. Orchid—a buxom shape-shifter—in the other, never struck me as a manifestation of my anti-alpha-male tendencies until now.) Eventually I'd run out of tokens, or confidence, and we would leave, returning to that big empty house.

The light turns green and my gaze swivels away from my younger self's favorite place.

An entire generation's remembered childhood is pocked with empty holes once filled by interactive light. Suburban Detroit exemplifies the shift. Space Arcade, once the scene of a friend's seventh grade birthday party, is now a tire store. Magic Planet became craft store Michael's, its unexplained yellow submarine awning and greasy cheese pizza giving way to plastic flowers and bolts of cheap fabric.

As an adult, I hope for a less superficial version of life. So why do I seek out those few places filled with digital paths to travel, with Continues earned through coin and a Lives counter in the corner of a screen? Only one way to find out. I'm off to see the Wizard.

SMASH TV

My Mazda3 hatchback scoots up I-93, T. Rex's "Electric Warrior" snarling from the speakers. Seemed like the right thing to listen to. I hit a patch of traffic and the flickering brake lights resemble a blinking reward for a well-placed skill shot. We must be close.

Destination: Pinball Wizard Arcade, located in Pelham, NH. Pinball Wizard is a rare breed of arcade in that it's new. The arcade celebrated its one-year anniversary in January 2012. To a lover of coin-operated games, driving around New Hampshire and stumbling upon Sarah St. John's establishment must feel like pulling the famed coelacanth out of South Africa's Chalumna River in 1938: Here is something long thought extinct, in pristine condition and full of life.

Pinball Wizard is tucked into the corner of a strip mall, next to Suppa's Pizza + Subs and an empty space for lease that used to be Peking Garden. Storeowners here don't waste paint on clever business names. I drove past one sign for GUNS: the shop's name, line of goods, and security warning all in one go. Another store called Discount Madness advertised Patriots hats and gloves on deep discount. Forty-eight hours earlier, the New England football team lost the Super Bowl. Pelham seems like a town with short loyalty and long memories. We're moving on, Pelhamites say, but we'll remember you fondly.

Perhaps this is why a 30-year-old idea may rise anew, as long as it stays out of sight. Pinball Wizard Arcade isn't visible from the street. You enter through a side door, and walk down a short hallway, before finally reaching the main entrance. It's 4:30 p.m. on a Tuesday and no one is at the front desk. As I make my way down the first aisle of pinball machines, Christina, the manager, passes me and says hello. The only other person in the arcade is a mechanic, tinkering with half-working games in a side room that will one day host birthday parties and board meetings.

The space strikes an odd half-note in my gut between giddy nostalgia and modern perversion. I'm not used to this—a room filled with nothing but upright arcade cabinets and pinball. The eight rows of games form four wide aisles. I walk slowly to absorb the resultant barrage, an audio/visual cocktail mixed and poured twenty years prior. Yet the sensation is very contemporary. The room feels like the physical embodiment of a Twitter feed. Each bringer of noise is lost in time, an anachronism: Gene Kelly seen dancing in a Dirt Devil commercial. None of this should be here. But there I am, pulling the plunger, shooting this silver ball into a minefield of bumpers, each ricochet popping with the satisfaction of a high-decibel "ding!"

While playing at home we forget the clever beauty of games designed for public consumption. Like children seeking approval, they try to get our attention. A pinball table from 1989, *Bad Cats*, calls out to me in a sweet baritone, "One more time?" The illogical request piques my interest. Easily swayed, I put two tokens in. And quickly lose. Arcade games founded this incremental pay-to-play model long ago, now exploited by super-cheap iPhone games, free-to-play web games requiring real money for upgrades, and even downloadable content for more traditional console games. But what separates the arcade experience from any modern incarnation is its transience.

I can only play *Bad Cats* standing right here. Once I leave, the game stays. A mobile device's portability allows a user constant access. Your console sits by the television, plugged in and ready. But the nearness sours desire. If you can always have something, you never feel that need, that

pull. The arcade traded on time's capacity for running out: in here, time was precious because you never had enough. Your parents took you away; the building closed. Meanwhile, *Capcom Arcade* for my iPod Touch sits patiently, awaiting my tapping. Knowing it will always be there. Ignored.

This is the game maker's anathema: mild disinterest. In 1987, a year after Nintendo marched onto American soil and launched the industry-saving NES, Atari attempted to regain the public's mindshare with a handful of relaunched classics. At Pinball Wizard, we see the rotten fruits of its panic. *Pac-Mania* stretches the elegant 2D silhouette of *Pac-Man* into a bloated isometric mess. *Blasteroids* begins with the classic shooter *Asteroids* and makes an ill-conceived slant rhyme. One is silky smooth, feeding our imaginations with the vivid white-hot lightning of vector graphics; the other slaps paint on our eyeballs, the sequel a collision of ugly sprites and chunky moon rocks. Here, then, is another clue to What Went Wrong: the impulse to overreach. Poisoned by desperation, a company tries so hard to excite, to nourish a public's enthusiasm, that it squashes past success. When something no longer works, it's better to part ways.

In 1993, when *NBA Jam* and *Street Fighter II* were raking in quarters that would soon go toward their maturing players' laundry, I saw my father three times as often as when we lived in the same house. Something no longer worked, so he'd left. Nearness had soured desire—he'd found it elsewhere. Atari didn't learn this lesson. Only a return to the past would salve its wounds. In 2004 it released the Atari Flashback, a plug-and-play home system

of stored classics—the very same that were left to wither on the vine decades prior.

In the arcade I step up to my thirteen-year-old self's favorite game: *Mortal Kombat II*. After eighteen years I can still pull off Baraka's fatality: Stand a step away from your dazed opponent, hold Block, pull the joystick Back four times, and hit High Punch. My mutant avatar severs the head of my opponent, a tanned alpha male, decapitating him to the sound of a faraway gong. Even with no one watching, the grotesque achievement satisfies. But the feeling fades. My last quarter goes into *Battlezone*. Unbeknownst to me, the Out-of-Order sign has been ripped off; my tank sits motionless, its cannon firing nonstop toward the outline of a volcano, before too many enemy shots pierce my armor and the screen cracks and I die. Time to leave. My own private arcade has finally been infiltrated by others. A dad and son stroll the aisles, separately, each looking for something the other can't find.

Before leaving, I speak briefly with Christina Wagaman, Pinball Wizard's floor manager. She tells me the arcade is the second-biggest on the East Coast. I asked if she knew of others nearby. She mentions only one.

HARD DRIVIN'

Funspot is a renowned family amusement center in Laconia, NH. Its mascot, Topsnuf, resembles a crocodile, a close relative to those dwelling here millions of years ago. Like its icon, Funspot has thrived amidst the harsh winds of

change, certified by Guinness in 2008 as the largest arcade in the world.

Towns have a way of latching onto superlatives like a trophy wife: *Look! This is mine.* But Laconia is not known as the bedrock of classic arcades. In 1916, a band of 150 calling themselves the Gypsies gathered for a motorcycle ride through the area's winding lakeside pavement. The following year, the Federation of American Motorcyclists sanctioned Laconia's as the first official road rally, a tradition that continues every second weekend in June. The first time I went to Funspot, on my 29th birthday, I stopped at a nearby bar for a sandwich and a beer. This was the Broken Spoke Saloon, the self-proclaimed World's Biggest Bike Bar (with locations in Daytona Beach and Sturgis) and center of all things leather and chrome. That three miles separate gaming heaven from the Hell's Angels is surely a sign of a humorous creator. But the propinquity makes this writer pause. What's in the water off Meredith Bay that fuels in some the urge to hang their Heritage Softail around a mountainous curve, in others the desire to play a game of Sega's *Super Hang-On*?

The dichotomy feels like a reflection of my own upbringing: a father who bought three motorcycles in quick succession after turning 50; a childhood often spent indoors, playing NES when siblings were behind a boat waterskiing. The tug of assumed machismo made me pull back with passive resistance. Decades later, in Laconia, I finally see my own fractured past made whole.

Opened by Bob Lawton in 1952 with a $750 loan from his grandmother, Funspot (then called Weirs Sport Center)

retains a sense of its humble beginnings. A decade of Dave & Buster's and Sega's ill-fated GameWorks prepares the 21st-century arcade visitor for an onslaught of pseudo-futuristic style: the kind of shiny aesthetic meant to invoke awe but instead dates your efforts immediately. Funspot's main building is all off-white paneling and exposed wood. Began a mile away on the 2nd floor of Tarlson's Arcade, it moved into the present location in 1964, with a ribbon-cutting ceremony held by the mayor. Lawton, now 80 years old, still works seven days a week. The arcade's success is a testament to his ability to see what kids (and their parents) like doing, and to provide them a place to do so, unafraid to leave history behind.

In 1964, Funspot's primary attraction was miniature golf. A billiards hall was built one year later. In the 70s, mechanical shooting galleries, room-filling slot-car racing tracks and other electro-mechanical wonders were installed. When Japanese electronics company Taito released *Space Invaders* in 1978, Lawton was paying attention. Soon he had a line-up of the machines in a prominent location; soon the pool tables were removed, then the slot-cars, to make room for more upright cabinets. Lawton opened several remote Funspot locations, from South Portland, ME to Port Richey, FL, each filled with the popular machines. Video games were taking over. Eventually they would cede their dominance to a healthy mix for young and old—a bowling alley and a bingo hall are now both popular—but Funspot still boasts more arcade games per square foot than anywhere west of the Grand Meridian.

In 1981, Gary Vincent was one of the hundreds of kids lining up to play the latest titles. Lawton noticed him hanging around. In the heat of summer, during the apex of *Pac-Man* Fever and after their college-aged employees started heading back to school, he asked Vincent if he'd like to help out and make a little money. Thirty years later, he's now Funspot's operations manager and president of the American Classic Arcade Museum, housed within Funspot's main building.

I sat down with Vincent to learn how the ACAM came to be. His all-beige uniform gives him the look of a safari guide. "It was September of 1998," he begins, diction tingeing the date with a slight glow of legend. An easy grin presses into a soft, spectacled face. He speaks with a youthful enthusiasm, all wide eyes and gesturing hands, thoughts and memories tumbling out one after the other. "We were having one of our weekly meetings. At the end of the meetings, Bob Lawton would always say, 'Does anybody have anything else?' I said, 'You know, there's quite a few old games upstairs.'" After searching online, Vincent noticed that fewer and fewer places existed where people could find arcade games, classics like *Sinistar* or *Robotron 2084*. So he floated the idea to organize their collection, "kind of like a museum." Lawton, founder of the Lake Winnipesaukee Historical Society over a decade earlier, didn't want the past to be forgotten. "Give it a shot," he said. "See if anybody has any interest."

In May 1999, they held their first classic games tournament. And the people, bereft of nourishment, subsisting on stale ports and shoddy emulations, came in droves.

We're in Vincent's office, away from the din of almost 300 coin-op machines originally made from 1972 to 1988. And yet it feels like we've been stuffed inside one of their coin slots. Innards of uprights surround us, game placards spilling out onto the floor. Half-finished cabinets line the ground with circuitry exposed. This is where Vincent fixes and tests new games. On one wall, cathode ray tube monitors are stacked like an unlucky string of *Tetris* squares. But to Vincent, the dusty screens gleam like unearthed gems. Though LCD flatscreens, cheaper and more accessible than CRT monitors, could be used to repair old games, he admits, "they just aren't the same."

Generous fans will often send donations of games or monitors, knowing Funspot needs them for their collection. The contribution is not cheap. Vincent tells me the average price to ship a full arcade game is $450. *Birdie King 2* recently came in, along with *Space Encounters* and a giant exposed cabinet for *18-Wheeler*—a mix of physical engineering and electronics. We step over to the monstrosity. A slight lumbering in Vincent's gait reveals his true age. But then he plugs the machine in and stands behind a huge steering wheel jutting from the front. He now looks excited and anxious, as if minutes from passing his driver's test. He clutches the hard plastic, calling early games such as this "a marvel of imagination."

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From the 1920s through the early 1970s, before computer chips made Pong possible, arcades were filled with

mechanical toys. The curious could plug a quarter into a wooden box and see a marionette dance the tango. Squeeze a handle to gauge your strength. Test your passion with the Love Tester, where two people each held a chrome handlebar; a bulb then lit up—Smoking! Lukewarm!—decoding the pair's matching pulses into a romantic future. But dime-store mysticism wasn't enough for some. Others wanted to actively play. Vincent considers the pre-video arcade game developer's plight. "All right… I have a projector bulb, I have an electric motor, I have a chain, and I have this cellophane. How am I going to make a game?"

We're standing in front of one such answer. Instead of a glowing monitor, the display of *18-Wheeler* is a physical space resembling a diorama. Instead of sprites or vectors, the player looks at the back of a model truck. Vincent starts the game up and the cabinet comes alive with the whir of running machinery. On the surface below the truck now appears a hazy road. He steps on the gas pedal near the floor and the truck "moves"—below and out of sight a motor runs, spinning a crudely painted cellophane disc. The moving image is projected via mirrors to the playing surface above. Press the pedal down harder and the disc spins faster, providing the illusion of speed. Turn the steering wheel and the projector tilts back and forth, the stationary model truck appearing to take corners with ease.

The effect is hallucinatory. Without a computer chip or graphics card, savvy game makers still crafted a representation of the real built for play, a primitive and dream-like escape. Vincent unplugs the machine.

"People appreciate that we're not taking games and hiding them away," he explains back at his desk. Four ghost sprites from *Pac-Man* rotate on his computer's screen saver. "Some have never played a real arcade game cabinet." His voice wavers, the idea nonsensical. But he understands the disappearance of rooms filled with quarter-munching amusements, even if he doesn't like the results.

"You can't make [money] with old games. People are like, 'Oh you must!' If old games made a lot of money, everyone would have old games. I say, 'If you think it's great, copy down a list of everything that's out here, go rent 10,000 square feet of floor space and tell me how profitable it is.' Because it's just not. This is more a preservation of history."

Success, however, can be weighed in currency other than coins. "A thrill [for me] is the first-time visitor, who hasn't been in the arcade since the 80s. And they walk in here for the first time and just get that look like…" He giggles like a dumbstruck child. "They look around, they don't know what to say, but they just have this big grin on their face. Perfect."

Vincent started as a customer; he knows the lure of the arcade better than most. His profession, then, yields bittersweet results. His work means he doesn't play games nearly as much as he once did. He spends most of his time here—his wife visits Funspot often, since if she didn't "she'd never see me," he says—and yet he's needed elsewhere, fixing a broken game or unjamming a token machine, instead of in front of a cabinet, where his love first grew.

We take to the floor, to absorb the closest simulation of "the real days" left on this planet. Classic cabinets, famous and unknown, stand side-by-side in row upon row. Some names are pure, boiled-down. *Tapper*: the controversial resource-management game that had players filling on-screen mugs with Budweiser beer. *Timber*: where you cut down trees. Some were obtuse, an ode to mesmerizing abstraction: *Quantum*, *Stratovox*. Many were straightforward: *Hit the Bear*, *Food Fight*. I walked through the maze, Vincent showing me rare finds and sharing old secrets. Then I asked him if he had a favorite from when he was younger.

He walks over to a game called *Alpine Ski*. The playfield shows a stick-figure skier from an overhead perspective racing down a mountain. You avoid blocky shrubs and pick up points slaloming between trees. A single joystick controls your skier's direction, and a button makes you move faster.

"Show me how it's done?" I ask. His eyes widen. The thought of playing the game hadn't occurred to him.

"Wow," he breathes, taking a ring of keys from his pocket and opening the front panel to register a credit. "I haven't played this in at least ten years." His muscle memory somewhat intact, he clears the first few sections, skirting between trees with practiced finesse. But the rust shows—he anticipates an icy patch but slides too far, hitting rocks. Vincent's glasses shine with the fake-snow glare; his back is bent slightly for optimal elbow angle. He falls again. The joystick clacks in its casing, the plastic older than his only audience member. He jams the button in a

staccato rhythm attuned to some old song in his head from long ago. His skier clips another tree and time runs out before he reaches the bottom. He exhales an audible grunt of displeasure. But on his grimacing face, a smile.

BREAKOUT

Funspot attempts to preserve the past, or evoke one that never was. Playing classic games is another way to relive the moment we played them first: a stagnant form of time travel. Sarah St. John, owner of Pinball Wizard, took over a building that housed Accent Bath & Spa, another business reliant on a customer's need to feel young. Playing *Galaga* in 2012, you remember the way things were. The way they might be, if only you could go back. Perhaps arcades died out not due to the advancing capabilities of home consoles or a reluctance to set our children in unsupervised darkness, but because the surrounding culture devised more efficient ways—Botox, TV Land, wheatgrass smoothies—to feel ageless.

In his essay from *Playing the Past*, Sean Fenty writes, "We cannot help but think of these virtual playgrounds as perfect and immutable constants that we can return to for comfort as our world changes around us." He's referring to emulations of old games—an exact representation of the mechanics and audiovisual content, but played instead through modern computers or consoles. He argues such mimicry loses much in the transition. But what if those playgrounds still stood? What if arcades never faded away, crumbling into lots more profitable when empty?

Perhaps what is needed is a different type of soil altogether. On February 3, 2012, a new game development team called Innovative Leisure was announced, bringing together the creators of Atari arcade games such as *Battlezone*, *Missile Command*, and *Centipede*, headed by Xbox visionary Seamus Blackley. Their mission: Create original, industry-shaping games, just like they did decades ago. "We are looking at the new arcade," Blackley wrote, describing the growth of mobile games, "and 99 cents on the iPhone is the new quarter." Upon hearing the news, Gary Vincent, purveyor of the old, feels optimistic.

"Gaming is all about innovation and keeping up with the times," he responded in an email. "It is nice to see a melding of classic game designers and new technology… This should be exciting to follow."

Such news is heartening. Instead of coercing classics onto new platforms—the virtual joystick, a bit of touchscreen fakery meant to replace the real deal, is surely a creation of Beelzebub himself—our industry's ur-designers can use today's methods to create tomorrow's games. The playfield has expanded to each and every hand with an opposable thumb. That infectious stimulation, found previously only in dark rooms pulsing with light, is now everywhere. But can distraction be meaningful if it's all that you feel? What was once soothing vapor is now ever-present miasma. Arcades no longer exist because everything is an arcade.

Down the street from Good Time Emporium's old home, smack in the middle of America's densest city, other businesses still thrive. On a Saturday in January, cars filled the parking lot in front of a place called Christmas Tree

Shop. Anxious customers streamed through the automatic doors. The store's slogan posed a question: Don't You Just Love a Bargain?

Across the way sits a decrepit building. This is the District Court of Somerville, est. 1967. Paint peels off the back façade. A four-sided clock tower rises over the front entrance; on three faces the time is five o'clock, on the other, 20 after three. I check my phone: It's 1:00 p.m. The courthouse, sad and maligned and inaccurate as it may be, still appears to be functional. Peering through darkened windows allows a view into a dank but running operation.

One block over sits a church named Christian Assembly. Its slogan exerts a more pressing need than seasonal foliage—"Need a Family. Need Deliverance. Need Hope."—though the lack of question marks open its simple message of reliance into something closer to urgency.

People require these things, apparently: Faith, Justice. christmas trees. Good times? They're farther down the list.

As for me, I'm trying to move on. Arcades, like childhood, exist as forgotten kingdom and haunted memory. Too few seek out its treasures, so it sinks, crushed by time's merciless pressure. Too many desire what they once had, and go on chasing ghosts. I can't change the past. The week after my visit to Funspot, my fiancée and I drive to Portland, Maine, seeking out venues for our wedding. While wandering up Congress St. we pop into a comic-book store. There, in the back, are five working pinball tables. On the wall is a whiteboard, filled with makeshift leaderboards. I pump my 75 cents into *Monster Bash*. A column of strangers' inked initials taunt my failed skill shot. The lady in my

life, not a parent but a soon-to-be spouse, watches over my shoulder. A jackpot and two multi-balls later, I register a seven-digit score that cracks the top ten. I add my name to the list. In one month, she will add my name to hers. This is how we survive.

The Glitch

Rebekah Frumkin

Edward Jonathan Phillips was spending the morning slumped over the screen of the Hackintosh he'd recently built, darkening once again the e-door of a Reddit Ask Me Anything whose URL he could've typed from memory. The AMA read: "I am a gay man who was married to a straight woman for 28 years. Ask me anything." The question Edward Jonathan Phillips wanted to ask was: "Did you ever play house with your male friends in grade school and suggest that you be the mom and/or that there be two moms?" But the question didn't seem relevant to the AMA and asking something that personal would, he was sure, humiliate him unspeakably.

Edward Jonathan Phillips (Fucken Eddie to enemies, EJP to friends) had the unique daily pleasure of being exactly like himself. Whereas someone more normal could probably go to high school in Braxton, MI and float by relatively unnoticed, any under-the-radar deformities (big teeth, Judaism, lack of a gun license, liberal parents, fascination with Satan) earning them at most a nickname and

some light ostracism, there was something about EJP's battleship board that was utterly transparent and embarrassingly conspicuous at all times. Today was the day Joey Gipson had very solemnly warned him not to come to gym class, but EJP had to go to school and he had to show his face at every period because last week he'd been truant for the last time he could be before the school district would get involved, which meant his parents would be getting a call and then they'd get suspicious and raid his room for the truancy notices he'd been stockpiling there.

It was 5:43 a.m., which was a good time for it to be. He wouldn't have to involve himself in breakfast preparation until 6:45 a.m. He began pulling on a few strands in the gray patch of hair just above his right ear. He was starting to gray on his left side, too, and he'd overheard his mother asking his father—who was Alexander to everyone but EJP's mother, who called him Dad—about it one night while EJP was walking stoned past their bedroom to the bathroom on the other side of the hall. It wasn't really a time to eavesdrop—he had messy, load-blown hands, the fingers of which he couldn't really feel because of the rare California medical in his bloodstream—but his mother was saying, "Maybe we should move," to which Alexander said in response, "I think the hair's genetic. There's no way he's graying from school." And then his mother hiss-whispered, "Of course he is! You're not even gray now."

"But," said Alexander, "my dad was completely gray by the time he was 40. That's pretty unusual."

EJP's strategy now was to just try and pull the gray hairs out before they became as conspicuous as the other aspects

of his shitty person. But he couldn't do it fast enough. Andy Stockton had started calling him Snowbird, and EJP was unsure of the meaning of this insult until Dennis Delpiere accused him of *loving to eat snow*. "Don't eat the yellow snow," Dennis told him one day at lunch. "You'll get the clap, Snowbird." It could've been his imagination, but the gray hairs came out a little more easily than the other hairs on his skull, possibly because they were more brittle, or possibly because they actually did just age faster than the brownish-black hairs. He'd had ample time to do a study of this. Time needed for removal of six gray hairs ≈ Time needed for removal of two normal hairs.

The first question on the AMA was the most obvious one: "Why did you stay with her for so long if you are not physically attracted to women?" The answer began: "She was my best friend since childhood and I thought I could change my—" EJP stood up and walked to the other side of the room. He checked to make sure the door crack had been sealed (it had since last night, with a beach towel) and then went to his closet and got the pipe he'd made out of his broken N64 controller and packed the bowl where the joystick should've been with some gummy mids he kept in his desktop drawer. Then he did a long hit while reading the rest of the answer: "—orientation because I knew that no one I loved would understand or approve of who I really was. Ironically, I think my wife was the only person who was able to accept that I was gay. You have to keep in mind that I'm talking about Alabama in 1979; we live in a world that's a lot more progressive than it was back then."

Before taking his second hit, EJP looked up at the disabled smoke detector on his ceiling. He'd begun imagining a long time ago that it was the tiny-pupilled Eye of God—or at the very least one of those masonic eyes you sometimes saw carved into the walls of the dungeons in *Ocarina of Time*, his favorite game and Nintendo's pre-GameCube *pièce de résistance*—and that acknowledging it while smoking was like begging its forgiveness or saying grace. He scrolled back up to the top of the AMA and reread the first question and the response. He didn't want to scroll down in case a troll had ruined the thread by linking to photos of a horse's dick or something. But the second question seemed legitimate, and so did the third, even though it dissolved into a tangential thread about marriage licenses in Vermont. Maybe this Addled_Astrolabe dude once had a shot at stopping it. As in maybe his wife knew and cared enough to help him, and that was how she loved him. *This woman is a hero. There should be a whole r/thiswoman*.

He took another hit and tilted his chair back as far as it would go. He looked back up at the Eye of God and tried to think of another question. This one would have to be *on the nose*. "Is this something you thought would actually work?" What was the "something"?

That sounded accusatory, which was exactly how he didn't want to sound. "Did you think you could change your sexuality by marrying her?" *Sexuality is fluid*. He'd seen those words on the internet somewhere and in that combination they'd produced a weird reaction in him, like the sudden addition of warm water to a cold bath. "Would you actually recommend doing this?" To who? Another hiccup;

it was getting to the point where grammar errors actually produced system-wide stutters if he was high enough, like English was as finicky as Java and wouldn't give him results unless he thought in it correctly. *To whom?* Who was asking for the recommendation? He stared hard at the Eye and could almost see a heavy, wrinkled lid, a furrowed eyebrow. A saggy nexus of Old Testament judgment: *Who wants to know?*

Link wants to know.

The Eye said nothing in response.

One of his favorite *Ocarina* glitches was something the internet had nicknamed Crooked Cartridge. Performing it was potentially damaging to the entire system, but it was worth it. What you did was you made Link run around the Kokiri Forest while you simultaneously lifted the left side of the game cartridge out of the console—slowly, slowly—until Link either glitched out or disappeared altogether. If he wasn't invisible, the new Link was a fibrous bundle of color or an anamorphic outline or half-bodied—and he could run through anything: people, fences, rocks, trees. EJP had this theory about himself that his cartridge had been fucked with at birth, and that was why he was the way he was. This was at face value a bad thing, because an error in the code was an error in the code. But if he could be more like Link, it could be a good thing.

Who's Link? asked the Eye of God.

Only the greatest warrior of all time.

Prove it.

And this morning he was thinking he could've actually proven it if his mother hadn't called him downstairs. It was

6:30 a.m. Time was not on his side. The little situation in the N64 pipe was not cashed. He blew off the smoke and put the whole thing in a shoebox and put the shoebox under his bed. Then he shouted down to her that he was coming and Visined his eyes in the bathroom. He thought he could smell what he and his mother were going to cook before she knew they'd be cooking it. She would say "waffles, eggs, and peanut butter toast" as soon as he entered the kitchen.

"Eggs and bacon, sweetie," his mother said, looking hard at his eyes. "Start on the toast."

He was grateful that she'd said nothing about his eyes. He felt like he was looking through Vaseline, which was kind of funny, but he resisted making public how funny he found it. He put the bread in the toaster and thought, *I'm sorry, Mom*. Her back was to him and she was saying something like *What the fuck is wrong with you?* in response. The idea of his mom saying *fuck* was too funny to him.

"What're you laughing about?" she said, turning around. She said it like she used to say it when she tickled him as a child and pretended to be ignorant of why he was laughing. She hadn't used this tone of voice with him for a while—probably because she was afraid she'd embarrass him—and now that she finally had, it made his stomach drop. He and his mother would never again be in a situation where she was tickling him; instead she would only *sound* like she was tickling him and he would have to remember the feeling of being tickled. He swallowed and the sobering reality of the day came into focus: Joey Gipson, gym class, his truancies,

the fact that Addled_Astrolabe was born gay, the uselessness of his high, how quickly they'd eaten breakfast.

"Nothing," he said.

In the Honda on the way to the high school, Alexander said: "Your mother thinks someone's bothering you at school." He said it quickly, as if it were the last item on a meeting agenda.

"Nothing's happening."

"I didn't think anything was. Boys will be boys, right?"

EJP nodded: "Right." *Boys will be boys* was Alexander's way of acknowledging the bus incident. During the bus incident, EJP had gotten punched twice in the stomach, hard enough that some bile came up, and then Dennis Delpiere had held a pencil across EJP's neck while David Olson, a bit player who was trying to cozy up to Joey Gipson, had written the word "faggot" in black Sharpie across EJP's forehead. It didn't take long: they'd done it in the back of the bus, between cul-de-sacs in a subdivision, and EJP had stayed quiet as instructed. The bus driver pled innocent and EJP's mother refused to let him back on the bus until "reforms were made." (The word "reform" didn't exist in Braxton High's data set.) EJP stayed home from school the next day, his thrice-scrubbed forehead still ghostily billboarding "faggot" in every mirror he looked at. The principal was the one who'd told Alexander that boys will be boys, "especially on the bus."

"Maybe we'll get you back on that bus soon," Alexander said. Then he reached across EJP to open the passenger door and EJP stared at the front steps. "Thanks," he said, and got out, thereby exposing his fucked-up person to the

inspection of others. He stepped into the school's intake valve and was swallowed into the building's Soviet-era interior. He stood there a few minutes holding the shoulder straps of his backpack and looking around him. Kids were going to their lockers, eating muffins wrapped in napkins, pasting posters to walls. Abe Verdega, who walked with a stoop and always smelled a little like gasoline because his dad owned the Quick Pump, was getting head-smacked by some biggish male tormentor unknown to EJP. Julie Cosworth, who sometimes spoke to herself and wore long dresses, was looking into a mirror stuck to the inside of her locker. *Them and not me*, thought EJP. *I can be invisible. I'm glitching.*

He walked down the hall and to his locker. There were no notes stuck to it telling him to go fuck himself. The janitor had scrubbed off the very real-looking, very hairy dick that Dennis Delpiere had drawn on there last week. Inside, nothing had been disturbed: not his *Portal* poster, not the potted cactus his mother had given him. He thought hard about it: He was at the very least still a little high, and if he wasn't a little high, he was stoned. This was a good way to feel, morning-stoned. This was as good as he could feel in a hallway of Braxton High. Then there was a flash of The Thought, and his brain's electricity went momentarily haywire. He silenced it. *Better today's problem be*—grammatical hiccup—*It's better if today's problem is The Thought and not Joey Gipson.* He closed his eyes and hung his head in the safe metal module of his locker. *Today's problem is not Joey Gipson.* Another occurrence of The Thought. Another.

Here were two questions he didn't think Addled_Astrolabe would've been too thrilled to see asked: "Do you/did you hate gay people?" and "Do you/did you hate your own thoughts?" These were both true of EJP, glitching through the hallways of Braxton High. He really did hate the idea of a man sleeping with another man, though he would never hold it against Addled_Astrolabe for being born that way. It genuinely sucked to be born with that deformity. By the same token, it'd also suck to be born fat, as Dennis Delpiere had been, or blind, or too short. Or limping like Abe Verdega or insane like Julie Cosworth. Even though he knew from the internet it was probably racist to do so, he'd once thanked the Eye of God for allowing him to be born white, because if he had to live in Braxton, it was better to be white at the very least.

As far as the high school was concerned, there were correct ways to be born and incorrect ways to be born. And without question the worst and most disgusting deformity to be born with was gayness. Which was why EJP always deleted his browser history and hated The Thought and hated gay people but couldn't hold it against them.

Third period was English, where he functioned as the class dictionary (*import class: dictionary* was a joke he sometimes made to himself as he walked in the room), and where they were halfway through a book he hadn't started. Third period was prime fuel for The Thought, because in the absence of a seating arrangement he always found himself sitting behind Chris Finn and Eliza Strobeck, who sat next to each other. The two of them made this period the worst of the day—worse than gym or the bus rides home

used to be—and yet every day he forgot about it and went home thinking The Thought was manageable and had to be reminded again the next morning that it wasn't. You couldn't glitch through The Thought. *This day's only problem cannot be The Thought.*

Chris Finn and Eliza Strobeck were the exceptions to every social rule. They were not popular and they were not unpopular. Chris ran track and was in mostly Advanced Placement classes except for science and calculus. He was black and had a double-peaked upper lip and was maybe five inches taller than EJP. He always wore his varsity jacket, which fit him perfectly. Eliza was in all APs except for government and she did drama, though not in a high-profile way. She was white and about EJP's height with EJP's hair color and rosier cheeks and good taste in clothes. The two had probably met in class—nobody really talked about where they met. *But that was exactly the thing*: Nobody talked about them. They had been dating for a year and were very public about it and had no major social support network and thus no specific roles to fill—not the Tough Black Kid, not the Hot White Girl. And *no one said anything about them*. They kissed in the hallway. They held hands. He drove her to school. They were obviously in love. *What was it that kept them free?* EJP had a theory: It was the love. A glitch can't be in love, but a glitch can recognize it from miles off.

Late last year was the first time he noticed how they looked when they kissed. When they were both sitting, Chris sort of cupped her head in his hand and pulled her to him and she leaned in smiling and then met his mouth

with hers in a two-halves-of-a-whole way. Sometimes when they were walking in the hall she'd skip in front of him and pull on the open flaps of his varsity jacket and his head would droop a little so he could kiss her. EJP's favorite was when he stumbled in on them after they'd already started making out, which happened most frequently in English before the bell to start third period rang. It usually took a few seconds for them to realize he was in the room, but when they did they pulled apart and waved at him: the only warm greeting he could expect to receive during a typical school day. He wasn't used to the feeling of waving back, but he enjoyed it.

After a few months of watching them kiss, it occurred to him that it must feel a certain way to be receiving that kiss. Here is how The Thought began: He imagined how it must feel for Chris to be kissing Eliza, and then he wondered how it would feel for Chris to be kissing anyone he loved. He'd get hard, first of all. Chris, who had a handsome profile, who had a very strong jaw across which there was already a nice, dark swath of stubble, would get hard and kiss more with his tongue, would go deeper into her mouth, would pull her head closer, would pull EJP's head as close as possible.

That was the first version of The Thought, and in the following months there were more. Chris is about to have sex and his dick is all hard and pointed and he's standing over a bed on which someone is lying prone and hairless and it turns out that person is EJP. Chris is running track and there's EJP sitting in the bleachers, cheering Chris on. Then they kiss under the bleachers. Then they both undress

and Chris touches the palm of his hand to EJP's bare stomach. The shitty, shitty fucking Thought. The Thought was what was ruining him, making him avoid conversation with his parents. The Thought had been responsible for the come on his hands the night he'd overheard them discussing whether they should move: He'd imagined Chris and Eliza kissing in front of the lockers and then tried not to let his brain swerve from the image of the both of them. But that was making him not want to keep going, and he knew he'd get life-threateningly bad blue balls from that, so he allowed himself for the sake of his own health to imagine that Chris was kissing him. And then Chris opened his eyes during the kiss and pulled back and sort of bit his lip and said: "I love you, Eddie." And in response EJP came hard enough that he had to keep on whispering *Oh god oh god.* And that was the worst occurrence of The Thought.

Most of the time all his thoughts re: The Thought were focused on its disgusting nature, but in his more private, stoned moments, he was embarrassed and a little infuriated that it was for Eliza and not him that Chris was a human being. A human being who changed his underwear and probably felt nervous about some track meets and excited about others, who liked some people and classes and not others, and who'd probably had Eliza over to meet his parents more than once. He had a childhood Eliza got to know about and he had a future she'd probably experience. He and Eliza had certainly talked about what colleges they'd apply to and whether they'd get married before or after they graduated. But to EJP he was just a pair of lips

and a washboard stomach and *The Fucking Thought* and nothing else.

The ridiculous idea that EJP could ever have powers of invisibility.

After fifth period, he walked in a zombified shuffle to the locker room. When the doors were in sight, he Z-focused on them. He opened them, walked in, and was met with a burst of pressurized mold. He could already hear Delpiere's voice coming from somewhere in the maze of lockers up ahead of him, whispering and then laughing. He passed through the cluster of B-list lockers. All eyes were on him. He was a conspicuous irregularity.

He began worrying about the combination on his lock. His hands were shaking. He had a minute until the sixth period bell rang. Then there was Joey Gipson's hand suddenly large and veiny and flat against the lockers, right next to EJP's face.

"Phillips," Joey Gipson said, deep-voiced.

Not knowing what else to do, EJP stared straight ahead.

"Fucken Eddie," Joey Gipson said.

EJP stared so hard ahead that the locker's metal latticework floated up in negative if he jerked his focus around a little. He surrendered himself to the impossibility of glitching for the better: It was idiocy to think his cartridge could ever come dislodged in a noble way, or a life-saving way, or at the very least in a way that would allow him to vanish completely.

"Turn around," Joey Gipson said.

EJP tried to, but he couldn't. Every locker went dark and pixelated except for the one in front of him, which

was glowing. A grabbable object. *Unfuckingbelievable*. He smiled and flexed his digitized fingers. They passed through the locker with zero resistance, and so did his head. On the other side were trees and clouds and a river and a castle: Hyrule Field. Really *unfuckingbelievable*. His whole body was spazzing with neon color. By then Joey Gipson had his hand on EJP's right shoulder but EJP couldn't feel it. He was already too far gone in that other place.

Leave Luck to Heaven

Brian Oliu

MANIAC MANSION

We are all here, and we are all here together with our backs to the moon. Here is a house. Go to it. Go to door. Open door. The door is locked and you should've known. There is a key underneath the doormat, and you should've known. When I was young there were plants that lined our walkway. One day I saw a snake move from one plant to another and disappear like a light being turned off, a coil of green being spit from leaves. At school, I told the children that it was poisonous, that I reached my hand into the leaves to get the key that we kept hidden in the mulch so I could open the door and run upstairs without saying hello to my mother because she is not home. I can run up those stairs faster than anyone: hands over feet. This is the house I grew up in. There were fourteen stairs that I counted every time I ran down them. In my sleep I crawled up bookcases: feet touching pages documenting how to

make a rocket, lessons on giving, lessons on not giving. Go to sleep. Open sleep. There is a photograph of me standing in front of the door on my way to school. I cannot remember how our kitchen looked. I cannot remember how our bathroom looked. I used to live in a hallway. My bed was a boat and I would draw on the windows in crayon on mornings before church, before I was lifted up from under my arms and brought down to the ground. Pick up child. I was in love with insulation but it would make me itch. There are sheets for my bed. There is a cast for my arm. I would sit in the darkness of the attic to learn what darkness is. We cannot use the word kill. It must be changed. There are neighbors here. The man next door is named red. They have a white dog and I have given it a new name. There is a girl who says the devil lived in her room but her mother got rid of it. There is a farm and sometimes the quails escape. Everyone within a five-mile radius is going to die if I press the button. This is where the magic happens. This is where the heart is. Ring the doorbell. The door is locked and you should've known. My mother is not a person—she is my mother. They are a building a house nearby. My father is not a person—he is my father. I threw rocks in the air and I hurt someone. They are not people—they should be home and they are not. There is no key hidden here; this is not a home. I would come here, amongst the gray siding and garbage dumpsters, the wooden stairs, the white walls and collect candy. There are so many families and so little space; we could never get to them all. They gave out razorblades the kids said. They gave out apples with razorblades the kids said. Our street was named after a bird that

I had never heard of, a kingbird, a tyrant. A hockey game swirls on cinderblocks and we are sad. There was no basement here, no attic. Go to loose brick. You learn quickly that you can operate at one speed here; there is no button to hold down that causes legs to move any faster, the background to scroll in reverse at any greater speed. There is no outrunning the nurse at the refrigerator. There is no getting to the door. There is a strategy here that involves the hero getting caught and pressing the brick and trying to run for the door. Go to door. The door is locked and you should've known. There are three of us. Press the brick and let the other out. I remember nothing about the house where I lived before I lived there. There is a photograph I have seen of me holding my body up by pressing my hand into a wall. It is dark; there is a light. This is where I lived, at the end of this hallway. My first memory was not this. Stand by the brick and press the brick. I am not scared of the dark. There is no gas for the chainsaw. In this house that is not a house is a grandfather clock that moves like a terror. The boy with the blue skin has the same name as my father. The boy with the blue skin has the same name as a town that I know. I know the color blue. There is no way to document this. There are numbers that need to be written down—I have memorized my phone number and it has not changed despite changes in ceilings. I want you to come to my house. Please come to my house. I am proud of you, house. There is a cheerleader in my house. There is a bully in my house. We will learn about the beatitudes and they will eat my dessert, they will watch my television. My mother has cleaned the basement. There is a new coat

of paint on the walls. This house is growing smaller with every new color. The deck is peeling. There is a hole where the horse went through. I was the only one home when it happened. There were no dogs. This house looks smaller without walls. My room exists without walls. My father and I stuff wires into electrical boxes and eat soup cooked on a fire. We press tiles onto the floor while watching television. The sawdust sticks to our shirts. We see the dogs. A horse walked up to our door. Go to door, horse. The horse's leg snapped—I heard it crack like a tree, like peppermint. I was home. Walk to. What is.

SIMON'S QUEST

Like all things, we start on a street in front of a church in a town that we do not know. There are stairs that we must climb and gaps to be crossed and no sense of direction except we must leave and walk into the forest. There is no castle here. What we hold is nothing but an extension of ourselves; we can assume that what is causing fast walking bones and rings of flight to combust at the slightest touch is not a weapon but an extension of ourselves; we exist in forms—we can end others because there is nothing left to hold. When you disappear you leave half a heart which doesn't go very far these days. These days I don't notice when it starts getting dark; the drapes on windows prevent the sunlight from purely entering my room. These days, there is a building that blocks my view of the east, the east is home. Across from my bed is a chair and beyond it a window where the weeds have grown through the cracks

between the glass and the wood, outside and inside if only for a moment. It is too much to go outside during the day, the sun and the music makes things weaker and more susceptible to the unsurprising fact that the heat causes us to evaporate slowly to the clouds. And so this is what heat is like here, that we wait for a time when we have an excuse to do nothing but visit familiar places over and over, the same gaited walks of friends, the same demons, certainly and before we know it is night it is night. I am told that it is dark and that I am cursed, that my body knows nothing that it knew before. At night, it is difficult for anything to get done, and we know this, that no good comes after the sun goes down, and we must rest, yet we slash at bodies unwilling to yield as they once did. You and you and you and I are old. Things cause more damage after nightfall when our strength has been halved by the process of the day and there is more left to lose, certainly.

This is not a castle—this is a house. This is another house. There are no castles left save for one, which is in ruins. There is the running of ghosts and the breaking of walls. There is nothing to fear here; repeat twice. When you hold certain things you can see things that are not there and this is where we are, in a manor, in a house, in a matter of speaking. You and you and you and I are old—backs are not what they used to be: yours from breaking candelabras in a castle, yours from moving yellow couches from consignment shops to other people's houses in hopes of leaving furniture behind before you leave this place for good; to go to a city where you can talk about this place as if it exists only in theory—that it gains in magnitude while

gone somehow. You say you'll never return unless you are passing through and I believe and envy your words; that you have the ability to leave without fear. When I was a child I feared the words that scrolled in white and I refused to talk to people, to go up to them and press the button that would make them spell horrible clues, horrible lies and so I paid attention to only the violence—I would jump into pools of water ad nauseum in hopes that I would fall through the water this time, one time, and that repetition is what get things done most days. In the town next to the town next to the end, the people tell us to leave; that we have been doing something wrong all of this time; the obsession of collecting and falling into spikes from trusting the sight of the ground. There is something to be continued, certainly, that the weather can pick us up at any given moment and bring us to a place where time does not move, day and night do not cycle, and nothing is protected. If we have enough hearts we can get what we need to take what is not ours; we must throw wood into orbs to create something that was once a given, a legend here that needs no explanation and a hope of leaving ourselves here so that we can be remembered in all of the colors that the system allows. We win, but we are dead. We win, but we cannot bring back what we have brought back. We win and we are thanked. On the night when I used to go to church to be healed I heat oil on the stove. I crush garlic with the broadside of a knife like my grandmother taught me. When she dies I will leave garlic at the cemetery. When I die I ask that you leave cinnamon, that laurels will help me through the poison that blocks the way to where I am going. We did

not think of these things before today, we did not think about loss, about the acquiring of the absence of invasion. There is something that needs to be done, you say, that uncertainty means action and little else. We eat in what all signs pointed to silence, that this was the appropriate metaphor that I had learned as a child, that I had learned from watching fake sincerity and severity and that is what I assumed would happen, that there would be nothing said except what has already been said, rote memorization and repetition with no reason to listen again, the text cut short as we jump from brick to brick in hopes of finding someone willing to sell us something, exchange what we have for something better, to make a deal. The day we begin to collect the things to put back together in order to destroy the sum of its parts is the day you tell us that they are taking you away from you and I am terrified of what is left to be said and what will be left of me at some point. The second we see where what appears to be ground is not where ground is, we line the path in front of us with prayers and holy water in hopes of seeing the fire at our feet or the sacramental flicker off screen.

The Fall of the House of Ghostly

David LeGault

I remember, as a child, walking into my local mall's arcade without a quarter to my name. At eight years old, it was enough to look at the flashing screens, to watch demo levels play through their endless loops: characters fighting and dying in the exact same places, only to be reborn and make the same mistakes again. I recognized the repetition, but I would still stand before the machine and mash buttons, pound the joysticks—making my movements match the video instead of the other way around. I'd do this at home as well: I'd watch television while holding onto a Super Nintendo controller, hitting Right as a character walked across the screen, hitting A, B, X, or Y as if I was making them walk, talk, and sometimes fight.

There was something assuring about these experiences: of assuming control when I had none. Being a child, particularly one in my family's forgotten corner of the Upper Midwest, made the world feel small and unimportant

compared to what I'd see in television and movies. I found my escape in video games, where raiding dungeons or storming castles or destroying mechanized beasts were all distinct possibilities**.** But even more exciting was imagining having real power over my surroundings, to believe that things always happened for a reason that made sense to me and only me.

Fast forward nineteen years: I'm working a full-time job at a used bookstore where I make less than I did working ten hours a week as an English TA, where I make less hourly than I did at my summer job when I was still in high school, where I spend a fair share of my time stressing about paying a mortgage and car payment and preparing for my first child—due in a few short months. I've applied for more than 200 jobs with no success, no interviews, and most days I vacillate between painting baby furniture and having acute panic attacks. I hate money and it's all I think about. It's slowly turning me into an awful human being.

And times like this, when I all but forget how to breathe, I often pull farther into the world of video games, where escape is instantaneous, where I feel like I'm making *real* progress, even if the world is artificial.

Last month, while emptying out a trash bin at work, I unearthed a couple relics from my childhood sitting in the dumpster: two VHS tapes from the Action Max game console. There was a definite thrill, a surge of excitement as I sorted through piles of garbage to rescue them from destruction. It made me nostalgic for the system—the feel of its cold gray gun, the coarse texture of the handle digging into my palm. I remembered the hollow springing

noise from a pull of the trigger, physically diving across my living room, hiding behind couches and chairs, avoiding the imagined threat of enemy fire.

Action Max is a game console released in the late 1980s. It didn't have games in the traditional sense, but rather tapes that played in a VCR while a light monitor was hooked up to the television screen. The console itself kept track of a player's score as they shot at targets flying across their screen during the movies, all glowing under a seizure inducing strobe light flash of black and white that are centered on an enemy's ship, shuttle, or sometimes body. The games are a mix of live-action actors juxtaposed with models and puppets.

The system came from Worlds of Wonder, the same company that brought us Teddy Ruxpin, Lazer Tag, and other high-tech toys from the mid-80s**.** For several reasons—lack of consumer enthusiasm, superior alternatives, and the financial collapse of the company after several poor investments—the system suffered a swift and relatively painless death. In 1987, the only year the system was produced, a total of five games were created. After searching through a number of sources including eBay, YouTube, and Craigslist, I managed to collect them all.

SONIC FURY

The definitive Action Max game: the one that came with the system and was featured in all of the commercials, the one that tells you, "If it were any more real, it wouldn't be a game."

Sonic Fury is the name of a flying squadron, very much a *Top Gun* rip-off down to the flying exams that start the game and the nicknames/decals marking every flight helmet**.** You are first introduced to Lance Bender**,** "Alabam for short," he tells you, inexplicably. He is your squadron leader, your flight commander, his helmet marked with a Confederate flag.

Alabam tells us that it's only nicknames up here. Yours is Ace.

He introduces you to the other pilots in your squadron: "Our own Native American Top Gun, Chief," [his helmet has a sunset landscape] and resident hot dog, 'Trucker' [a skid mark]."

And from here the true game begins. It is a blend of landscape shots moving forward in fast motion: stock footage flying through a canyon, over a mountain range, and past a series of deep sea oil wells. The planes onscreen occasionally light up with flashing black and white lights, mimicking the black and white flashing circle in the bottom right corner of the screen, letting you know when to shoot.

After successfully shooting down a drone, you are ambushed by an enemy craft that comes from nowhere, blasting with no apparent motive. Your circumstances turn increasingly dire as an enemy aircraft jams your radar, your radio systems. You cannot call for backup from your base, and Chief has already disappeared into the canyon, a guided missile in close pursuit. You're left wondering whether he is alive or dead.

Your enemies are flying out to sea, presumably to an aircraft carrier somewhere off the coast. You, Alabam,

and Trucker take pursuit, winding past miles of coastline, mountain ranges, and ocean. Often, the same footage is recycled, and you'll fly past the same oil derrick again and again.

You fire machine guns, attempt to lock missiles onto enemy planes, occasionally succeeding in sending bright orange blobs into exploding enemies. Meanwhile, you, on your couch, are firing a plastic gray handgun at your screen, hearing the metallic *clang* of the trigger, the sound less satisfying than the clicking sensation pressing under your finger.

You gain points for every successful shot.

The Sonic Fury squadron flashes like your enemy, though you are not given points for shooting your friends. Friendly fire attacks merit a digital noise of disapproval. You are also wasting precious ammunition, which is limited in certain play modes set on the console. Each downtrodden *ding*, each misdirected shot, makes you feel like a traitor, a failure.

Miraculously, amazingly, Chief has returned!

The footage here is a blend of mediums, a collage of actual footage of coastlines and ocean mixed with model airplanes moving up, down, sideways—defying the concept of physics as they evade your fire, as they flash with light and shoot back at you with firepower that you will never truly feel.

At times, you can see the hint of strings moving the planes up and down in front of the apparent green screen.

More attacking fighters overwhelm your squadron. A missile locks onto your craft. You see the ship behind

you but have no option to shoot: You are powerless. Your squadron advises you on evasive maneuvers, encouraging you to speed up your craft, abandoning the mission for the sake of your life. Here *Sonic Fury* abandons all pretext of being a game and turns into a movie. All potential flashing targets are gone, leaving only you, your ship, and the missile that has just launched from an enemy craft. Cameras cut to a view outside of your ship, then back to your gloved hand on the throttle, then back outside as your ship pulls up into an impossible climb and the enemy missile careens into one of its own. There is an explosion, shrapnel, death, and finally applause.

The enemy retreats and finally, finally—after eleven minutes of battle—you establish contact with your base. Alabam tells his commanding officer, "Rockin' Robin," about hostile aircraft, requests backup to figure out where these planes are coming from.

Your commander denies this request.

Rockin' Robin tells you there's a security lid on the entire operation, that there must be complete radio silence and no mention of the attack to anyone outside of naval intelligence. Trucker, understandably, asks, "But… what about the carrier?" To which Alabam responds, "You heard him. Nobody saw anything. Now put a lid on it and let's head for home."

You, like Trucker, are disappointed, confused. Before you can process any of this, the game transitions to uplifting music, synthesizer strings, images of billowing clouds. You, Ace, wonder what enemy would attack U.S. soldiers, unprovoked, on U.S. soil, nearly killing you, without any

thought at retaliation. You wonder about the American dream of retribution. You wonder if this meant anything at all.

HYDROSUB 2021

It is time for confession: Though I've spent a great deal of my childhood playing these games, watching these movies, I have never—until now—played these games *properly*. That is to say that I would point my own toy guns at the screen, fire like crazy, but I have never had the base unit, a proper means of keeping score. By the time I was old enough to play these games, the system had already been broken or thrown away. Only the videos and gun—a broken piece of wiring jutting from the handle—remained. Still I played, letting my imagination take over, relying entirely on the story unfolding on the television instead of any hopes for points or otherwise measurable achievement.

Hydrosub 2021 opens with footage of an underwater seascape: reefs, reeds, fish swimming lazily as a camera moves along the sea floor before an animated cloud envelops it. Cut to the inside of a submarine. It looks like a 1980s pre-conception of how 2021 would (will?) appear—absurd modernist desks and chairs, elaborate arched supports, connected to the outer hull with metallic spokes, a command post in the center of what appears to be an enormous gear. Several sonar screens flash with incomprehensible, repeating blips of light.

Cut to Captain Jason, wearing an all-black bodysuit decorated around the collar and sleeves with reflective

silver rings. He wears matching silver gauntlets and headband, speaks in an awful Scottish accent, more *Star Trek* than sea captain. Captain Jason receives a message from your ship's navigator: Your ship has been hit with a beam of energy, your navigation systems have been knocked out, and you are completely lost.

Captain Jason turns to you, an officer of the ship, panic in his eyes:

"Could it be? The lost world! Filled with the most cursed creatures God ever put on this Earth. Monsters that are half-fish, half-machine. Metallic crabs as big as elephants!" He tells you to defend your ship, the Sea Dragon, against these robot beasts. You are warned that there are friendly creatures too. As you work your way across the ocean floor, you'll realize that every beast here is metallic, unnatural. You don't know how Captain Jason knows that some of them won't harm you, and you don't know whether the ones you are shooting are friend or foe.

The special effects are out of some *Doctor Who* nightmare: awful and cheap and kind of amazing.

You are brought to your battle station, an attack screen showing a camera's view of the ocean floor overlaid with a green wire grid. Creatures swim by at alarming speeds, completely out of scale, clearly on strings. Each creature is stamped with a flashing ring of light.

Behind Captain Jason is a commanding officer in a chair, a teenage boy in a matching outfit. The boy's face is never fully seen, only in profile at one seemingly accidental moment during the filming. The boy watches a screen and grid identical to your own. You wonder if you are supposed

to be the boy, but if this is so, who is Captain Jason speaking to as he turns his back to the boy in order to look directly at the camera?

There's a robot that looks like a spider built with an Erector set. An anthropomorphic creature flies in, a set of legs with a head on top of it, a nose that's actually the barrel of a gun. The creature bobs its head sporadically, and though you are underwater, you hear its strange quacking noises.

When you shoot these undersea creatures, they burst into flames.

Behind these robots, in the footage of the ocean, fish swim in the reeds on the sea floor, oblivious to the fires that should be consuming them as they swim past the camera's lens, past the waves of enemy attack.

The boy in the command center turns some knobs. A creature explodes and the boy pumps his fist, and you still wonder if you are him. If so, how do you see outside of him, outside of your ship? Are you an apparition having an out-of-body experience? A hallucination from too much accumulated pressure, oxygen bubbles forming in your blood?

RC cars with crab-like pincers float across the screen, moving without rhyme or reason. Captain Jason watches with astonishment, as if he's been waiting for this day. If you could talk back, you'd ask him how these creatures could attack a submarine with claws that barely open? Were these creatures built or born?

And it's in this moment of uncertainty, this moment of questioning the existence of the world around you, that the Sea Dragon takes critical damage.

Cut to the inside of the sub where steam or fog or smoke sprays out of gashed open pipes. Lights flash; alarms sound. The screen you have used to guide your shots has been reduced to static flashing black and white like snow. The camera tilts and shakes as your ship comes apart.

A second hit and you're taking on water. You are ordered to surface.

Your ship rises to the sound of thunder, to a sky you've never seen, to a red setting sun or a planet of blood, to flying robotic creatures swarming overhead, to smoke or fog rolling black like death.

Captain Jason sends you to a battle station on deck, yet your grid remains the same. The boy never leaves his chair. You cannot be the boy, and yet you are. You are both inside and outside the ship.

You do not know how you can survive as the creatures fly over your stationary submarine again and again. You fear for your life, for the regret that plagues you, even now. You question Captain Jason's ability as a commander, how he could get your crew marooned in this way. You wonder if this is his white whale, the obsession driving him underwater all these years. You are dying and he is happy for the opportunity.

The order comes to dive again. You watch your ship sink back under the surface; you find the water clear of creatures. Where did they go? Why have they stopped attacking when your ship is at its most vulnerable?

Captain Jason orders you to stand down, and once again, the game rolls credits as you make your Odyssean voyage home. One wonders what kind of life you can have after killing so many ships or creatures or ghosts: Where can you be heading without a navigation system? Where can you be going when you don't know where home is?

.38 AMBUSH ALLEY

Let me tell you about how light guns work: Most guns for arcade games or consoles have a photodiode in the barrel, a detector of light. This sensor works in tandem with the gun's trigger and the signals coming from the television screen, accomplishing its task in several ways. The most basic (think *Duck Hunt*) turns the entire screen black when you pull the trigger, but paints the target object white. If the gun detects the white of the target, it registers a hit. This system is binary: black and white, right or wrong, easy to comprehend.

But the Action Max cannot blank the television screen; it cannot know when you will shoot. To compensate, it uses not one, but *two* diodes: the first in your gun, the second in a suction cup stuck to the bottom right corner of your screen. The red diode in the corner (red and translucent, the flashes shining through) acts as a control, flashes identically to the enemies on the screen, telling the console whether your hit what you intended.

That is to say that there is more to the system than I initially suspected: that there is an ingenious use of technology, one that can limit your ammunition or reward you

for quicker reaction times. It can register missed shots or friendly fire attacks, can make every bullet count.

It's also worth mentioning because the variety of shots and points can be beneficial for games like these because they keep you, the player, invested. These games rely almost exclusively on the narrative. Other games can get by with basic premises because you control the action (find the princess, capture the flag, cross the finish line). These games push the importance of video narrative to a new level, which is particularly fascinating considering that you, the player, have no control over the outcome.

This takes us to *.38 Ambush Alley*, a police academy shooting range, where a commanding officer refers to you all as rookies, though every man on the screen is middle-aged, probably older than the commanding officer himself. Most of them are noticeably balding.

Your commander tells you that you're going into the toughest test you can outside of the streets, a place called Ambush Alley. He tells you it's called that because "you make one wrong move, and you're the target!" It's worth mentioning that from here on out, you will be shooting at nothing but paper targets and mannequins.

This is the first (and really, only) game that takes friendly fire seriously. That is to say that the game has just as many, if not more, flashing targets that you are not supposed to shoot. If you slow down the film, or if you pause the screen at just the right moment, you can see how the system uses its own light detection system in reverse. The flashes on civilians are mirror opposite of the light sensor itself—white when the control sensor is black and vice versa.

Because of how rapidly the flashes are happening, and because of the bad camera angles and poor film quality, it is usually impossible to tell whether or not you should be shooting. You work your way through a shooting range, and multiple targets will pop up at once, one holding the other in front of them with a gun pointed at their hostage. The flashes on their bodies are so close together—and so large—that you cannot properly see who is holding the gun until the screen cuts away.

Two actual gun shots are fired at your targets—cartoon men holding rifles—and both shots miss, punching holes through the wooden boards, missing the bodies painted upon them. A cardboard box falls in front of your line of vision, the only possible threat you will face.

"All right now hold it," your commander says. "It isn't easy, is it?" He laughs lecherously. "I think you rookies are beginning to see why we call this Ambush Alley."

The problem is that, no, you really don't. There is no threat, no risk or danger, no chance of ambush when your enemies can't fire back. Frankly, you don't understand why your commanding officer is treating it so seriously. It takes you out of the game. You feel almost obligated to disobey, to shoot the wrong targets because of your complete disrespect for the man onscreen.

You can't help but wonder: Why are pedestrians jumping out from behind mailboxes in the middle of a firefight? Why is that target carrying a bag of groceries and also a gun: Is he a civilian protecting himself from stray fire or is he a criminal trying to look inconspicuous? You shoot him to find the answer.

Your line of sight pans toward two enemy targets, you shoot, it pans a little further, you shoot, and then the camera pans to your commanding officer, on the firing range, standing directly between you and your targets.

It is legitimately startling. It is the only game that seems like a plausible, real-world scenario, the only one where your handgun controller makes any sense. This is the only time you actually feel "in the game," where the targets are actual targets that one could presumably shoot if they found the right range. And then, in the middle of the action, an actual human being shows up in the middle of a live firing range, and you are tricked into shooting at him.

Your commanding officer is here to warn you. He says that you need to be careful, *real careful*, because the next area includes a hostage situation. Of course, there have already been numerous hostage situations in your targets, so you are unsure of what makes this next scenario different.

Cut to the corner of Pepper and Pearl, a back alley setting, enveloped in fog and darkness, broken through by the flashing red and blue of police siren light. Strings of laundry hang between buildings, though nothing could dry in this weather. Your commanding officer circles around, referring to you now as his partner. The environment is different, and so are your targets: They are mannequins rather than paper. These mannequins have exceptionally blank stares, oddly fake hair, and an "uncanny valley" lifelessness.

A door pops open and fog billows out. Behind it, a man posed with a gun.

The camera pans around as before, past a door flying open to reveal a man holding a gun to a woman's head, his

other arm hooked around her throat. The camera keeps panning, paying no mind to the hostage situation presented so gravely. The mannequin's gun appears to be made of cardboard: flat, featureless, black.

"This place is loaded, partner. I'm calling for backup."

Your commanding officer (partner?) runs away, constantly looking over his shoulder, ducking down as if expecting a bullet in his back. He is terrified and overwhelmed, which is confusing: Isn't this still a shooting range? If not, why are there mannequins posed everywhere? Your commander calls for not one, but two choppers. *Two choppers for one alley*? Wouldn't more officers on the ground be more helpful, especially when the criminals are popping up in windows and doorways? What can a chopper—let alone two—do here?

Mannequins stare with cold dead eyes. Windowpanes spring open without anyone's touch. You recognize certain mannequins being used repeatedly: sometimes posed as friendly civilians, other times trying to kill you. The only difference is a change of shirt or a (sometimes visible) gun, often aimed in the air or at nothing at all.

Another hostage. Your partner says to be careful, yet you proceed without rescuing her. A friendly fire target shows only on her chest. You do not have the option to shoot at her captor.

Your commanding officer asks you to cover him while he stands in the middle of the street—gun toting maniac mannequins standing at every window and balcony. If this were real he would certainly be dead: Why bother if he'll

only get shot? If this were fake: Why bother if no one will *ever* shoot?

You think of your childhood self and—with no way of keeping score—how little value you should have found in this, how this video with no arc or conflict and no score should have killed that imaginative spirit. You think of how unsatisfied you are with your job, with how much time and energy go into alphabetization and dusting. You think of how you used to love browsing bookstores where now you mostly feel anxiety, how the monotony of a job could ruin something so dear to your heart. You think of how games are meant to be a distraction, an escape, and how a game like *.38 Ambush Alley* does more to draw attention to the fact that you are sitting in your basement, alone, shooting fake guns at fake people that won't even react. You think of how you should be writing or exercising or applying for more jobs—doing something to put your life back together. You wonder what you can do to make things better, what you can do when there is no control.

Out of the center of the screen zooms your commanding officer's face, back on the paper target range: "Snap out of it rookie, snap out of it. Listen, you did pretty darn good out there today. You keep up the good work, and someday you can be my partner. Now hit the showers."

The hell? Was this alley—more than half of the twenty-minute video—meant to be a dream? How did you fall asleep in the middle of a gun range? Why did you dream something so boring, so nonthreatening? If you were asleep or dazed, how did you "do a good job out there?" Now you really are confused, and somehow the fact that you

were daydreaming makes the whole game seem, if possible, more useless, the stakes even lower than you could have believed. What is wrong with you? What in God's name are you doing with your life?

BLUE THUNDER

Action Max isn't the only system that uses the video format. The *Captain Power* kid's TV show in the late 80's allowed viewers to buy the Mattel brand "Powerjet XT-7," a space ship-shaped light gun that could be shot at the screen during weekly episodes. The View-Master Interactive Vision allowed players to respond to video cues by manipulating a joystick. *Dragon's Lair* debuted in 1983 as a Choose Your Own Adventure-style game that allowed LaserDisc owners to choose from option menus that would take them down different animated paths, a breakthrough in animation that still looks better than most cut scenes in contemporary games. All of these debuted around the time that the Nintendo Entertainment System was released, and all of these systems failed to compete with the Nintendo's variety of games, the multiplayer capabilities, the complete control it gave users over events.

The Action Max brand created a final video, one that attempted to raise the stakes and production values, to get players more invested. This final game took footage from *Blue Thunder*, an actual movie—a Hollywood blockbuster from 1983 involving helicopter combat over the city of Los Angeles. Compared to the other Action Max games, the production is phenomenal, a blend of realistic footage and

actual explosions overlaid with the same flashing black and white lights.

You are a helicopter pilot sent to your first day of training and combat tactics: a shooting range full of targets including building facades and disabled automobiles. Mixed throughout are red target silhouettes for terrorists, white for civilians, and it becomes immediately clear how much color coding helps to differentiate, how more manageable this game becomes. That's not to say it's easy. The targets here are difficult to hit because you actually move at a helicopter's pace. You pass by the shooting range and you see your chopper from the ground, gun and explosion smoke swirling through the air, curling around your rotors, hypnotic.

"Good shot," your team leader tells you, "You really fried their bacon!"

Cut to your second day: the World Peace Coalition, Los Angeles. *Intelligence reports that plans of hostile activities have been uncovered. Normal traffic congestion could give perpetrators maximum cover*. You take to the sky to look for anything suspicious including rooftop snipers or cars parked in strategic locations. You are told there is no way to tell what's going to happen. An enemy helicopter flies by. You are led to believe this would be a more subtle attack, but are immediately met with a full-scale assault.

Your team leader is shown in a pilot's chair, speaking to you directly. He wears no uniform, and it's clear he is not a part of the action, that he is an actor on an entirely different set somewhere far away from here.

It is unclear why the summit would go on as planned when the city is being shot apart by unknown terrorists, but is up to you and your partner to destroy the threat, to watch as enemy helicopters turn to flame raining down on busy streets. As with the other games, there is some repetition with the camera shots—flying past the same row of buildings again and again, but there's much more editing here, more action to break up the repetition to the point where you only notice after playing this game repeatedly.

It's worth mentioning that this game was made in the same year as the other four, though it has a radically different feel, a different tone. This video looks like it was made by professionals, which it was. Even your commanding officer—for being some guy sitting in a parked helicopter—has an actual IMDB page, has appeared in films outside of this production. Of course, this professionalism was designed for a Hollywood movie and not a direct-to-video gaming system. This re-purposing of footage comes off simultaneously more and less ambitious than the other games—a more polished product that reeks of desperation.

Of the five games, this is the only one that never shows up in the preview footage that ends the other videos; you are never told of this game's existence by advertising. You would not know it existed if not for the internet's ability to catalog everything. You wonder if there are other games out there that are simply beyond your reach.

After all, the Action Max is part of a long tradition of failure and obscurity. The View-Master tanked after seven games. *Captain Power* was cancelled, but not before killing off its only female character in such a dark turn for a

children's show that it simply must be seen to be believed. And Action Max, despite going larger—more grandiose—came to a similar, unsatisfying end.

You once again face enemy attack then watch as your partner is pursued by enemy choppers. Your partner takes damage and suffers mechanical failure. You follow him, try to save him as nearby buildings explode, a smokestack lights up with your trigger, a warehouse turns to flame and explosions bloom from the concrete below.

You follow and fire until the enemy explodes. You feel a breath of relief before the jets arrive. You recall your time with *Sonic Fury*, but the game has changed: What can a helicopter do against a pair of jets? The game returns to the old format: two puppet jets in front of a green screen, flying through the LA River viaducts at an impossible pace, your helicopter in hot pursuit. You associate these unnatural movements with the system, and though this game feels more professional it is this slowness—the predictability—that you always appreciated. You like understanding the patterns of movement, the ability to hit your targets. You like feeling like a champion.

You see a policeman holding a sniper rifle, aiming it out the side of a helicopter. What's he going to do against a pair of fighter jets?

Central Command informs you that one of the jets has a heat lock on your exhaust port. You would wonder how they know, but you know better than to ask these questions anymore—you know there are no good answers for what is asked of you. The camera follows the path of the missile, heading towards your chopper, and for a moment

you feel like you might be the missile. "Find a diversionary heat source," a voice says, and you do—exploding a nearby skyscraper, likely killing dozens if not hundreds, but for the moment you are safe.

You are winding over the city, told to "pursue and engage" as the jets make their way toward the World Peace coalition. You press "Turbine Boost" and catch up with the jets almost immediately. After six minutes of game time, your leader has flown back to base and has made adequate repairs to return to you, to help you achieve your ultimate mission.

"*Jets are now in safe airspace. Take. Them. Out.*"

You wonder why these jets have flown away from their target, why they shot a skyscraper-leveling missile at you and your chopper instead of the city hall building they've been circling, why it is safe to destroy aircraft over residential neighborhoods. But you are beyond questions: You have your mission, you have your orders, and you've been waiting for this moment all your goddamn life.

A marketing pamphlet refers to a sixth Action Max game, *Fright Night*, presumably based on the 1985 film of the same name, an extension of the concept behind this movie/game hybrid that you've witnessed here. Sadly, this game was never made, was in the planning stages before Worlds of Wonder collapsed, before this system was abandoned. Rumors persist online of a working version, somewhere, available to play if only you could find it, like the ghost of a childhood we can feel but no longer see.

THE RESCUE OF POPS GHOSTLY

The film opens on a sunny suburban street. Everything is green, alive. The houses all seem to match, cohere. It feels like a neighborhood that would throw block parties, where people actually enjoy their neighbors' company. It reminds you of childhood summers spent with your cousins: swimming, biking, playing video games where you were always part of a team, where you never fought each other if it could be helped.

Meanwhile it is February and you are in your basement under blankets, watching as the six to nine inches of snow begin to accumulate, covering your basement windows completely, burying you alive. You get along with your neighbors but know what people say when you tell them where you live—that it is the "bad" part of the city, where neighbors like to tell stories of the drug deals going down in this house before you moved in. Where you enjoy your home but at the same time you can't help but worry, can't help hating yourself for the act of worrying, for never having problems yet waiting for them to arrive.

Cut back to the suburban neighborhood. The street is calm, serene. Two children chase a dog across lush lawns while synthesizers play dreamy New Age tones. The dog's name is Arthur, which you will discover as the kids yell his name repeatedly while he runs through the open front door of a neighborhood home.

The children follow, entering the house. The music changes, white lights flash and you hear the sound of thunder—the sun still shines without rain or even a cloud in the sky. The door shuts of its own accord, a wooden horse

begins to rock, a chandelier waves and rings, wind chimes singing in a nonexistent breeze.

Then! Look! A ghost!

Out of nowhere he emerges, a red tie and beaten cap. He has the body of a sheet but human hands and face. He giggles at your presence.

"Thank heaven you're here. I'm Pops, Pops Ghostly. And boy, do we need your help." A female ghost emerges, questioning your motives, but willing to accept your help for a task you have not committed to, to a task you do not yet understand. A third ghost enters: young, male, voice cracking in eternal puberty. His name is Gordy.

"It's been like this for generations. We Ghostlys lived here. Then one day these *creatures* moved in. Warped, horrible creatures. They're terrifying! We need to get them out of here!"

It is up to you to save these ghosts, the Ghostly family. They will try and help when they can, but please, don't shoot them! They fade away, and Gordy tries desperately to give you one final warning, but you cannot hear him, cannot even posit a guess as to what he wants to say, for in the moment the Ghostlys disappear, you are met with the image of a demonic, floating red face, covered in fur, eyes blazing white—the pupils either rolled back into the skull or nonexistent.

The face warps, bends, a flashing circle of light hovers somewhere near his lips. Everything in this penultimate Action Max game is better. The backdrop footage—wandering through a haunted house—feels like a realistic pace for exploration. The puppets' unpredictable movement

feels silly for a submarine but feels legitimately unsettling in a house full of ghosts. The Ghostly family is recognizable and easier to avoid accidentally shooting. Everything feels campy and cartoony yet still somehow managed to scare the shit out of you as a child.

More sheets with faces. Red skulls poke out. A cackling witch whizzes past your head. A skeleton plays a piano for four dancing ghosts and the game will not let you shoot at any of them.

The Ghostlys are the only ones capable of speech, yet this is a house of sound and scream. You work your way through the dining room and foyer to frantic music, to screeches of pain and of laughter, to the whine of Arthur's barks.

You see a skeleton on a rocking horse, laughing maniacally. It is the same rocking horse you saw upon entering the house, and to see what makes it move—to live in a world with the spirits made visible—is to know your world is not the same as it once was. Gordy flies into the frame, lamenting that this horse once belonged to him. Moms comes in and shushes him off.

The children are back now, screaming, flailing their arms as they run around a dining room table. Two ghosts follow while the red demon laughs. It appears as if it is their leader. It moves with the quickest speed, the deepest laugh.

The children, at long last, find Arthur the dog. They chase him up the stairs while what looks to be a floating platypus follows closely behind. Two ghosts swing from a grandfather clock while Pops cowers nearby. A witch shrills; a head floats in with enormous yellow eyes. Arthur charges

down the stairs and a skeleton dog is right upon him, the children follow, the red demon in close, violent pursuit.

The skeleton dog walks across a Persian rug, slowly. Your field of vision is pointed straight… at… the floor…

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The floor flips forward and there is a flash of light as you fall, fall, fall through a trap door or a collapsing bridge. It is not clear what is happening, but the floor disappears from under you and you are off…

Into another dimension.

Into unbinding reality

Into a bright geometric vortex, a wormhole opening around you. You are flying through an abstract world of brightly colored shapes, bursts of light whizzing past, all of the ghosts—including Pops and his family—pulled out of the world in front of you.

You are not sure if
you've crossed over to
the other side, if you
are

finally

seeing where the ghosts go
where spirits rest in limbo,
the filter between
the living and the dead.

You continue to shoot because this is all you do, because this is all you've ever done.

You are a ghost

A nothingness
A pull of a trigger
A receptor of light.

A swirl of rainbow mist envelopes you, then floats past you, collecting into squares hurtling through space

until it bursts.

Three concussive blasts, repeating, a fireworks display, an S.O.S.

The world begins to spin and

Gordy screams for his parents
They are nowhere to be found.

And now you are
here…

All alone…

Disconnected as the stars float by.

You are a
ghost
Stuck in the past
Looking so far back
That you no longer
know
Where you're going

A flicker of light
The swish of a knife

Finally, *finally*, a shape in the distance.
A single window pane, spinning in space.

A skeleton glides past, shatters the glass.
What can you do but follow in his wake?

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You are back in the house, and though you have no proof, you know you are not the same as you were before. Have you joined these ghosts? Do you count yourself among the dead?

The ghosts come back, laughing their laughs, screaming their screams. A new creature appears, entirely green except the black slits of eyes, popping up from behind a dresser to throw fireballs at you.

You remember this monster well; have seen him in your dreams since the age of five. You remember a childhood spent with your cousins, diving behind couches and makeshift forts, shooting Nerf guns at your television, attempting to dodge this monster's attacks. You remember the relief you felt when you managed to dodge them. You remember dying on the floor repeatedly.

These ghosts are everywhere, everywhere! You shoot as they come out of the walls, as they pop out of clocks, as they flood into the room. Moms Ghostly is dancing with a demon, and though she fights to get away, though she screams, the demon holds her forcibly, and you must watch her dance this dance. You shoot to save her, but nothing you can do will make this demon stop.

The camera pans toward a steamer trunk, which pops open on its own, and more demons or creatures or ghosts

begin spinning out of it. You cannot possibly shoot them all, yet their release creates a chain reaction. Every creature, every spirit begins spinning wildly, uncontrollably, every room of the house full of screaming and twirling and flashing beacons of light. You are glued to the spot, shooting, always shooting, shooting without knowing whether you hit or miss. Shooting without worries of points or records. Without thoughts of your personal failures. You are frightened and there is nothing you can do to stop shooting except keep shooting. You are a specter, a lonely child looking for his dog, a gnashing of teeth.

These ghosts, *your* ghosts, all spinning and laughing and screaming as their world becomes undone. You watch as every soul retreats into ether and meanwhile you are feeling the cold basement air, your poor circulation cramping your hands as you fire your weapon again and again and again.

Then silence. A quiet so complete it echoes in your head, cold and alone.

The Ghostly family emerges from a steamer trunk, uncertain, checking to be sure that the evil has been banished from this house.

"Boy, we really took care of them, didn't we?" Gordy includes you with the ghosts—no longer a *you* but a *we*, part of a joyful family of the damned. You belong here, in this suburban mansion of death, with the only father and mother and brother you have never known. At last, you are home.

It's worth mentioning that those kids and their dog are never seen again.

Pops turns to Gordy, his one and only child: "I hope so son, I hope so!" And then Pops turns to face you as he laughs the laugh of a man no better than the demons that intruded upon his home, the laugh of a man who waits for his floor to lift up once again, carry him away to a world all his own.

The credits roll and you are both here and not here, in this house. The Ghostlys are gone, and you are watching a sewing wheel covered in cobwebs, knowing that you have played every game, that there will never be any more, that all you have to look forward to is endless repetition, to never again fearing what must come next. You have no control but at least you have certainty. Now, finally, you know what you are**.** You are life and you are death, black and white—a flickering beacon in the corner of your screen, wild and red, a hummingbird heart. Now, finally, you know what you are: You are nothing at all. You are everything at once.

John Starks

Salvatore Pane

There's a glitch in *NBA Jam* only John Starks knows about. He sits in the dark in his duplex, the gummy carpet littered with empty forties and dead blunts. He selects his old squad, the New York Knicks, and chooses himself as the playable character. He looks at his face onscreen—grinning 50 years earlier—and taps in the code. In the twilight of his life, John Starks has discovered how to summon Michael Jordan in *NBA Jam*.

Jordan refused to lend his likeness to the *NBA Jam* developers because he signed his own, more lucrative deal to star exclusively in *Michael Jordan: Chaos in the Windy City*, an unplayable 16-bit debacle almost on par with Shaquille O'Neal's video game holocaust *Shaq-Fu*. But John Starks doesn't know any of this. All John Starks knows is the code came to him in the middle of the night during one of his many sleep terrors. He saw it neon red, pulsating on his ceiling. *Up seventeen times. Then the B Button. Unlock Michael Jordan in* NBA Jam. That was three weeks ago. John Starks hasn't left home since.

The game boots up and Horace Grant wins the tip. He kicks the ball to Michael Jordan, who leaps from the three-point line and dunks the ball. John Starks grinds his teeth as the announcer shouts, "Razzle dazzle!" The game is glitched. John Starks has to believe the game is glitched. In *NBA Jam*, Michael Jordan is faster than everyone, stronger than everyone. He can shoot without missing from anywhere on the floor. Three weeks of playing and John Starks has yet to even score a basket against Michael Jordan and his cackling sidekick Horace Grant. Starks's partner, Patrick Ewing, crouches under the basket and weeps. When he finally inbounds the ball, Jordan steals it from digital John Starks and dunks it so hard the hoop explodes. Glass rains down on digital John Starks as the announcer screams, "Hoop's on fire! Hoop's on fire!"

John Starks closes his eyes and tries to ignore the announcer's cries, the fire and brimstone on his dinky television set. As a boy, he felt certain he would wind up in hell, but he never imagined it coming for him through the decayed visage of his son's Super Nintendo. The greatest professional moment of John Starks's life occurred during a 1993 playoff game against the Bulls. With less than a minute to go in the fourth quarter, his small frame elevated skyward and he tomahawk-jammed in the faces of the much taller Horace Grant and Michael Jordan. But the Knicks lost the series. They lost out to the Bulls four times in the playoffs during Starks's tenure. For the last 50 years he's had to endure old fans telling him that if it weren't for Jordan, the 90s Knicks would have been the greatest dynasty in the history of sports. John Starks opens his eyes

and watches Michael Jordan urinate all over digital John Starks's face. Patrick Ewing is bleeding out in the background, his intestines balled in his hands. Michael Jordan rips out digital John Starks's heart and raises it above his head like a sacrament.

John Starks stands up for the first time in three weeks. He is 80 years old and doesn't know how he's still alive. He puts on his raincoat and braves the short distance outside to his Buick. He listens to the engine rev and imagines tying Jordan to a chair and dunking over his body until the end of time. All debts have to be settled.

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John Starks arrives at Michael Jordan's mansion three hours later. He's shocked to discover it in disrepair. The iron gate at the property's edge is toppled, eaten inside out by rust. The road that leads to the mansion is pockmarked with potholes, the grass alongside it running leafy and wild in all directions. He parks in front of the entrance, the wooden doors lifeless on the ground, and tilts his head skyward. John Starks is here.

It's dark inside, so John Starks retrieves a lighter from his coat pocket and strikes a flame. He makes out a foyer, the furniture sealed in plastic, a thick coat of dust over everything. He hears windows clanging against the mansion and the faint whistle of wind. He comes to a marble staircase and follows it to a hallway where John Starks spots a red oak door nearly as big as his Buick. He hesitates before opening it, terrified that the pixelated Michael Jordan of *NBA Jam*

might leap out at any moment to tear out his heart. He slips inside and sees a bed and velvet comforter, the rising and falling body of a man sleeping beneath it. John Starks creeps forward quietly, oh so quietly, and reaches the head of the bed. He recognizes the old man's face under a powder blue nightcap. Michael Jordan.

He stands there unsure of what to do. He never really had a plan, just vague ideas of malice and retribution. But now that he's here, now that Michael Jordan's face is really before him, John Starks is indecisive. Does he really want to kill Michael Jordan? Was it really Michael Jordan's fault that John Starks injured his knee the year MJ hammed it up in AA baseball? Was it Michael Jordan's fault that John Starks was traded from the Knicks in 1999, that his career never recovered? Was it Michael Jordan's fault that John Starks even had to play four humiliating games as a Bull in 2000, long after MJ retired with his six championship rings? Was it Michael Jordan's fault that John Starks lost touch with his son during that decade—squandered to the trenches of the NBA? Was it Michael Jordan's fault that everyone had to die someday? John Starks stands there, stands there some more. Finally he tugs back the comforter and gets into bed with Michael Jordan. He hugs the old bastard and MJ blinks his eyes open. He whispers, "John Starks? Is that you?" and John Starks tells him it is.

"John Starks." Michael Jordan stretches the words into four syllables, an incantation. "Do you wish you were a better person?"

"Yes."

"Me too. I was a terrible person."

They hold each other under the velvet comforter. After a few minutes, Jordan falls back to sleep and John Starks listens to his old foe snore. There's something comforting about it, how very human it sounds. It puts Starks at ease, reminds him of whistling, of his grandfather in Tulsa, cupping his neck in his palm and steering John inside the family barbershop. The bell above the barbershop door chimes as John's uncle waves with a pair of scissors. He gives a little boy a baldy sour and the kid smiles at John, his front two teeth missing. His grandfather squeezes John's neck, his fingers warm and sure, radiating love. It could go on forever like this. It could go on forever.

Fuck Video Games

Darius Kazemi

First, a disclaimer:

The argument that I am making is meant for people who struggle to express themselves creatively through making video games. It's not for people who make games as their job (necessarily). It's not for people who are successful at expressing themselves creatively through video games. It's not for people who make games to make money, or to entertain people. I'm specifically talking about making games as an expressive, exploratory activity (and even more specifically, the failure to do so).

… Seriously: If you are happy with video games as your medium of choice for creative expression and exploration, good for you. This isn't for you.

Okay? Here we go.

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In my years working in the video game industry, I would often hear really smart people repeat the claim that video games are "the most exciting medium in the world," or perhaps, as Chris Hecker says, that games have the potential to "become the preeminent art and entertainment form of the 21st century."

This implies that video games, due to some magical quality (interactivity?), are imbued with more potential as a medium than, say, books.

FUCK THAT.

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Every medium is imbued with the exact same amount of possibility: it's like the density of the Real Line. The density of the Real Line between 0 and 1 is infinite, as is the density between 0.2 and 0.4, which is the same as between 0 and 100, etc.

You can always drill down, and there will always be more to discover about a medium.

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Furthermore, I've heard the claim that video games are somehow "new" and therefore exciting. But hey! New mediums appear every single goddamn day. Anything is a medium. Here is a list of mediums that are possibly more exciting than games:

Twitter

hypertext

gelato
what my cat pooped this week

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DON'T FUCKING LIMIT YOURSELF.

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In 2012 I realized video games were holding me back, artistically speaking. Or rather: My tunnel vision focus on video games as "my" medium was holding me back.

Let's say you have a feeling you want to express or an idea you want to explore. Maybe it's best explored with a game. Or maybe it fucking isn't. One time I wanted to make an autobiographical game that summed up how I felt in the spring and summer of 2009. I labored over it for a month, building a shitty platform game of all things, before I realized that I could just WRITE IT DOWN:

"My girlfriend at the time treated me like shit and I really fucking hated her."

While it wouldn't be novel to write such a thing, it would be better than making a platform game, in that it would better articulate my idea to the audience I was trying to reach.

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(Unless my audience was navel-gazing video games bloggers, in which case I absolutely should've made the autobiographical platformer.)

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In 2012 I was forced to ask:

Why do some people default to games as their medium of creative expression?

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Some people make games because they want to express things that they think need to be expressed through systems of play or interactivity or ritual or whatnot.

This is a good reason.

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Some people make games because they grew up with games and always saw themselves as the kind of person who would one day make games.

I don't think this is a very good reason. I think it's arbitrarily limiting, but a lot of people I know fall into this category.

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Some people make games because games are cool, or sexy. What I mean is: If you write a blog post about your cat, probably nobody will care. But if you make a GAME about your cat, it'll get covered on a blog or something!

But just because you're right that you'll get more fucking media coverage doesn't mean you're not a creatively bankrupt asshole.

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Games should be a tool in your creative tool belt. That's all. If you want to express a feeling or an idea, try it as a game, but if it doesn't work... don't bang your head against the wall trying to solve the problem. Express it some other way.

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Try not to frame the problem you're trying to solve as "I need to innovate in this medium"—that is a poisonous way of thinking. You should say, "I'm trying to do X, now what can I do to make it happen?"

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Games are a methodology, a tool, an approach.

And you should always add more tools to your belt.

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If you struggle at creatively expressing yourself via making games—if you've made lots of games but they get you nowhere, if you find yourself with more shelved projects than you can count, try two things:

1. Keep making games and get better at it.
2. ...but don't spend all your time on that. Add some breadth as well as depth. Learn CNC milling or latte art or JavaScript or creative writing or painting or cat poop handling or whatever. It is possible that one of these new-to-you tools will get the job done more simply and more effectively than video games ever did.

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In 2012 I realized that a huge part of my interest in games came from an interest in generative experiences, serendipitous systems, and randomness. I had a lot of fun figuring out how that worked in the context of games: level generators and AI and that kind of stuff. But you know what? Turns out the internet ecosystem itself is a way more fertile and effective medium for exploring that kind of thing (for me, at least).

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In 2012 I started making Twitter bots and really strange programs. Recently I removed "game developer" from a lot of my online bios and profiles. I started identifying more as someone who makes "weird internet stuff." I could rest on "Twitter bots" or "JavaScript" as my chosen form but I'm also taking classes in machining so I'm not bound to a computer screen. Maybe someday soon I'll make something neat that isn't even tied to the internet at all.

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I guess what I'm trying to say is: If games AREN'T working for you as a tool for creative expression, don't give up on games, but also try some other stuff. Don't try and bend ideas to fit into the mold of "game." MAYBE try and bend "game" to fit to your idea, that might work (I'm thinking of Twine games here, which bend the concept of game so much that it makes traditional game designers cranky that the authors have the audacity to use the word "game." This also works in the other direction: Please think about whether your Twine game should be an essay instead.)

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AND, FINALLY: A WORD ABOUT COMMUNITY.

Community! Yay! It's a thing we have! It's what makes indie games great! Hooray!

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But it's possible to get swept up in community. It's possible that community becomes the reason we make games, which to me seems a little perverse.

Here I will quote (with permission) an email exchange I had with Rob Dubbin:

> A lot of the perceived rewards of expressing something as a game are extrinsic rewards from the culture that's sprung up around gaming, and rather than chase those rewards in all cases, it's better/more rewarding to pursue the intrinsic reward of successfully expressing something on a case-by-case basis, in whatever medium fits that idea best. ... **Buying into the idea that validation can/should/will come from a given culture is way more nourishing to that culture than it is to you.** [emphasis mine]

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So that's what I have to say. Remember kids, whenever you get frustrated at the state of the art, or you find yourself struggling to express yourself, just repeat after me:

FUCK. VIDEO. GAMES.

Contributor Bios

Anna Anthropy is a play designer, historian, and thirty-year-old teen witch. Her books include *ZZT*, *Rise of the Videogame Zinesters,* and *Star Wench*, and she maintains the ANNARCHIVE game history archive at annarchive.com. She lives in Oakland, California with her partner and their two gay cats.

Ken Baumann is the author of two novels as well as *Earth-Bound*, Boss Fight Books's first title. For more, see kenbaumann.com.

Matt Bell is the author of the novel *In the House upon the Dirt between the Lake and the Woods*, as well as two previous books, *How They Were Found* and *Cataclysm Baby*. His next novel, *Scrapper*, will be published in Fall 2015, and his first nonfiction book, *Baldur's Gate II*, is coming soon from Boss Fight Books.

Gabe Durham is the editor of Boss Fight Books and the author of *Fun Camp* and *Bible Adventures*. He lives in Los Angeles, CA.

Rebekah Frumkin is a graduate of the Iowa Writers' Workshop and a recipient of the Richard E. Guthrie

Memorial Fellowship. Her work has appeared in the *Best American Nonrequired Reading 2009* and *Granta*, among other places. She is at work on a novel, from which "The Glitch" is excerpted.

Rachel B. Glaser is the author of *Pee On Water* (Publishing Genius, 2010), *MOODS* (Factory Hollow, 2013), and the forthcoming novel *Paulina & Fran* (Harper Perennial, 2015). She loves video games, particularly *The Legend of Zelda: A Link to the Past*, for SNES.

Jon Irwin teaches college writing in Atlanta, GA. A longtime contributor to *Kill Screen*, his essays and criticism have appeared in *Alimentum*, *Billboard*, *Down East*, *GamePro*, and *Paracinema*. His first book, *Super Mario Bros. 2*, was published by Boss Fight Books in 2014.

Darius Kazemi makes weird internet stuff. His best known work is the Random Shopper, a program that bought him random books, DVDs, and CDs from Amazon each month. He also has a small army of Twitter bots that he builds because they make him laugh. He works as an API Evangelist at Akamai in Boston. He is the author of *Jagged Alliance 2* from Boss Fight Books. Before he moved into internet technology, he was a game developer for ten years.

David LeGault's recent work appears or is forthcoming in *The Sonora Review*, *DIAGRAM*, and *The Seneca Review*, among others. He lives and writes in Minneapolis, where he destroys books professionally.

Mike Meginnis is the author of *Fat Man and Little Boy* (Black Balloon Publishing, 2014). He operates Uncanny Valley Press with his wife, Tracy Rae Bowling. His fiction has appeared in *Best American Short Stories 2012*, *Unstuck*, *The Collagist*, *PANK*, *Hayden's Ferry Review*, and many others. He has never seen the ocean.

Brian Oliu is originally from New Jersey and currently teaches at the University of Alabama, where he is the Associate Director of the Slash Pine Press internship. He is the author of *So You Know It's Me* (Tiny Hardcore Press, 2011), a series of Craigslist Missed Connections, *Level End* (Origami Zoo Press, 2012), a chapbook based on videogame boss battles, *Leave Luck to Heaven*, an ode to 8-bit videogames, and *i/o* (Civil Coping Mechanisms, 2015), a memoir in the form of a computer virus. His works in progress deal with professional wrestling, long distance running, and *NBA Jam*.

Salvatore Pane was born and raised in Scranton, Pennsylvania. His novel, *Last Call in the City of Bridges*, was published by Braddock Avenue Books, and his chapbook, *#KanyeWestSavedFromDrowning*, was published by NAP. He is an Assistant Professor of English at the University of Indianapolis.

Tevis Thompson is an independent writer and critic. His graphic novel with artist David Hellman, *Second Quest*, will be released in early 2015. He is currently writing a book about the original *Legend of Zelda*.

Mike Lars White wrote and directed the award-winning short film "Steve's Problem," which has screened at film festivals throughout the country, including Seattle International Film Festival, NewFilmmakers Los Angeles, and Albany FilmFest—where it won Best Narrative Short. His essays and prose have appeared in *Word Riot, Poor Mojo's Almanac(k),* and *Dark Sky Magazine*, while his work in advertising has been recognized by the Clios, One Show, and Cannes advertising festivals.

Michael P. Williams is a Japanese specialist at the University of Pennsylvania Libraries, and an MLIS candidate at Drexel University. He has written *Chrono Trigger* for Boss Fight Books, and his shorter work has appeared in *The Appendix* and the *Journal of East Asian Libraries*.

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