

# FILMMAKERS WITHOUT CAMERAS ISSUE 2



# THAT NIPS TO OUR BACK EDS

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## note

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It's been a hell of a year. For *Filmmakers Without Cameras*, though, this year has been incredible. Quadrupling Issue 1's funding total was a sign that all the time and effort we spent putting it together was actually worth it!

This new issue brings with it a whole host of new writers and illustrators; one of the main pieces of feedback from Issue 1 was that you wanted *more*. And *more* you shall receive - at double the length of Issue 1, this will take a bit of chewing through. Despite my native country being an ex-Soviet state, I had never heard of Soyuzmultfilm. I wasn't a fan of *The Last of Us Part 2*, nor *Nier: Automata*. I had never seen *Butch Cassidy and the Sundance Kid* before, and the only *Godzilla* film I've *ever* seen is the Matthew Broderick one. The writing featured in FWC2 had made me reconsider all of those things and that's exactly why it's in here: I hope this issue has the same effect on you. I hope that it makes you view some of these pieces of art in a new light, and that it stokes conversation between you and the people around you.

**-Eryk**

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Where did all the

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# SCR

art charlie freer

# EEN

go?



**T**HERE WAS A TIME in the not so distant past when the amount of players you could squeeze around one TV was limited only to the amount of controllers you had in your arsenal and the amount of people in the room willing to play. Okay, it was usually four, but still. Almost any game you purchased seemed to have a mode where your already tiny TV screen would be quartered like a hot cross bun for you and three others to get involved. My elder brother, my two cousins and I spent hours and hours spread across the living room floor, cables creating McCallister-esque trip wires for Aunties and Grandads to whistle Lalo Schiffrin as they tiptoed past staring into our little boxes. Sadly, these days are now long gone. The TVs got bigger, we got older, controllers (thankfully, actually) became wireless. Slowly, the four little boxes became two, and then they became one.

This is a sweeping statement for dramatic effect, clearly a good few major titles still offer some form of split screen mode, although it seems generally to be fading away. Call Of Duty is now pulling back. It's reeling it in; the recent backwards compatibility update of the Black Ops games took away the ability for local 4 player Zombies and the online split screen brings the frame rate so low it is essentially punishing you for daring to be in the same room as someone else. I get it, everyone's online now, why would I want to tear my screen in half to accommodate some freeloader on my game? Sit and watch or get your own! The problem is I live with two other people and we want to sit in the living room and play together, be it against each other or as one cohesive team. My god, if I'd bite your hand off for a two player game,

I'd eat you whole for a three or four player one. I'd do anything to prevent the demon in the corner from rearing its ugly head,

# "Anyone for a game of FIFA?"

## *I can't do it anymore.*

sitting there waiting, knowing boredom will eventually take hold and we will inevitably fall into its salivating jaws.

Racing games are culprit number one when it comes to the dissipation of the Split Screen. Need for Speed, Forza and Gran Turismo fell like dominoes. Some still offer a 2 player arcade mode however others, like Forza Horizon, offer only single player locally. My brain knows the reasons why; these games now look hyper-real. The spoiler on my Nissan GT requires more RAM than an entire play through of Cell Damage Overdrive. My heart tells me it's the fat cat CEOs who see no need to waste their developer's already bleeding fingers on split-screen modes when there's no room to weasel a microtransaction in. I'm semi-convinced the latter is the reason why, when my brother and I attempted some split screen on Star Wars Battlefront 2 a few months back, we were met with bitter disappointment. Instead, we just chatted about how good the PS2 version was. We spend our time wrapped in nostalgia for Worms Battlegrounds and Burnout Paradise and playing games we've played to death, revived for a new console and then murdered once again.

Peggle 2 has always served us well. For all the brilliantly well-crafted artistic

achievements in gaming that have come and gone, for some reason Peggle 2 has made its way to the third generation of console and still has its fair share of playtime. It's nice

and quick; we can smash out a one on one in the time it takes people to get their shoes on. It's also really damn moreish - seven years later and that endorphin rush still hits big when you clean up the final few pegs with a long shot and Ode To Joy In D Minor blares through the speakers, mocking your now defeated opponent with Extreme Fever. Peggle's other main draw is that anyone can play and anyone can win. I've probably played over 500 games of Peggle 2 since its release in 2014; last Christmas my Mum, whose last exposure to gaming was Spyro The Dragon, beat me fair and square. But we can't keep playing Peggle 2 can we? Surely there's more in the world's largest entertainment medium for those sharing a screen?

There is. Like in any artistic medium, when the mainstream leaves an idea behind, the independents and the outsiders fill the gap in the market. More often than not, they drastically improve upon mainstream offerings. That's what appears to have happened with local multiplayer games, and I'm all the happier for it. I'm a 'casual gamer' I guess. I've always enjoyed playing them, I loved the Witcher 3 and God of War, but I'm not in the zeitgeist. When my cousin (who's a big fan of all things Video Game) tells me of what he's just finished I have the same reaction he has when I ask him if he got out to see the new Claire Denis film. A long stretch of time spent in my living room, one too many games of Peggle and the local multiplayer void left behind by some of the gaming big dogs has left us to search out and play some truly beautiful games. If Forza

allowed a four player split screen, I probably never would have even heard of them.

We played Hotshot Racing: a 4 player arcade style racer with a blockish polygonal

design, brightly piercing primary colours and outlandish cartoon archetype characters. You drive at what seems to be 1000 miles per hour, the physics glue you to the track as you slip stream ahead of the angry player to your left, laughing for the entire 3 minute race. It's glorious. We saved the Mexiverse in the gorgeous platformer Guacamelee 2, we screamed and shouted at each other for letting the pasta burn and for not washing the pots when we're nearly out of clean ones in Overcooked 2 (and they say games are supposed to help you escape reality). We also nearly burnt the actual house down in anger playing Cuphead, but it's best to not talk about that one. We experienced two very different sides of the 1970s; the first via breaking out of prison in gritty Scorsese inspired action puzzler A Way Out and the second in StikBold! A Dodgeball Adventure, a hilarious party game with pumped up disco aesthetics and up to 6, yes, SIX (!) people in one game.

I love the split screen, I love the social aspect of games more than anything else. I'm so glad I found all these wonderful games in all shapes and sizes and the past year playing them has reminded me of what I used to love about playing video games so much. It wasn't usually 60 hours worth of campaign and 300 side quests but everyone together overcoming a challenge. And I love, now that we're just about allowed, someone coming over and being excited to say 'you have to play this with us'. Split Screen was always there, we just had to look a bit harder for it.

# Game Over for Sexism

Words by  
Sophie Wallace

I've played video games since I was around 4 years old. Although 'playing' might be a bit of an extension of the truth - my first memory of playing a video game is begging to be allowed to hatch eggs on my brother's versions of Pokémon Ruby and Sapphire. Literally one of the duller aspects of Pokémon but I just wanted to be able to play the game. I was perfectly happy to cycle the little Pokémon trainer up and down the Route 110 cycling road waiting for each egg to hatch. I'm pretty sure my brothers saw it as free labour.

I've loved playing everything from Pokémon to Animal Crossing to Little Big Planet to Skyrim and to my latest completion, Horizon: Zero Dawn. A good story and enjoyable gameplay are all you really need to get me hooked.

I had a long obsession with Minecraft during my teens - fuelled first by my brother (who once told me that we'd spent so much time on Minecraft that he'd started to dream in blocks), but then by my first proper online experience with people other than my family. I was decent, I guess, and that helped 'cause there's a certain amount of respect that you get when you're 'good' at something. There were a few girls on my regular server, but once again it was mostly filled with boys. And they were lovely (for the most part) but there's always an aspect of feeling out of place, especially when you're 13 and had the tendency to feel like you don't belong (like most teenagers).



Pokémon was my first love and is still probably my biggest and brightest in terms of games - never-ending iterations certainly help keep it alive - but like the majority of the games I've played, I still don't personally know any women or girls that play. I know they exist - even when I was younger they must have existed, but I've not met them yet. Maybe I'm not looking hard enough; I'm naturally shy, and meeting people makes me nervous, but my experience is backed by the numbers - and the experiences of many other women.

The gaming industry is male-dominated, wherever you look. In 1995 when PlayStation released the PS1 only 18% of owners were women. It's no wonder I didn't think video games were for girls when I was a kid - hardly any women owned the consoles, let alone were part of the development industry. There's definitely been improvement throughout my lifetime though. PlayStation recently confirmed that 41% of PS4 and PS5 owners are women, which roughly reflects the number of women in the gaming population overall as well. Back in 2014, the Internet Advertising Bureau UK (IAB) reported that women make up just over half of the gaming population, and more recently in 2020 Google and Niko Partners discovered that up to 45% of the Asian gaming community are now made up of women, with a similar 41% of female gamers in the United States. But even now, there's still a depressingly small number of women in the development industry. Between 2014-2019 the number of women worldwide working as game developers hovered around the 20% mark (Clement, 2021). It's no wonder then that women typically don't see video games as something for them when they can hardly see themselves represented in the industry.

To be fair, it's not often you see behind the curtain in any industry, at least not historically, but you can see the influence of women in the game industry by looking at the protagonists of games. Rather encouragingly from a lowly 2% of video game protagonists being female in 2016, last year it increased to 18%. This still seems pretty low, but you also have to consider that last year 54% of games were classed as 'multi', meaning you could choose the gender of your protagonist, or there were multiple lead protagonists of different genders. Having said this though, these statistics say nothing about the quality of the representation. Female characters are often hypersexualised and objectified rather than being realistic, well-rounded characters - I can confirm this is not how you encourage more women to play games. Unrealistic standards are already everywhere in the modern world, and we don't need to feel that unrelenting pressure to be an impossible kind of perfect when we're trying to escape into a different world.

There's nothing like not seeing yourself in an industry to make you feel unwelcome, particularly when you're young and more easily swayed by societal opinions. When I was a teenager, I was too nervous to show interest in games like Call of Duty because it felt like it was a "boy thing". Girls didn't play those sorts of games if they even played games at all. So, instead, I scorned them, said they were stupid or dumb or that they shouldn't be played because they simulated killing and murder. Whilst I still don't play Call of Duty, I do play games like the Uncharted series, so I no longer have a leg to stand on for that argument. But what this comes down to is that I didn't feel represented or like I was the target audience for these games and ended feeling like I was being excluded from some sort of exclusive club that I would never be able to access because of my gender. Even when you finally get the nerve to push those thoughts aside and just play video games because you enjoy them, there are still barriers in the way to the full experience. I hardly play games online. There has always been a hesitancy in knowing that I'd be one of few, or perhaps the only, girl online. Deep in my Minecraft phase, my parents told me that I should have chosen a 'less feminine' username for my account because they were genuinely worried that I'd be negatively targeted for being female. The idea of being targeted because of my gender wasn't something I had yet to really grapple with. I'd never been given any idea that I was anything less than equal to anyone else, that my ability to do anything was dependent on my gender. Ability came from hard work – you have to put that in no matter who you are. But it certainly makes you feel like you've joined the wrong club.

Playing video games though is such a uniquely empowering experience. You

make mistakes without it having a 'real-life' consequence and you learn from it. You absorb yourself in something fantastical, become immersed in a world that is different from your own. You connect with others and make friendships that are different, but no less real, than the ones you have in real life. What greater joy is there than sharing in something you love? And the best part is that you don't even need to be good at it. Practice makes perfect, of course, but as long as you're enjoying it, you don't have to be the best. Sure, it's nice to be good, or great, at something – and it's good to strive towards bettering yourself in any area of your life – but you don't have to put others down to reach that goal. Besides challenge is good, no matter what the gender of the individual it comes from is.

I want more women who play video games; I want to know their experiences, want the affirmation that I'm not the only woman, want them to be better than me, worse than me, anything at all, just to share how empowering it can be to play games. And I want more women developing those games we play – ensuring that we're represented fairly, that female characters have their own role to play other than the damsel in distress. Truly excellent games require a diverse range of individuals to make them.

Make room for women at the controller. There's nothing about video games that make them inherently male, except the story you decide to tell about them. So, let's change it, and embrace anyone who wants to play – even if all they want to do is hatch Pokémon eggs.



*B.C. Wallin*

**T**HE FAMILIAR WHIR OF THE PROJECTOR. A movie screen comes to life, rounded corners and all. It's showing a silent flick about a great train robbery. Fft, fft, fft, the weathered frames flit by and flicker. A train approaches, its black column of smoke billowing across the sepia-toned landscape. Paul Newman has a mustache. Then, the gentle strings of Burt Bacharach's score, as we hear a slow elegy for the Hole in the Wall Gang — "once they ruled the West!" The music comes slowly, taking long pauses between breaths. It starts with what sounds like a mandolin, soon joined by what might be a clarinet or an oboe, and then a tack piano with a tone that feels straight out of an old saloon. Butch Cassidy and his gang are all dead.

The slow, mournful tune from the opening of Butch Cassidy and the Sundance Kid keeps coming back in different places — on a steamship, in a barn, in a shootout — and different iterations — on accordion, on piano, in Bossa Nova style. Bacharach's score for the silent film in this early moment doesn't appear on the official soundtrack released by A&M Records (with or without the sound of projection), but the theme, "Not Goin' Home Anymore," is the most repeated one in the film (closely seconded by "Raindrops Keep Falling on My Head"). It's a simple melody that goes up, goes down, returns to the beginning, repeats itself, then gives way to a reedy whine of melancholy. It's contemplative, sorrowful. I cried the first time I heard it.

The “Not Goin’ Home” theme doesn’t get much play in writing about the film. “Raindrops” made it to the top of the charts — despite claims that 20th Century Fox didn’t want it in the movie in the first place — and its cheery outlook and anachronistic tone became the focus of understanding Bacharach’s music. It’s nice to think about the good times, to remember Paul Newman as charming bandit Butch Cassidy, gleefully showboating on a bicycle (“the future mode of transportation for this very western world”), before taking Katharine Ross, as the teacher Etta Place, for a ride on the handlebars. Newman had such a wonderful smile and wore such a goofy bowler hat and the music was so genuinely good, so pleasant.

At the start of *Butch Cassidy and the Sundance Kid*, we who aren’t familiar with heroes and outlaws of Western lore know nothing about Butch Cassidy or the Sundance Kid, but when I saw the silent picture play for the first time, when the score started up in its slow pace of a start, I cried. Some people die in this sequence, but in the kind of way where they clutch their heart and keel over — a movie death. That’s not what hurts. Butch Cassidy and his gang are all dead.

Openings, and the first notes of the musical scores that accompany them, can elicit emotional reactions, even when there’s nothing in the form of a story to anchor those emotions on. Like an oboe leading an orchestra as it tunes up, the first notes of a film can open the floodgates of emotional reaction. E. Daar, a freelance theater producer and a good friend of mine, describes this as something

of “a push or a punch or an overwhelming sensation.” The sensation, she says, “creates this overwhelming feeling that moves me to tears. It’s not really a happy or sad cry. It’s a physical feeling.” Often, these moments act as permission to feel — moments that turn on an emotional attentiveness that connects us to the screen, stage, performance. Daar stressed that this is not the only way to understand these first moments, because it’s not always about permission — the response can be wholly involuntary.

“You may be sitting in a room reading this book,” writes composer Aaron Copland, in the essay “How We Listen,” describing the sensation of listening to music on a sensuous level. “Imagine one note struck on the piano. Immediately that one note is enough to change the atmosphere of the room — proving that the sound element in music is a powerful and mysterious agent, which it would be foolish to deride or belittle.” Copland is emphatic that there are other ways we must listen to music, but he makes clear, “the sound appeal of music is a potent and primitive force.”

The silent footage in the style of a newsreel that opens *Butch Cassidy and the Sundance Kid* was originally intended to appear later in the film, as something Butch and Sundance watch, with

Butch complaining about how unrealistic it is. Instead, as an opening scene, it’s the perfect trigger of nostalgia, with the physicality and texture of its aesthetic — a reminder that everybody we’re seeing is long gone — while those notes of sorrow attune our ears to the realization that something’s already slipping away, and we better cling to it fast.

In 1967, two years before the release of *Butch Cassidy and the Sundance Kid*, two bank robbers changed cinema. The shocking violence and realism of *Bonnie and Clyde* set off the end of the strict Production Code, which had reigned in Hollywood since 1934, and “was the spectacular domino that set off a chain reaction that toppled a studio system that was getting ready to collapse in on itself,” as film critic Owen Gleiberman wrote. In his glowing review at the time, Roger Ebert described *Bonnie and Clyde*’s shocking nature: “real people die. Before they die they suffer, horribly. Before they suffer they laugh, and play checkers, and make love, or try to.

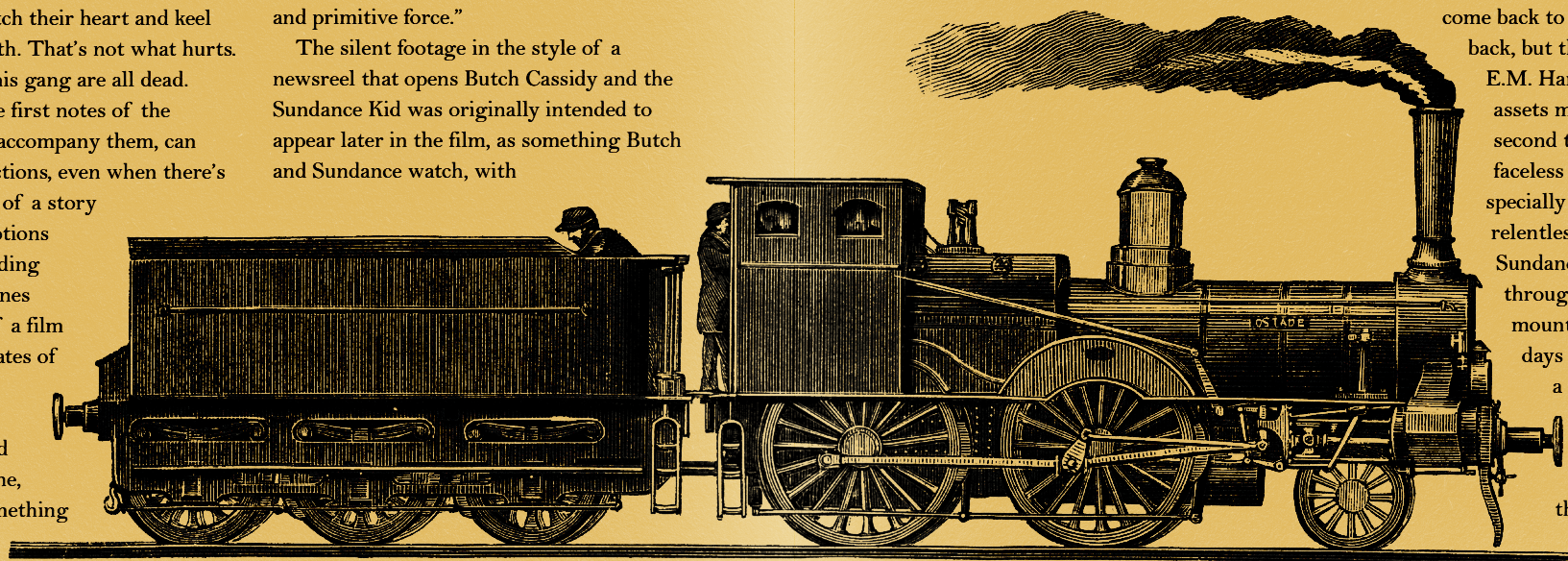
These become people we know, and when they die it is not at all pleasant to be in the audience.”

Butch and Sundance are in a Western, but everything has a modernness to it. Their dialogue is contemporary to the ‘60s and quippy (and has faced plenty of criticism for it — William Goldman, the screenwriter, wrote in his book *Adventures in the Screen Trade* that one of the things he disliked in his script was the “smart-assness”). Bacharach’s score is decidedly out of place with its time, and intentionally so — in a making-of documentary, director George Roy Hill lays out the way pieces of the film were made to feel modern, including the dialogue’s “contemporary rhythm and feel” and notes, “we didn’t want a traditional Western score.” As modern as the West of *Butch and Sundance* is, the future just keeps chasing them even more.

First, there’s the bicycle. Then, the superposse. Butch and Sundance and the Hole in the Wall Gang rob a Union

Pacific train going one way then come back to rob it on the way

back, but the businessman E.M. Harriman protects his assets more carefully the second time around, as a faceless posse erupts from a specially chartered train and relentlessly chases Butch and Sundance (over hill and dale, through forest and over mountain, and on). The days of politely robbing a train are ending, as are the days of engineers excitedly getting out of their hijacked trains to see the robbery



# FIRST, THERE'S THE BICYCLE. THEN, THE SUPERPOSSE

up close. If the superposse catches up with them, Butch and Sundance can only expect violent retribution in such a way as Bonnie Parker and Clyde Barrow met their end. For most of their film, Butch and Sundance are running from the spectre of Bonnie and Clyde, from the terrifyingly violent future where gunshots don't make you clutch your chest — they make you bleed. So, the two of them run. And they leave the bike behind (“future's all yours, ya lousy bicycle!”).

The music is out of place with the times, especially in “Raindrops” and the piece “South American Getaway,” an often cheerful track where vocalists were used as instruments, as Bacharach describes it (which is to say, there's a whole lot of scatting). As the vocalists “bah bah bah” and “dah bah dah” their way through the mostly cheerful music of “Getaway,” Butch and Sundance pull off robbery after robbery. The music starts as they escape Bolivian officers of the law. The two hide in a tree with Sundance's love, Etta, and bloodless fire at the officers, briefly puncturing the music, but it's all played for laughs: “Well,” says Butch, “we're back in business, boys and girls; just like the old days.” And the music is as playful as somebody singing along to a song without quite knowing the lyrics, but having fun

with them, anyway. I've long been of the opinion that film music criticism deserves more of people trying to imitate the sound of orchestras with their mouth, and the vocalists, singing in the style of the Swingle Singers, definitely deliver on that. These times, the music tells us, are the good times.

There are two bloody scenes. The first one plays out in slow-motion, and it's the first time Butch ever kills a man. The bodies are punctured and a scream of agony calls out, over and over. The bodies tumble into the dust and Butch looks on sorrowfully. Just like the bicycle, the future is here. The next blood comes not 10 minutes later. Butch and Sundance face a shootout and narrowly escape, but they suffer. They sweat, they wrap up their bleeding wounds, and they talk about going off to Australia, to escape into their heists and schemes. They don't know they're surrounded by the Bolivian army. They don't know that the future has caught up with them.

Ebert wrote that Butch Cassidy's “violent, bloody ending [was] a mistake; apparently it was a misguided attempt to copy Bonnie and Clyde.” But as much as we see Butch's bloody hand and Sundance's head wound, the real violence of the scene is never shown. The two fugitives run out, guns drawn, ready to

face a shootout, though certainly unprepared for the myriads of bullets about to fire down upon them. We hear the bullets, but Butch and Sundance remain untouched. The color drains from the image, as we return to sepia. The blood and bruises fade into the realm of photographic imperfection. A long pause. And then, once more, Bacharach's gentle piano notes of “Not Goin' Home Anymore.” And I cry again. The credits roll over the still image of the legends. Butch Cassidy and his gang are all dead.

“Butch and Sundance did what Gatsby only dreamed of doing: they repeated the past,” wrote screenwriter Goldman. “And probably that fact — recapturing their past — is what I found so moving about the narrative. We all wish for it; they made it happen.” In Goldman's original script, where the silent film within the film plays closer to the end, Butch and Sundance watch more thuggish versions of themselves and complain that life didn't happen that way. A title reads, “THE WILD BUNCH ARE ALL DEAD NOW BUT ONCE THEY RULED THE WEST.” Butch asks Sundance, “Did it say we're dead? We're not dead.” It's a reinterpretation.

## BUT NOW, BUTCH CASSIDY AND HIS GANG ARE ALL DEAD

The silent film-within-a-film as it appears onscreen is a reinterpretation, too. The song everybody remembers is “Raindrops Keep Falling on My Head,” but the track that defines the movie is “Not Goin' Home Anymore,” the tragic, slow walk down memory lane, the track that lingers as the past flits away, *fft fft fft*, with the rolling of film.

Butch and Sundance are running, running, running away from the future, from consequences, from Bonnie and Clyde, and E.M. Harriman. Their dependable tricks fail, their gang leaves, and the end of their own legends looms. Etta doesn't get much, but she gets Butch and Sundance's love, maybe equally. “Not Goin' Home Anymore” is as much about home as it is about Etta. It's the reedy notes that trill in the night as she slowly dances with Sundance while Butch sits alone. It's the whining accordion that plays when she tells the two, “I might go back ahead of you.” If only Butch would ask her to stay. If only Sundance would too. The music sounds like sorrow. Like an apology of some sort, where you'd answer “it's not your fault,” and the music would continue, “I'm still sorry it happened.” Butch and Sundance have to die because, sooner or later, the future catches up. Sure, once they ruled the west. But now, Butch Cassidy and his gang are all dead.

And Bacharach's score gives us permission to feel. Maybe it just opens the door that lets our fear of losing the past slip out. Or maybe it's a punch or a nudge or a shove that hits us with emotions. “A changing world was closing in on them,” the trailer for Butch Cassidy announces. Is that statement ever untrue? We're being chased by the future, ceaselessly. It's only a matter of time before it catches up.

# i'm thinking of ending

things words by callum woodhead-melimmens

**I** just wish there was more challenging cinema being made.” I’ve read it, I’ve heard, I’ve said it. There is an ever-growing abundance of well made and easily digestible cinema from pre-existing franchises, not only dominating theatres, but also sometimes spoken of as getting their own section in the Academy Awards. The only thing more ubiquitous than the franchise block buster in film is the take itself - as ice cold in its tedium as it is accurate - that there’s not enough challenging cinema being funded.

Enter Charlie Kauffman - a writer/director whose most accessible work came in the form of good ol’ deep dive into the nature of memory, love and coping with loss, *Eternal Sunshine of the Spotless Mind* - ready to push the boundaries of audio/ visual story telling to their limits with the dark double entendre entitled, *I’m Thinking of Ending Things*, adapted from the eponymous novel. Kauffman’s reasons for adapting a novel are unsettlingly pragmatic: “I was actively looking for something to adapt. I thought I might have a better chance of getting a movie made if it pre existed in another medium,” he said, continuing to say, “It was small, so I thought I could maybe get the financing. Small in terms of its budgetary needs.” He thought correctly, as Netflix funded the project into reality.

I wanted inventive and it was inventive. I wanted complex and it was complex. I wanted originality and it was so frustratingly confusing that within an hour of watching I mentally waved a white flag and conceded; my view of the plot had been obscured by the film’s experimental nature more than the main characters’ journey is by the blizzard they drive through. I stuck through til the end, with a dejection of someone lost in the centre of a maze, hoping they’ll find a convenient hole in a hedge in the form of an unlikely expositional dump, and the film ended. I’d seen many beautifully shot scenes with excellently performed dialogue but without being able to piece together what I was supposed to be following, it lacked meaning. I messaged friends who had seen the film and found they’d had the same experience. Sure it was beautiful and intriguing but what was it about? No idea either mate, sorry. The film began to take the shape of an admirable swing and a miss in my mind until a few days later one of those friends sent me a YouTube video: “I’M THINKING OF ENDING THINGS (2020) Explained”. And explain it did, within a few minutes,



**“If there’s 100 people in the audience, you’re going to get 100 different interpretations, especially when things get abstract. It’s beautiful.”**

a small number of details I’d missed and connections I hadn’t made were made apparent, and the film slotted into place. I realised I’d seen a poignantly bleak study on idealisation, memories, regrets, ageing and death. Well, sort of.

See, I may have seen a film that communicated all of those elements, but it didn’t communicate them to me, an external piece of work in the form of YouTube video did. My experience of the film as a piece of art in itself remained the experience I’d had, one of confusion and gradually waning interest throughout the course of the viewing. This begs the question: is it the film that is at fault for not getting its message across, or is the audience member at fault for

never independently receiving the relevant elements that were present? The filmic equivalent of how much wood would a wood chuck chuck.

Stuart Hall’s Reception Theory characterises filmmakers as weavers of the fabric that makes up a film, and the audience as unweaving it, unravelling the parts that make the film through an active participation in spectating, and can often come out with a range of different interpretations depending on their individual perspectives. The more lengthy and complex a film is the more open to interpretation it will be. 75 year old follicle anomaly and Film Studies tutor’s wet dream, David Lynch, emphatically supports this, saying, “If there’s 100 people in the



**«Art: Rachel Handley**

This is a piece I was inspired to create after watching *Two English Girls* (1971). The film was recommended to me by a friend and I didn't know what it was about going into it. It had an interesting premise but what really moved me was Muriel's confession in the latter part of the movie. I guess I was just surprised by the universality of human experiences. Not only had something similar happened to me in my youth, but it was apparently a common enough occurrence that it had been written about and put in a movie decades before I was born. And so I painted Muriel.

audience, you're going to get 100 different interpretations, especially when things get abstract. It's beautiful. Everybody's a detective and whatever they come up with is valid in my mind."

When a mainstream film that is expected to be understood by large audiences tackles complex stories, it faces the challenge of trying to communicate complicated ideas with a diverse audience, and often has fairly blatant methods of doing so. For example, *Inception* had Elliot Page's character - new to the the world of dozing James Bondery - requiring to have the concepts explained to her the audience.

A child watching the most accessible flick will subconsciously play detective with the exposition they are drip-fed when watching a film. They parse the available information and put together who the characters are and why they are doing the things they do. This is a process most film fans have been doing their whole lives, and can expect a certain structure from most films, regardless of quality. It is similar to the process of enjoying music, where we recognise the patterns in the sound and anticipate the melodies. This can all be

done without conscious thought. When the writer/director subverts storytelling norms by doing things such as giving us huge amounts of information in unorthodox ways, they go against the grain we've been made so familiar with, and our usual, effortless detective work is no longer applicable in finding meaning in what we're watching. Some say this is the difference between an "accessible" film and a "not-so-accessible" film. It takes a level of critical thinking and personal interpretation of the audio-visual information displayed.

*I'm Thinking of Ending Things* gleefully misleads the audience in many ways, as it initially masquerades as a straight forward film about a woman (played by Wild Rose's Jessie Buckley, whose ability to seamlessly switch into another accent is once again on display) with misgivings about her relationship, going on a road trip with her boyfriend, Jake (played by none other than *Breaking Bad*'s Jesse Plemon's, a far cry from everybody's favourite beloved psychopath, Meth Damon), to visit his parents.

Once we've spent the vast majority of the opening twenty three minutes in the car with our leading couple, going between internal monologues, pages of dialogue and Buckley's character holding eye contact with the camera while giving a dead eyed recital of Eva H.D.'s poem, *Bonedog*, it's evident this isn't going to be a straightforward story at all. Once Buckley's character(s) start changing names and Jake's parents manage to time travel within their own bodies we know we're in seriously unfamiliar territory

Here's the kicker: the explanation video that helped me retrospectively unravel the fabric of the film made me realise that one of the most important connections I hadn't made had been made during those initial

twenty three minutes. This connection was, for me at least, too subtle, and left me unable to appreciate the perspective the film's complex messages were coming from.

While I'm Thinking of Ending Things is certainly more ambitious in its approach to dropping tid-bits of information for the logic-starved viewer than a more broad project such as the aforementioned Inception, its subtlety comes at the cost of alienating the viewer from the story. The pay off from such an approach is that the audience are sucked into the diegesis of the film without the jarring feeling of consciously being aware of the stages of the story we are in. It's a welcome change, as nothing induces a groan quite like knowing you're in the midst of the "refusal to call" stage of a hero's journey, knowing full well the film won't end twenty minutes in with the protagonist deciding to stay at home and play Minecraft. Subtlety, however, is easy to miss.

Exposition that is intended to be snook in under the viewer's nose can instead fly clean over their head. When this information is vital, it can be severely detrimental to the viewer's experience. This is a risk almost impossible to avoid when experimenting, because if it were a sure fire hit, it wouldn't be an experiment.

But experiments can fail.

Kauffman's approach is likely not overly concerned with making sure the viewer understands the deep and poignant story he's worked so hard to tell. Toni Colette, who puts on a masterclass performance of a character through many stages of her life, alluded to this, saying of Kauffman, "he's very reluctant to pre determine people's experience of it". How he's not driven to insanity by the idea of his work going largely unappreciated and misunderstood is a difficult one to answer, but his attitude

resembles Lynch's positive view of every audience interpretation being of merit, even when they're totally at odds.

While the film being so open that it's difficult to get a grasp of at all may be on purpose, that doesn't absolve it from being flawed. It's certainly tempting to blame any film for information not being made clear, under the premise that the audience have no responsibility at all, and are merely passengers, however that view severely limits that kind of stories that can be told on screen, and I for one know that I've been left behind by plots that I was more than up to understanding, purely through the laziness of my Twitter-rotted attention span, and it's bordering on facetious to lay blame for that at the feet of filmmakers.

Furthermore, plenty of people very much did pick up on the on the story and have had the exact experience Kauffman was trying to communicate, proving that appreciating the film as a piece of art in itself was more than possible. This brings us back to that pretentious-but-relevant word: challenging. If anything, I'm Thinking of Ending Things shows the vast untapped territory of storytelling tools yet to be fully exploited in filmmaking, while simultaneously proving that I can expand my ability to perform the more conscious detective work necessary to take in challenging cinema.

After all, what is a challenge if not something that improves you for having overcome it. There is no narrative more simple and easy to understand than the protagonist undergoing growth to overcome a challenge, so why wouldn't that apply to a critical audience member's own role as a viewer?

# KING OF KINGS AND MONSTERS: The Absolving Power of Reinvention

words  
JOSHUA LUKE CABLE  
art  
WILL HUCK

**I**n the beginning God created heaven, and earth. And the earth was void and empty, and darkness was upon the face of the deep; and the spirit of God moved over the waters. And God said: Be light made. And light was made. Ages past, and in 1954AD in the wake of the American occupation of Japan, somewhere in the south Pacific Ocean, the United States military exercised their God given right to nuke desert islands, and blinding light was made. A force of destruction a thousand times more than what had levelled Hiroshima and Nagasaki a decade prior. Forged in those nuclear fires (and by the creative powers of Ishirō Honda, Tomoyuki Tanaka, Eiji Tsuburaya) mankind created new life, one birthed, or transformed in the irradiated saline soup of the south Pacific: Godzilla.

A Japanese fishing ship sinks, and then its rescue ship goes missing too. Nearing Japan, large footprints are found on the remote Odo island. The locals believed that a creature called Godzilla (anglicised version of Gōjira, an infusion of gorilla and kujira, gorilla and whale) was responsible. A legendary sea monster, a relic from the past. When fish was few, it would come from the ocean to feed on humankind to survive. In those old days a girl would be sacrificed, all they've got now is an exorcism ritual to repel the monster. These monsters share a name, but they are not the same, the locals were mistaken. This is not the Godzilla from an old man's tale, ours is a 20th century horror, one that leaves radiation in its wake. From an old myth, to a rampaging monster born of science; Godzilla had much further

to go on his journey across the ages. In most outings since 1964 he is the aloof protector of earth and humanity alike. Standing between us and threats, extra-terrestrial and of our own making. Powerful, wrathful, unknowable, ever present, stoic, adaptable, a helping 'hand' when you need it most: a being worthy of worship. Do you see where I'm going with this? For 67 years Godzilla has been on a path to godhood. There are many gods in the Shinto religion of Japan, but I don't see the world through the prism of Shintoism. I was born and raised in the culturally Christian country of England. My agnostic childhood was injected with the beliefs of my surroundings. My frame of reference for an all-powerful being is the Biblical God, bulbous warts and all. I am not a believer, but it is a topic I have loved out of interest. There are parallels between the two in their respective texts, but it is their similarities as an ongoing cultural creation that interests me. Their hard edges have been deliberately smoothed overtime to maximise their dispersion, and retention in people's minds. I have a 'Mickey Mouse' degree in filmmaking (a 1st mind you), a religious scholar I am not. This is about power, and how we absolve its user's (namely Godzilla and God) overtime, with reinventions of their stories to suit our changing wants and needs. To be 'God Fearing' always seemed antithetical to the sock puppet Bible shows of my primary school days,

and the truly beautiful messages of compassion and forgiveness attributed to God. Surely the God in the annual Christmas nativity play wasn't away committing horrors in the off season? Well, in his younger days he was. Those Old Testament displays gave you good reason to respect, to be awestruck, to submit, and yes, to fear. Fear is belief, as much as love is, as unpalatable as that is to our modern sensibilities. Both Godzilla and God operate on a 'might is right' philosophy, something that is inherently fascistic. We learn to fear when power is used against us, be it the 10 plagues of Egypt or the stomping on of our cities. In defeat we submit, and then in time we love when that power is aimed elsewhere. Our popular notion of God has changed, as it has for Godzilla, as once upon a time he was pretty Old Testament too. From the beginning Godzilla has symbolized nature's revenge on mankind, born out of our greatest violation, atomic weapons. This righteous vengeance is what made the Godzilla of 1954 a horror film, and as far as film's go it is iconic. But Godzilla himself has achieved popularity beyond horror, and certainly does not stand shoulder to shoulder with the other giants of the genre. Characters such as Freddy Krueger, Jason Voorhees, Michael Myers are supernatural and heavily franchised, but have never deviated from their initial characterisation, unlike Godzilla. The

exception being Dracula, Wolfman and Frankenstein's Monster whose stories are not predicated on their use violence, but on their condition, which usually leads to violence. Godzilla is certainly violent, but it has always been righteous from his own perspective. That seed of sympathy, that righteousness, agreed upon or not, is all it takes to grow new stories, and transition characters into a more favourable light for new times and audiences, and let what we dislike wither away in darkness. We grow fond of familiar faces; so, these stories and characters come back time and time again, until they go from acquaintances to friends, but unlike a real friend these characters can be modified on a whim, you remove what is harder to love.

Even in Godzilla's relatively short existence he has been pruned into a more agreeable shape, away from a vengeful revenant and into something more heroic. God has experienced much the same over a far longer period, but who knows what has changed in God's story over several thousand years, innumerable revisions and translations. Yet the contemporary Bibles feature acts of God so barbarous it is unsurprising they have not received the same DreamWorks animation treatment like the family/musical 'Prince of Egypt' (1998). God's commanded genocide of the peoples of Canaan at the hands of the Israelites springs to mind. No Oscar award winning original song could save

that in polite society. In their long and confusing continuity, it is easy to gloss over such things, which begs a certain question, to paraphrase a philosophical thought experiment, 'If a fictional radioactive dinosaur commits wanton destruction and no one talks about it anymore; does it make a difference in the reboot?' Each reinvention has tried to make Godzilla something more than just an atomic aberration driven by wrath and instinct, they tried to give him a greater claim to his throne as King of the Monsters, so the ante keeps being upped. He grows bigger and more powerful in each reinvention. With a greater justification as to why it is ok to love him. He does what he does to; fight the common enemy, to protect his son, to stop pollution, to save Japan, to have some fun, to save the world, to feed himself, to settle a score, to avenge his son, to restore the natural balance, to mark his territory. These have all been true, and ways for the storytellers and audience to absolve him of the actions of his vengeful youth. It has been the plight of screenwriters from Tokyo to Los Angeles to make sense of and sell Godzilla, but which one, the destroyer, the hero, or the anti-hero?

In 1971, during the original Showa era of the franchise, for the first time Godzilla chooses to help of his own volition, to save the world he will fight Hedorah, an alien creature grown fat off of the planet's rising pollution.

We would see this heroic Godzilla four more times before the Showa era ended, and the series would endure its longest break of theatrical releases ever, just 9 years. In 1984 the Heisei era began, as a continuation of the original film only, after 30 years he was missing, presumed dead, now was 'The Return of Godzilla.' In this soft remake of the original, Godzilla is the same vengeful monster from 1954, but he has changed, he doesn't rampage, he hungers for the only thing that will sustain him, nuclear power. He acts out of instinct to survive which pits him against Japan. This reaffirmed Godzilla as the sympathetic anti-hero. It took 39 years for a heroic Godzilla to return to screens, in 2014 Hollywood took another swing at things, so began the MonsterVerse era and a Godzilla who is an overtly majestic and ancient figure, intent on maintaining the natural order. In response to this new American success, Japan began their own new Reiwa era, and a return of a more sinister Godzilla. That same popularity that incentivises characters changing to seek broader appeal, also prevents them from coming to an end. Godzilla the intellectual property, and the character itself has achieved 'meta.' In or out of the story Godzilla is like the coming of the seasons, inevitable.

There is a fluctuation at the heart of these figures, destroy or defend, cruelty and compassion. It is these kinds of irreconcilable differences that lead to reboot after reboot of Godzilla, and new editions and denominations of Christianity, who try to set the record straight, for convenience or comfort, like the Cathars. A medieval Christian sect who was so alarmed at the suffering of the world around them they came to a reasonable conclusion, their material world must belong to the Evil God of the Old Testament and the Good God of everything spiritual, and the

New Testament wants to help them. But the two must be equally powerful, because things were not improving. The Cathar's resolved their own cognitive dissonance by making a sensible change to the story, they made God less powerful than convention would have it, but made him consistently kinder as a by-product. The Vatican cured their heresy with a crusade. Whatever fettling you may do to these characters, there are streaks of mean too important to be omitted, only smoothed over in the canon of both God and Godzilla. For God, one was the Garden of Eden saga with Adam and Eve, and their novel transgression which he met with a harsh, unjust, and disproportionate punishment, especially for Eve. Another would be the world consuming Flood, a megalomaniacal act of human extinction, a wiping of the slate clean (I went to a nursery called 'Noah's Ark,' perhaps this is where my biblical grievance began, the rice pudding didn't help. I have since come around on one of those two things). For Godzilla, his origin as the anti-nuclear messaging wrapped in keloid scar scales, towering 50 metres high and ready to inflict revenge on humankind, from crushing buildings to melting pedestrians in the street. In most reinventions that is still the characters starting point, pure wrath, from which he develops a more nuanced motivation. (Exempting the 1998 American remake, loathed on both sides of the Pacific for omitting any social relevance, and for just being a big iguana, this was absolutely my first Godzilla film by the way.) Sure, you can cast the lovely Morgan Freeman as God, or have the friendly animated Godzilla Power Hour series for kids, but you can't divorce those reinventions from their core concepts. If push comes to shove, would Morgan Freeman God, or Power Hour Godzilla, smite or stomp you out?



hallowed be thy name,  
GODZILLA

That's the thing with inhuman characters, it's hard to know what they're thinking. One day Llywelyn the Great, Prince of North Wales returned from the hunt to find his baby missing, its cradle overturned, and his faithful hound Gelert with a blood smeared mouth. Llywelyn furious, drew his sword and avenged the death of his child by killing Gelert, or so he thought. Only after the dog's dying yelp Llywelyn heard the cries of a baby, unharmed under the cradle, along with a dead great wolf which had attacked the child and been killed by Gelert. The prince filled with remorse is said never to have smiled again. Gelert could not speak his case and was only vindicated in the aftermath. The smoke has cleared on many a Japanese metropolis, with a bloody and debris dusted Godzilla standing as the victor over another monstrous worse alternative. Unlike Gelert, Godzilla doesn't stay dead, in victory or defeat he can be seen swimming back out to the pacific from whence he came. Instinct is what spurs a dog to fight a wolf, but what drives Godzilla in all his incarnations? It is hard to say, his thoughts are unexpressed, he never articulates himself, we can only project meaning onto his actions, and examine his expressive eyes for clues. But for all his power Godzilla is just as communicative as Gelert with his yelp, only ever speaking in his magnificent roar (created by rubbing a contrabass

string with a glove soaked in pine tar). Godzilla lacks the ability, or perhaps the willingness to communicate to humanity. We never truly know his thoughts, feelings or what guides his actions, we can only endure and witness them. He is unknowable. God has the ability, and seemingly chooses not to communicate with humanity directly, or clearly on any perceptible level. His plan remains a nebulous mystery. The end result is the same, silence in lieu of answers. This ambiguity is the real secret to their longevity. They are a lizard and an old man shaped mould to be filled with whatever the storyteller desires, the only constant is power, and their iconography.

You build your dream home, and take every conceivable precaution to protect it, but there is a limit. Vis major, a "superior force," an irresistible natural occurrence, be it a volcano, tsunami or hurricane, well in the insurance world you'd call them an Act of God, and do your best to limit or exclude it in the coverage you offer, to avoid a pay-out every time someone's home is wiped off the face of the earth. "God" in the Act of God clause is nonreligious, it is just an indicator of a rogue power, answerable to no human. You can be sure that in Godzilla's Japan, there is a Kaiju clause. If an 180ft crab monster crashes into your apartment, you're not getting a damn yen from your insurance company. Human history is filled with

the proposed role of supernatural powers, divine and infernal, in the causation of destruction. Twice Japan was saved from Kublai Khan's Mongol fleets by storms so powerful and timely that the Japanese called it the kamikaze, the 'divine wind.' The Bible features many examples of this, but none so relevant as Sodom and Gomorrah. Two infamously sinful cities in the Old Testament where God 'destroyed these cities, and all the country about, all the inhabitants of the cities, and all things that spring from the earth'. Though it's not clear what those sins were, homosexuality unfortunately has been blamed, but read Genesis chapter 19. Sodom and Gomorrah had way more going on than gay people minding their own damn business. Historians today believe it was just an earthquake. It's easy to imagine a spectator in 1900 BC from the next town over watching as the cities shudder and fall, as they're consumed in fire, lit from the petroleum and gases unleashed from the earth, giving the whole debacle a 'fire and brimstone' flavour. The spectator, unenthused with the unneighbourly treatment he sustained there in the past, stops and thinks for a moment, "well they must have deserved it, after all it didn't hit my house." Whether it is the orange burning sulfur raining down on Sodom and Gomorrah, or the pale blue beams of atomic breath strafing the skylines of Osaka. We would rather

have it done for a reason, even a bad one, as destruction dealt randomly is a far scarier prospect in reality, and unsatisfyingly chaotic within a narrative.

Previously I said these characters were just moulds, and like any tool can be used poorly or even worse harmfully. These characters and stories are reinvented for various effects and purposes, but it is the storytellers alone who may require absolution for their intentions. Ironically it is the storyteller who wields ultimate power over these two figures. No one alive thinks Godzilla is real, but there are billions who believe in some version of this God. Which makes the real-world implications of reinventing God, a far more impactful thing. I love Godzilla, at best he is a cautionary tale for humanities capacity for destruction, at worst he's a cool monster who fights things, and makes money for people because of it. He's just a fictional character whose beginnings as a piece of art are so recent and visible, there is no ambiguity as to where he stands in the Ven diagram of fact, fiction and myth. Very unlike God in that regard. But as the Bible shows, all gods have to start somewhere, give a good story a few thousand years to marinate, and see where Godzilla stands then.



# Office Space

# &

# bullshit jobs.

words Zachary Diaz

**F**OR THE MAJORITY OF MY TIME AT UNIVERSITY, I would pick up shifts delivering pizza at Dominos, with summer's off usually allowing me to work full-time. In the four years that I had this job, the work itself, like most delivery and food service work, became mind-numbing, usually delivering to the same few neighborhoods in the monotonous Dallas suburb I grew up in. It was walk in, grab an order, walk out of the store into my car, put on a podcast while driving to the house I was delivering to, take the order to their door, give them the order, give a fake smile and say "have a great weekend", get back in the car, head back to the store, and do it all over again. Wash. Rinse. Repeat. Do that for eight hours, then wash dishes and close up the shop for another two to three hours. Count up my tips, drive back to my parents at 3am,

then wake up and do it all over again. Now I certainly wouldn't call this a useless job, being able to deliver quick meals to families (as well as drunk or stoned gamers) is a good thing, and I was happy to do it (especially when the tips were good). But there were parts that certainly made me feel like a cog in the machine. Getting stuck in traffic, yelled at by customers, hassled by managers, and then finally breaking down and crying in my car en route to another delivery were common occurrences. There were countless instances where I wanted to say "fuck it," rip open the large pepperoni pizza sitting next to me in the passenger's seat, take a huge bite, and drive straight home, never to see that god-forsaken store again. There are times where I wanted to take a baseball

bat to the store's phone system just to get a second of peace during the evening rush. There are times where I just wanted to stop right in my tracks and stop working, and sit right down in the middle of the store and play games on my phone.

I imagine many people working similar jobs have had similar experiences and feelings, which is one of the many reasons I believe the 1999 movie Office Space has resonated with so many people and has grown a cult following in the past twenty plus years since its release. Memes involving the characters Milton and Mr. Lumbergh have been popular in various internet forums for the past decade, and phrases such as "the cover sheet on the TPS report" have been used as slang for needless paperwork.

Written and directed by Mike Judge of Beavis and Butthead fame, Office Space tells the story of Peter, an office drone who works for the fictional corporation Initech (though this could be interpreted as representing any number of corporations from Amazon to Microsoft), and, after an unfortunate incident involving the death of his hypnotherapist, decides to take control of his life. Instead of quitting his company, however, he chooses to live hedonistically while still going to work, wearing casual clothes to the office and making more room for himself by knocking over other cubicles. Much of the mundane events that occur and characters that appear throughout the movie were based on Mike Judge's own experiences working in a corporate 9 to 5, such as the character Milton

being based on a stuffy and socially awkward co-worker. In this article I'd like to look at three characters in the film (Peter, Joanna, and Milton) and how their painfully relatable struggles are representative of a larger issues of late capitalism and the alienation of their labour.

Let's start with the film's protagonist, Peter. Played brilliantly by Ron Livingston, what makes his character so appealing to so many fans of the film is his "call to action" after his incident with his hypnotherapist, which leads to his rebellious and lackadaisical attitude towards his workplace throughout the rest of the film. Although it appears that the inciting action is the supposed "spell" that his hypnotherapist put him under, one could argue that this incident was simply what gave him the motivation to finally "break free" of the mundane and oppressive nature of the society and culture that surrounded him. Though in other films, the loss of one's girlfriend and slacking off at work is usually seen as a negative, in the case for Peter it is the exact opposite, and allows him to embrace what he is truly passionate about and pursue his own self-actualisation. This also allows him to see how his role within the corporate system actually functions, which leads to several fantastic lines such as when he tells the corporate big wigs who are interviewing employees to determine layoffs that he only does "fifteen minutes of actual work" a day and that he has "eight different bosses" to tell him any mistake he makes during his work. Most notably he states in the same scene that "now if I work my ass off and Initech ships a few extra units, I don't see another dime, so where's the motivation?" Beyond a fairly straightforward Marxist understanding of capitalism and surplus value expressed by Peter, this is also representative of what the late anthropologist David Graeber describes

as one of many "bullshit jobs" that can be found in many corporate environments. In his book of the same name, Graeber describes how that many corporations create jobs that aren't actually needed but are used to prop up the size of the corporation itself. He also points out the irony of these jobs, which, due to automation and the acceleration of computing power (which is why the "fifteen minutes of actual work" line is so poignant), requires less labour but simultaneously pays more to their workers in comparison to a variety of service jobs. This is further emphasized later in the film when, in a twist of fate, Peter is promoted to a higher rung of the corporate ladder, as his employers see his acts of rebellion as signs for potentially strong leadership skills.

In terms of service work, Joanna is significant to the representation of wage labour outside of a strictly corporate system. Played by Jennifer Aniston, Joanna is a waitress that works at the fictional casual restaurant chain Chotchkie's, located right next to the Initech office building where Peter works. In several scenes we see how Joanna becomes disillusioned with her own work environment, both in her conversations with Peter as well as her own interactions with her manager (played by Mike Judge in a director cameo). In one instance, for example, she gets in a heated argument about the amount of "flair" or buttons that she has on her work uniform. Although the uniform requires a minimum of fifteen different buttons according to her contract, her manager insists that she needs more in order to go "above and beyond" and show that she is passionate and an individual. The irony is, of course, is that by wanting her to express her individuality, the manager is urging her to conform to what the other workers are doing. In the United States this

is especially important when it comes to food service workers like waiters and bartenders, as the minimum wage for these jobs is usually well below the national average, which leads these workers to heavily rely on tips for any reasonable amount of income. This puts Joanna in an almost polar opposite situation to Peter in terms of income, where Peter can rely on a salary to maintain his standard of living, whereas Joanna must rely on selling her labour (as well as her mannerisms and physical appearance) with every interaction she has with a customer. After this encounter with her manager, Joanna decides to express herself by flipping off her manager.

Finally, the character Milton (played by Stephen Root) is, although seen infrequently throughout the film, one of the more radical characters throughout the story. Though his shy demeanor appears to be innocent and meek at first, many of the lines mumbled throughout his scenes portray an avid desire for a better work environment. Whether it is his demand for larger slices of cake at the company birthday party or someone taking his prized red stapler, the many unsatisfactory experiences within the workplace (as well as the loss of his job entirely) causes him to spew constant threats under his breath of "setting the building on fire." This (spoilers) eventually comes to fruition, with the climax of the film showing the Initech building in ashes and Milton on a beach far away from the crime scene. Although the incident is played out for comedic effect, this action is far more extreme than any other action taken by any of the characters. While Peter and Joanna struggle and then subsequently rebel within their workplaces (with the results of these actions varying substantially), Milton's act of arson destroys the workplace that many of the characters felt oppressed by, thereby

freeing the workers from their oppression (as well as the illegal embezzlement attempted by Peter and co-workers Samir and Michael).

The feeling of satisfaction at the film's ending, however, can be seen as bittersweet. Though the characters Milton and Peter seem to be free from their alienation, it is unknown as to how the hundreds of others who worked in the same building were affected, and most likely had to face unemployment. This action, therefore, is not as revolutionary as one might interpret, and although Milton seem to be doing well, Peter is left working a construction job that, although at the film's end seems to satisfy him, will most likely alienate him as well. This is emblematic of Mark Fisher's concept of "capitalist realism", which in his book of the same name describes the fatalist notion of there being no alternative to the global late capitalism many of us find ourselves in. Even as we try to express our desires of rebellion and freedom in a myriad of ways, our atomised late capitalist culture has separated us so thoroughly that any kind of collective revolution seems too fantastical. This leaves us with one final query: what would a society in which all of these characters (from Peter to Milton, and yes, even Mr. Lumbergh) are fulfilled actually look like? To quote Slavoj Žižek: "It is easier to imagine the end of the world than the end of capitalism."

## CHOOSE YOUR OWN DAMN ADVENTURE

# YOU'RE THE STAR OF THE STORY!

BY RICHARD COOK

Every board game tells a story. Chess is about the clash of two armies. Cluedo is a murder mystery. Monopoly is about how capitalism will inevitably destroy everything you love. But, typically, these stories don't go much deeper than existing as an excuse for the mechanics. Hey, Battleship says, you're some kind of navy general. Your job is to destroy the opposing enemy by firing randomly into the ocean until you hit something, I guess. Then you're left to forget all that and focus on playing a nautical-themed deduction game.

As you play a game of Battleship, you're role-playing as that navy general only as far as the fact that you're obliged to utter the phrase "you sunk my battleship". Beyond that, there's no in-game storytelling. Who were these brave seamen? What were their lives like? What circumstances have required this bizarre arrangement for naval combat? Instead, the game just ends.

So, although every board game tells a story, not every game tells a very good one.

But, that's not universally true. Board games come in all manner of shapes and sizes, many of which make a valiant effort to tell a story of some sort. So, we'll look at some of the most popular approaches and see what kinds tend to be the most successful.

## EMERGENT STORYTELLING

Storytelling doesn't just mean having some plot dictated to you. It's sometimes best enjoyed as something that happens to you. An effective way to do that is to entirely remove any kind of artificial narrative framework.

So, instead of a big lore dump at the start of the manual, these games might say to you: here's a world and here are some rules - play! These games can be very effective indeed. Take Oath for example. In Oath, you assume roles within a kingdom - the chancellor, citizens, exiles, etc. - all vying for power. The gimmick is that the end state of the board after each session informs the way you'll set up the next one. So power structures persist across games, just like real history!

Oath certainly looks like a game trying to tell a particular story (look at those fox people!) But it's not. If you think it's significant that there are fox people in this world, that's on you. All Oath wants you to know is that there's a kingdom for you to play around with. The stories appear from playing the game and the unique combinations your group happens to experience.

"The Fox that ate salad to become the king" is a real title of a thread from the

BoardGameGeek forums about Oath. There's nothing in the rulebook about this. No author dreamt it up and wearily added it to a list of 100 predetermined event cards to flip over. This story just... emerged!

The downside of emergent storytelling in board games is that it takes a bit of work. You have to be up for it. Pandemic can be a game about a desperate group trying to save the world despite the odds stacked against them. Or, it can just be about playing efficiently to remove cubes from the board.

Sometimes, it just might not happen. Robinson Crusoe: Adventures on the Cursed Island from Portal Games (whose tagline is 'Games that tell stories') is a rich storytelling sandbox. You build a shelter, a storm tears it down, you go hunting for food, you find ancient treasure. These are all things that players can string together to tell their story. However, in some games, it may not be a cohesive tale. It might just be a bunch of random stuff that happened. Whilst emergent design can be a highly effective way to tell stories in games, it's not an assured one. It can end up being a bit of a roll of the dice (pun intended).

## SCRIPTED STORYTELLING

The polar opposite to emergent design is pre-scripted content. At its very extreme, this takes the form of literal storybook games - which might not even count as board games at all.

Legacy of Dragonholt is an example of this, playing more like a multiplayer choose-your-own-adventure story than a board game. The gameplay involves reading sections from a series of adventure books where the players can make decisions and perform ability checks. There's nothing emergent here, with every outcome printed in ink before you've even begun. It's hard not to feel a little dissatisfied with the result.

That's an extreme example and most board games that make heavy use of scripted elements don't go that far. This year's sleeper hit (pun once more, intended) *Sleeping Gods* seems to be onto a winning formula in this regard. The game has you managing a predetermined crew of characters sailing around mysterious waters, experiencing encounters read from a heavy book of events. The game is notable for

its open-world mechanics, rarely seen in board games, and the sheer number of things you can see and do. On paper, this sounds ideal. All the ingredients of a good story are there - a rich cast of characters, interesting locations and the promise of exciting things happening. The players have a sense of agency which means you're not entirely railroaded. Does it succeed? Meh.

Some of the stories *Sleeping Gods* tells are compelling, for sure. It has some clever tricks up its sleeve, but it's ultimately a series of vignettes. The game gives you the freedom to experience them in whatever order you choose, which means you're not guaranteed a well-told story. Stories need structure, after all. A defeat in the second act, a surprise twist in the third, that kind of thing. The best-written story in the world, but told out of order, just won't land right. That's what scripted games often lack. Too much scripting and you've got no agency, not enough, and the story feels random. You need peaks and troughs, but you also need to find those for yourself.

## CAMPAIGN GAMES

What if you could have a well-told story without sacrificing player freedom? This is what campaign games try to do. They are games that have players following some kind of overall narrative but offer choices within them.

Take *Gloomhaven*, for example. On the surface it's just a dungeon crawler with some interesting euro mechanics. But, between each section of hacking and slashing, there's just enough flavour text to form a narrative. A few paragraphs of exposition introduce each scenario and, between scenarios, you return to a central hub where more stories are told via random events. The storytelling in *Gloomhaven* isn't perfect by any means. The setting itself is generic beyond belief and the plot offers

nothing you won't have seen before. With that being said, it at least gives an appealing illusion of genuine storytelling. Your character, for instance, levels up by gaining XP before eventually 'retiring' once they've completed a personal objective. In reality, this mechanism just exists to keep the game at a reasonable power level and introduce new characters by using the language of a hero feeling fulfilled and deciding to settle down. Hey, that's neat!

*Gloomhaven* is one of a few games that you'll find on the Forteller app. Forteller is a very new company that provides audio narration for games attempting to be more narrative. Their *Gloomhaven* narration is solid, playing out like an audio drama. So, even if the

story isn't the strongest, it's at least well told.

Similar to *Gloomhaven* is the epic *Middara: Unintentional Malum*. Clocking in at over 100k words, *Middara's* accompanying storybook regales what happens to your characters between scenarios. Using the Forteller app, these breaks in gameplay can end up being more than half an hour in length. You're still technically playing a board game, yeah? Telling

stories in this way can work but it's hard not to feel a bit cheated. If you can walk away and put the kettle on whilst the storytelling happens, it's unlikely you're going to be that invested in it. By divorcing the story from the gameplay (rarely in a *Gloomhaven* dungeon do you stop to think about why you're doing the thing), you cheapen the impact of the storytelling. If only there was some way to keep players invested...

## LEGACY GAMES

Legacy games are a bit like campaign games, but you personalise them as you go. The first of its kind - *Risk: Legacy* - had you scribbling and stickering all over your game board and even, gasp (!), tearing up game cards. *Risk: Legacy* has no real story to speak of. Flavour text on some cards gave justification for whatever crazy change was happening to the game's mechanics, but that wasn't the point. *Risk: Legacy* was more about the story of YOUR group. Remember how Jon irradiated South America five games ago? Well, it's still an uninhabitable wasteland now. THANKS, JON. The game even invited players to sign the gameboard before the start of a campaign, pledging to take responsibility for the decisions they were about to make.

If that sounds a bit emergent, you're not wrong. The two do have similarities; even *Oath* has legacy mechanics. The following legacy games have tried, quite successfully, to introduce more storytelling mechanics.

*Betrayal: Legacy* takes the classic formula of *Betrayal at House on the Hill* and introduces legacy elements. What if you were exploring a haunted house that remembered? It does an excellent job of narratively framing why this house remains so haunted and why people just won't stop coming back to it.

The gold standard when it comes to storytelling legacy games is the *Pandemic Legacy* trilogy. Each game takes the classic clearing-cubes-off-a-board format of *Pandemic*,

subverts it somehow, and then uses legacy elements to make your game uniquely yours. It's hard to talk about too much without giving spoilers (imagine that, a board game with SPOILERS), but the *Pandemic Legacy* games offer a real sense of player choice and consequence. Sacrifice a city this game and it'll be gone in the next. Great job. That's on you.

In between games, you're given that narrative hit to keep players engaged with the story. You're forced to see the cubes as diseases, not just cubes, and you have a dual narrative: the high-level, slightly cheesy action thriller about a worldwide pandemic and the personal story of the things your team does to sort it, for better or for worse. This approach overcomes so many of the problems that others suffer from. It gets to be emergent, but not at the cost of inconsistency. You're guaranteed a good story no matter what you do and it's not forcing you to sit down and endure 45 minutes of exposition while you twiddle your thumbs.

In the future, we'll likely see board games experimenting with even more ways to tell stories. The rise of app-integrated board games like *Forgotten Waters* and *Mansions of Madness: Second Edition* suggest that some digital solutions might be the way forward.

But, the most exciting prospects will likely be in that magical space between giving players ultimate freedom to tell a story and invisibly pulling strings to make sure it's a good one.

# HOW BREATH OF THE WILD CHANGED MY LIFE

In  
2019

I was  
diagnosed  
with anxiety.

It doesn't seem  
like much when you  
write it down, but the  
complexity of my diagnosis  
caused ripples in my life I'm  
only now escaping from. Whilst  
everyone else was complaining about  
being stuck inside for a year during  
Covid, I was coming close to my second  
year, having been trapped inside with an inherent

fear  
of  
going  
anywhere or  
doing anything.

My doctor signed  
me off work for multiple  
months, citing a level of  
anxiety and depression so bad  
that she put me on medication  
before any other tests being done.

It was clear to everyone and anyone  
that I was in an exceedingly bad place.  
That first year trapped inside was tough.



I  
was  
alone  
almost 100%  
of the time, with  
my then partner  
working nights and  
only my one-eyed cat  
Lily for company. Now and  
again I'd fire off a few messages  
to my friends, maybe have a phone  
call, before once again collapsing under  
the weight of existence and hiding away.  
It was a consistent cycle of lying awake

WORDS  
BY JOEY PALMER

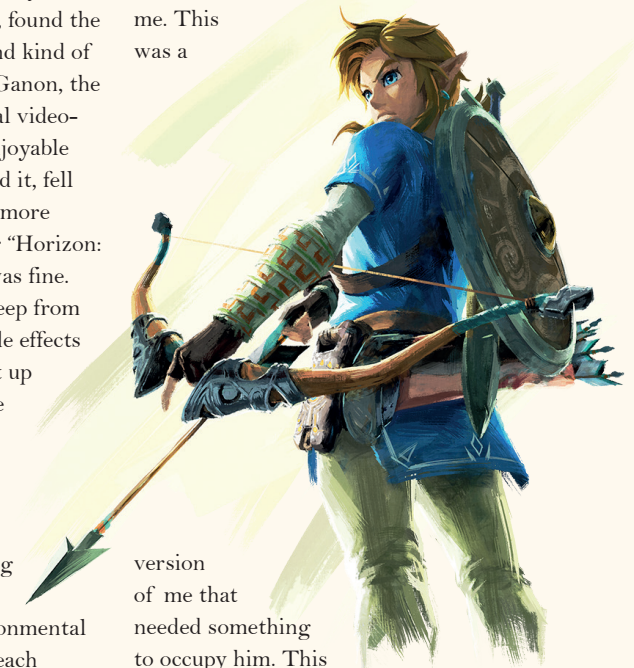
staring up at the ceiling at night before  
finally falling asleep at around 6am, only to  
do it all over again. That was until one night.  
The night I decided that I wasn't going to  
let this destroy me. Depressed and tired, I  
got out of bed, sat in front of the TV and  
started a journey - a journey into Breath of  
the Wild.

Here's some context: I love Zelda. I  
always have - in fact, ever since I was young I  
had an odd obsession that caused all my early  
email addresses to be embarrassingly named  
"zeldalover" variations. Zelda was a perfect  
amalgamation of all that seemed exciting  
and brilliant about fantasy: a singular  
warrior, a sacred sword, a massive journey,  
exciting temples and tombs, exploring new  
environments and fighting massive bosses.  
When Breath of the Wild landed on my  
switch in 2017 I found myself enjoying it,  
but also not exactly being \*blown away\*. I  
ran through the lush environments, found the  
Master Sword and Hylian Shield and kind of  
just powered through to Calamity Ganon, the  
games "big bad". It felt like a normal video-  
gaming experience: a disposable, enjoyable  
action game that, after I'd completed it, fell  
to the back of my mind as I played more  
exciting titles like "God of War" or "Horizon:  
Zero Dawn". Breath of the Wild was fine.

But that night, wiping away sleep from  
my eyes and half sick due to the side effects  
of 100mgs of sertraline, I loaded it up  
with a goal: get everything. Anyone  
who's played Breath of the Wild  
will know that task is horrifying.  
There are 120 shrines in Breath of  
the Wild which act as mini-puzzle  
dungeons with rewards after besting  
the complex interiors or solving  
some difficult to comprehend environmental  
riddle. These are fun and exciting, each  
more devilish than the last and each one

challenging you in new, exciting ways.  
That, however, is not "everything". To get  
"everything", to complete the game 100%,  
you must collect Korok Seeds - hidden seeds  
given to you by little plant creatures to  
help upgrade your inventory. They're not  
difficult to collect: each stands as a minute  
long puzzle at max to uncover within the  
overworld, often including something simple  
like "put the box in the whole" or "shoot the  
balloon". The thing is, there's a lot of them.  
And by a lot, I mean 900. Nine. Hundred.

The usual me - the me who's typing this  
after having finished Resident Evil Village  
for the fifth time to collect all the weapons  
and only spending 40 hours on it - would've  
immediately switched off Breath of the Wild  
after hearing the number "900" before placing  
the cartridge amongst a pile of uncompleted  
games. But, this wasn't the usual me. This  
was depressed  
me. This  
was a



version  
of me that  
needed something  
to occupy him. This  
was a version of me so

desperate for a consistent, repetitive task that the idea of doing very small, dull puzzles before checking them off a map was, in fact, ideal. And so, my adventure began.

Like always, *Breath of the Wild* took me from my opening shrine across into the mountains, through a city built upon a lake, up into the depths of fire infested mountains and lava-spurting volcanoes, across to icy cold regions with flying birds and deep snow and finally into the depths of the harsh, uncaring desert, through sand-storms and into the caverns of an evil tribe. This journey is fun, but it stood as the first time I went through the map for *Breath of the Wild*. The first time is great - it's exciting and you uncover the mysteries of a barren wasteland and feel like a true explorer. Unfortunately, to get 900 Korok seeds, you'll need to do more than one trip. In fact, you'll need to do at least 5 or 6 trips around the map for a perfect casual run.

### I did 37 trips.

37 times I crossed the flaming ridges of Death Mountain and fell into the Hebra cold. 37 times I marched across the mountains and into the desert. 37 times I trudged through the dense forests and avoided bolts of lightning that'd make *Final Fantasy X* blush. 37 times I repeated the same tracks, covered the same ground, did the same thing. But I didn't complain - not once. In fact, I barely spoke. Suddenly, when I was hungry, I was eating. I chomped on toast whilst planning out my next route to capture as many of these Korok seeds as humanly possible. I made meals whilst listening to YouTube videos explaining the best way to do certain nasty time-based seeds.

And, for the first time since my

depression began, I fell asleep at a reasonable time and awoke excited.

I never completed my task. Later on, post-depression and now stuck in a quite comfortable lockdown with my parents, I finished off the last seeds and patted myself on the back. In the end, *Breath of the Wild* simply kept me going until finally, after collecting around 800, I felt satisfied and accomplished. I put the game down and went outside. Properly this time, too. I explored, went for long walks, saw friends, started to return to work, started to feel human. At this point, I didn't understand what *Breath of the Wild* had done to me - but now I do. *Breath of the Wild* had acted as my friend on the long nights where the anxiety crept in. It took my mind off of things, making it so the anxiety couldn't slip past the impenetrable barrier of curiosity for the next hidden nugget of content within the depths of Hyrule. It kept me entertained and focused, allowing me to expend energy whilst not testing the limits of my own emotions. It let me sleep.

When you load up *Breath of the Wild*, there's a moment when Link runs across to the edge of a cliff and looks upon Hyrule for the first time. It's an awe-inspiring moment that is built to say to the player "Look at what you have ahead of you." But, that's not what it says to me. When I see that opening, all I can imagine is the game opening its doors and saying: "Welcome back, old friend."

# ACTION IS ENOUGH

ZACH WEBSTER

**R**ECENTLY, I watched Leigh Whannell's *Upgrade*. It's a very simple revenge story: man's wife is killed, man becomes borderline superhuman and kills his way to the perpetrators. Simple? Yes. Satisfying? Well... *yeah*, of course. The story takes a major backseat; *Upgrade* knows what it is and it isn't a mind-bending experience trying to make you think. This awareness allows it to lean into the more rambunctious aspects of the film: everything is neon-drenched, the camera follows his hands as he punches, it does the cool swoosh thing as the AI allows his body to rise up from the floor like *Dracula* from his coffin. It just looks cool. *And I think that's enough*. This story has very little to say in the grand scheme of things, besides a fairly hokey message about taking technology too far. Instead it offers a far more visceral experience in terms of well choreographed and shot action scenes that put you right in it, that are made to make your blood pump fast and your face wince faster. We're very familiar with films with very little to say; they're called blockbusters, but I would argue you don't get the same honest reaction from the big Hollywood tentpoles. I know films aren't real, but the artifice of the average *Fast & Furious* or

Marvel affair just doesn't hit the same as your smaller or more practical based action film. There's generally a much heavier reliance on CGI, and what is practical is usually so spectacular that your eyes can fill in the gaps where the strings in the air and the mat on the floor would be. Usually we complain about the veneer coming off, but in this case it just puts another barrier between you and what's happening on the screen. When making something, not necessarily smaller in scale (see *Mission: Impossible* franchise), but more practically minded. That's when some real movie magic happens. A greater focus is put upon how the stunt is going to be pulled off on-set. I'm reluctant to call it craft or a higher standard of filmmaking. Computer generated special effects are is craft in itself. However, I would be remiss to not say in my experience the more real it is, the more real it feels. To way oversimplify the filmmaking process it feels like the due amount of prep has gone into everything on screen, not that it was shot in front a green blanket to figure out later. It draws you in because it's two people really fighting within a real space. You can see in *Deadpool 2* how much more was done live, and personally I remember far more of the action sequences compared to the first. With a smaller budget

we root for our little movies that could. I'm no film historian but the release of John Wick and The Raid 2 in 2014 seemed to give a real renaissance to smaller-in-scope action movies with more emphasis on stunt-work, leading to the success of films such as Atomic Blonde, The Equalizer (both) and, arguably, Baby Driver. Plainly: the story, and any message it's trying to convey, can take a back seat if the character feels like they're in danger from a tangible threat. Instead of everything feeling bouncy and indestructible when their 3D model takes the reins. Message and/or emotion driven stories are good. I'm not here to bash those films, in fact, I love them. Story is a journey but in these films that journey is often action scenes with just enough thread in-between to sow them together. It's not The Bayeux Tapestry, like (IMDBs top-rated) Shawshank Redemption could be considered. Something like Extraction is a hand-knitted patchwork blanket, its structure is solid and each patch is lovely to look at even if the thread inbetween is simple and obvious. I know I'm not the first to argue practical effects are better and I'm hardly chanting the cries of a quiet crowd. On the other hand there's people (snobs) that upon seeing films that aim to get honest reactions to well-made action/gore etc. over having a clear resonant story, claim them to be a waste of time. Yes, you have the right to argue that you do not agree with the simplicity or message of a film. I put my foot down when it is argued the simplicity or message of a film make them of no worth. I thought everybody liked Taken. A friend (snob) told me that it was ludicrous and gave a bad message that females should just endure torture until a man can save them. "Fine" I say, "A valid reading" I say. "But you can't deny that the action scenes are \*chefs kiss\*" I say, and gesture. I was then told that

the message was so egregious that they didn't really see any warrant to appreciate any part of the film. Tenet got a real pounding on release by some because the characters are 2-dimensional and the dialogue is corny, I've heard people say it's the worst film they've ever seen. They did fully practical, high speed action scenes backwards! *The worst film they've ever seen.* I consider it a real shame that when a film manages to give you that instinct reaction from your spine to your face to wince, look away or jump up in excitement it isn't appreciated to the same degree. Yes I love to have my heart ripped out, swell with joy and be challenged by difficult narratives. But there's still a place in cinema for you to go in and let the stimuli bypass your brain, leave the world behind and just let yourself feel the pain and fear as the characters engage in action. Survive with them, fight with them, cringe at pain with them. These kinds of scenes are just as difficult to make, to really make you feel that punch connect or that rush of adrenaline from a risky motorcycle manoeuvre. Everything has to align to make it real in the real world before it is shot and presented on a 2D-plane. Stunts, choreography, action vehicles, special effects, visual effects, foley, camera. They all have to sing off the same hymn sheet to make it convincing, and it only takes one to be a little off key to lose the tune. They're easier to nitpick because it's right there in front your eyes. If it looks fake it looks fake you can register that. You're not searching within to find some way to relate. On the flip side if it's done perfectly you don't immediately register anything, it's just lived. Making it harder to see when it's done faultlessly. There's a lack of sight from the viewer to see the intention of the filmmakers, some just intent to make thrilling action sequences, and that doesn't make it of any less worth when done right.

A GRUESOME START TO A GRUESOME ADVENTURE

# TWEEN TWO MASSACRES

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**N**IE R: AUTOMATA has a lot more to say about what it means to be human than any video game that insists on repeatedly upskirting its female protagonist has any right to. Yoko Taro, the game's writer and director, has created an allegory that is deeply concerned with humanity, existence, and how we find meaning in a meaningless world.

Set on Earth in the far-future wasteland of 11945, during the 14th Machine War, humans have long since fled to the Moon amidst an alien invasion, and human-made androids fight alien-made machines in a seemingly endless battle for control of the planet. The highly advanced androids of the military organisation known as the YoRHa, with their big swords and Gothic Lolita sense of fashion (but make it fetish), are built in humanity's image. In stark contrast, the machines are clunky rust buckets. Yet both entities are haunted by the ghosts of human civilisation; whether it be in the literal rallying cry of the YoRHa, "For the Glory of Mankind!" or the means to solving the problem of existential dread that machine lifeforms are plagued by in their evolving consciousness.

In the game's opening gambit, protagonist 2B, a battle unit, monologues: "Everything that lives is designed to end. We are perpetually trapped in a never ending spiral of life and death. Is this a curse? Or some kind of punishment? I often think about the God who blessed us with this cryptic puzzle and wonder if we'll ever have the chance to kill him." A glimpse into the viewpoint of a stoic soldier, who, within the first hour

of gameplay, kills herself in a nuclear suicide pact with her companion scanner unit, 9S. It is here that we learn death is inconsequential, as 2B and 9S' memories are uploaded to new bodies in The Bunker, a satellite base orbiting Earth.

Respawning in video games is not an unusual concept. But NieR: Automata questions the very meaning and purpose of living through these creations that are not built to, and therefore do not have to, experience death, the one true inevitability of being human. It calls on philosophy and theology, as it confronts the central theme of the story: is everything pointless?

A STORY THAT CAN ONLY BE TOLD BY A VIDEO GAME

Yoko Taro is an auteur in the purest sense. A creator with a distinct vision, rarely appearing in public without his Emil mask (a character from the NieR series), he is known for his non-linear stories and backwards script-writing, a process which he describes at length in his presentation on Making Weird Games for Weird People\*. His goal is to elicit a strong emotional response from the player, and "create an emotional store in their brain".

When Square Enix greenlit the production of NieR: Automata, a big budget sci-fi sequel to the PS3 game NieR: Replicant, itself a spin-off of the original Drakengard series, Taro set about using every tool in his arsenal to toy with, and subvert, the expectations of his audience.

Different mechanics are used throughout the main story and side

quests, from third person hack-and-slash, to top-down twin-stick shooter, to side-scrolling platformer. There's even a couple of text adventures.

When the credits first roll, you're encouraged to play again. But this ain't your mama's New Game Plus. In fact, you have merely finished route A; the true ending of the game reveals itself after routes B-E. Routes F-Z make up the remaining alternate endings. The perspective changes from one playthrough to the next, with the world becoming so fundamentally different in Route C, you'd be forgiven for feeling whiplashed. The three playable characters are 2B, 9S, and antagonist attacker unit, A2. Each character utilises different combat mechanics, and each playthrough unearths fresh exposition. Machine lifeforms once considered enemies grow increasingly sympathetic.

It may be a small map to explore as far as open-world RPGs go, but the abundance of character-driven plot and side-plot as told through the quest-givers reveal members of the android resistance abandoning their posts, falling in love, and getting high on synthetic stimulants, while machine lifeforms are forming small pockets of civilisation and imitating the social behaviour of the people they learn about through the vast databases they hold filled with human records. All are tired of fighting in a forever proxy war.

FINDING MEANING IN A MEANINGLESS WORLD

One of the first quests you complete is

given by an android who can't leave his post in the Resistance Camp due to a broken leg. As you find and deliver the parts, you learn that he doesn't intend to actually fix the broken leg. Over many years, he has replaced every part of himself, except for this broken leg. He asks you if he replaces the only remaining piece of his original body, is he still the same android he once was, or does he become something new? It is a clear adaptation of the identity thought experiment, The Ship of Theseus.

Classical philosophy is a recurring motif that is introduced as early as the first boss, Engels. In a not-so-subtle reference to the German socialist philosopher Friedrich Engels, the closest collaborator of Karl Marx in the foundation of modern communism, Engels is literally a walking factory, churning out small bi-pedal stubby machines connected as one in a vast machine network, when not attempting to smash you to bits and pieces.

Every named machine is a reference to philosophers whose belief systems are





# Simone

concerned with existence and identity. From Ernst who once presided over the Forest Kingdom, a nod to Ernst Bloch known for *The Principle of Hope*, a book about utopianism, to Immanuel, the reborn King of the Forest Kingdom, representing Immanuel Kant, considered one of the foremost figures in the Enlightenment of modern philosophy. There is a cruel irony to this influential figurehead on morality being stuck as an egg child. Friedrich Nietzsche, Confucius, even Laozi, founder of Taoism, all your favourites can be found in *NieR: Automata*.

Some stand out as more affecting subversions of the philosophies they subscribe to than others though. Take Simone, the second boss of the game. Her heartbreaking backstory isn't revealed until the second playthrough, and boy is it a gutpunch. The real life Simone de Beauvoir was a French philosopher whose works focused on existential feminism and feminist theory, famous for saying "One is not born, but rather becomes, a woman." She believed that women and men perform their gender, and none more clearly than Simone in *NieR: Automata*. She is desperate to be seen and validated by the male machine she has fallen in love with, Jean-Paul Satre (surprise, also a philosopher, who was in a polyamorous relationship with Simone de Beauvoir, though he was known to be jealous of her other suitors). She paints herself, modifies herself, wears elaborate dresses that she makes for herself, even sings to attract him, but he does not care.

Beauvoir translates to beautiful to see. During combat with Simone, she cries at you, at anyone, to look at her. "I gaze into

the mirror. In its reflection, I see only my own meaninglessness, and so I scream." But the design of the scene prevents you from doing so. As you run around the arena to avoid her attacks, you cannot shift the viewpoint to face her. It's subtle and impactful.

Arguably the most empathetic character in the game, whose story arc made me weep, is the leader of a community of pacifist machines, named Pascal. Upon entering Pascal's Village, you are confronted with numerous machines waving white flags, the nonsense chattering of child machines can be heard over the twee music that scores the scene. It may even be the first time you find yourself questioning if they are actually the mechanical monsters the YoRHa claim them to be. Pascal is passionate about learning as much as possible about the human ways, and dedicated to leading a non-violent life.

His human namesake, Blaise Pascal, was a mathematician and religious philosopher, known for Pascal's Wager. In *Pascal's Wager*, he argues that it is impossible to prove or disprove the existence of God, and so rational people should live as though God exists. The wager supposes that if God exists, a believer will earn infinite payoffs (Heaven) in death for the sake of mild inconveniences in life, whereas a non-believer will experience infinite loss (Hell). It's an argument rooted in fear, particularly fear of punishment in the afterlife. Machine Pascal uses the concept of fear to teach his younger followers to live virtuously; unfortunately, this fear poisons them, with catastrophic consequences.

Søren Kierkegaard was another philosopher and theologian, widely

considered to be the first existentialist, whose work focused on the ethics of the religious institutions he was fiercely critical of and the individual's subjective relationship with God. He believed the only way to escape the anguish of living was to take a leap of faith into, well, faith. When you discover the last colony in the Abandoned Factory, you learn they are a fundamentalist group of machines led by a Pope-like figurehead named Kierkegaard, who are about to transcend and "become as God". And since machines cannot die naturally, they take their own leap of faith, into the molten furnaces from which they were forged. The last in a tragic series of subversions in the machines' search for meaning.

#### ■ IS IT ALL POINTLESS?

For a game so obsessed with humanity, humans are spuriously absent. At some point in Route A, you learn that after invading Earth, the machines rose up and fought back against their alien overlords. Without direction, they assimilate the land that nature has taken back, and attempt to recreate humanity. It's a doomed endeavour, not only because they cannot procreate or physically grow or naturally evolve, but because humanity itself is doomed.

Or was doomed, in the case of Nier. Unbeknownst to the androids who have spent millennia fighting "For the Glory of Mankind!", humanity is long extinct. Only the highest commanders in the YoRHa know, and they maintain the lie as "we need a God worth fighting for." The opening gambit becomes a genius act of misdirection. For 2B, killing God won't set her free, as her God is already dead.

"We were created to fight. To eliminate others and reside at the pinnacle of existence. Yet the battle rages eternal. Our cursed cycle of destruction and rebirth continues without end. None of us in this world are loved. This world has no need for us. There is only one solution..."  
- Random Machine

It's incredibly nihilistic. Or is it?

The final sequence hits during the end credits - the real end credits! As you play through an increasingly tough arcade-type shooter, 2B and 9S' Pods ask you a series of cynical questions, culminating in the suggestion you simply give up. In the background though, you see real messages from real players around the world, encouraging you to keep going. Inspired by Coca Cola's Small World marketing campaign, whereby live communication portals were planted throughout India and Pakistan, providing a means for Indians and Pakistanis to engage across borders, if you accept the help of those that completed the game before you, you easily defeat the credits. And are presented with making the ultimate sacrifice in the name of empathy: delete your save to help the next person going through the same struggle.

Yoko Taro is an artist and a troll. And he doesn't think much of humanity, that much is clear. But given the number of people who helped me get through the credits, I want to believe the message of NieR: Automata isn't one of abject hopelessness. The struggle to find meaning in a meaningless existence is a universal truth, but we can still find it in a simple act of kindness.

# A BRIEF HISTORY OF SOYUZ MULT FILM

OLEKSANDR  
DEREVIANCHENKO

**5** YEARS AGO Soyuzmultfilm celebrated its 80th anniversary! The studio released over one thousand quality-made cartoons for children and their parents. Artworks which taught kindness and love to children and the elderly. Although the life and struggles of the number one competitor to Disney were hard and unbearable, they gave us memories we won't forget.

Soyuzmultfilm was founded by the order of Joseph Stalin. Soviet elites looked up to the Disney experience and understood the

power of moving pictures.

The studio was located in the Orthodox church of St. Nikolas, which was closed by the Soviet government due to their anti-religion policy.

With the help of communists, the best of the best were recruited to Soyuzmultfilm to produce and sell cartoons overseas. Cartoonists, artists and screenwriters had privileges everybody could dream of. Even censorship didn't intervene in their humble and professional work.

Soyuzmultfilm became a counter-attack to Disney; their technology, such as the production conveyor belt, was taken as the basis for the creation of cartoons.

Soviet animators have admitted that they trained according to American manuals, so not only the technology was copied, but their style too.

The first cartoon "It's Hot In Africa" was made in the style of Disney. The plot revolved around African animals who wanted ice cream to cool down. The cartoon was black and white. Only a year later, the studio began producing cartoons in colour.

In the first year of production, animators chose animals as the main characters. Artworks were published in collaboration with Soviet writers and poets.

## War Propaganda

On the morning of June 22, 1941, The Great Patriotic War [*Editor's Note: this term is used mainly by former republics of the Soviet Union to refer to the conflict between Russia and Nazi Germany during World War II*] shook the Soviet Union. The Soviet Union was so desperate that they sent large numbers of people to the war - including Soyuzmultfilm cartoonists. Only royal and important ones were evacuated to Samarkand - a city in

Uzbekistan, a relatively safe place. Only a few stayed to continue their work but under the new management.

During the war, Soyuzmultfilm produced propaganda against the Nazi regime. One of the best examples is "The Vultures". It showed dark vultures wearing helmets with swastika symbols and later transforming into the bombers that bombarded the USSR. Out of nowhere, white attack planes flew up and destroyed the vultures. This short cartoon, in the end, featured the message: "*Death to the fascist vultures!*"

Another cartoon, "One Of The Many", tells the story of a woman who selfishly wastes a lot of electricity. Imaginary heroes, such as Lamp-boy and Posterman, try to convince her to turn off the lights when she goes out to work. She doesn't listen, leading the heroes to cut off power of the whole kommunalka [*communal apartments*] so they can redirect it to a munitions factory. The cartoon's motto was "*Want to multiply the production of ammo? Save energy!*"

## Soviet Anti-Imperialism Cartoons

During WW2, many animation studios didn't hesitate to use propaganda cartoons to support their ideologies. Soyuzmultfilm wasn't an exception. For communism to prosper, the highest power used propaganda to support communism.

Once Nazis were out of the picture, the USSR needed to fight America. The best example of pro-communism propaganda was "Black and White". The cartoon shows the cruel treatment of Black workers in the American South. It shows chained Black Americans working the fields, sitting behind bars, and even facing executions at the hands of the White man. The cartoon ends with a view of the Lenin mausoleum and the appeal:

*"Workers of all countries, unite!"*

Another cartoon was titled "African Fairy Tale". It shows "African" people living on their native land when the White Elephant appears with smooth words. The Elephant treats the people with Marlboro cigarettes and glossy magazines to read.

While the people are reading and smoking, the Elephant unceremoniously devours everything he can and takes over the people's homes. To evict the "Africans", Mr Elephant appeals to the court of "animals".

The court finds the people guilty of "savagery", but they are nonetheless allowed to build new homes. Every time they build a house, it is occupied by other animals. Ultimately, a fight breaks out and once the people and the animals find themselves inside the house together, the people set it on fire, and the animals flee in panic.

## The Golden Age

The main task in the post-war years was not only to restore the normal rate of production but also to abandon the so-called "Disneyism". The studio's new course was aimed at developing its own unique Soviet art style.

The 60s of Brezhnev rule brought great changes to Soyuzmultfilm. The animators called this period "satirical". Fairy tales became not the only option. Management started to animate cartoons based on real-life events. The next decade was the most fruitful for the studio - 368 films were released.

In the 70s Soyuzmultfilm was considered the largest studio in Europe. It employed about 500 people and won over 150 awards. In addition to the recognized masters, the studio allowed young talents to express themselves - many of them made their debut in the animation anthology "Merry Carousel".

## The Glorious Legacy After Soyuzmultfilm

I always encourage my foreign friends to look up Soviet cartoons like Croco Gennadiy and Cheburashka. In 1969, the screen version was released, which became the most famous puppet picture of Soviet animation.

Initially, the main character was supposed to be a crocodile. However, Cheburashka took his place. Its creator, Eduard Uspensky, described it as an "animal unknown to science."

In the mid-70s, Cheburashka went outside the USSR. In Sweden, the children's show "Drutten och Gena" started on television with Cheburashka and Gena in the lead roles. The Swedes used puppets and came up with a new biography for the heroes.

But real international fame came in the early 2000s: Japan bought the rights from Soyuzmultfilm and six years later launched its anime series "Cheburashka Arere?"

It is noteworthy that in the 21st century the popularity of Cheburashka has not decreased at all. The hero became the Olympic mascot of the Russian national team. Several Russian cities have built a monument of the character, and Cheburashka has become a symbol for Soyuzmultfilm as well.

There is another gem - "Well, wait!". It features the wolf and the hare though, at first, pairs like "fox-rooster" and "fox-hare" were considered too. The cartoon was conceived as a response to "Tom & Jerry".

Young Soviet comedians were invited to work on it. They were given the task of doing something... *entertaining*.

The problems began when one of the creators emigrated to Israel and work was delayed. The cartoon was returned to the screens by Anatoly Papanov - the actor who

voiced the wolf.

The chairman of the Presidium of the Supreme Soviet of the USSR, Nikolai Podgorny, asked Papanov for an update on "Well, wait!". Papanov honestly answered that there was a conflict at the studio.

"One guy emigrated."

"Well, everyone else stayed!", said Podgorny.

Podgorny confessed his sympathy for the cartoon. Soyuzmultfilm later resumed work on it.

## But what for now?

Today, with the support of the Ministry of Culture, the studio functions again. The new management paid off its debts, reorganized it and resumed filmmaking, releasing new cartoons. The studio plans to release educational films and author's projects, and someday again to reach those unprecedented proportions when whole generations grew up on good cartoons.

Grandpa "Soyuzmultfilm" is old, but does not give up and looks to a bright future with hope.

# solo board games & me

words  
adam richards

art  
megan dobbyn

**W**HEN THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC HIT, life as we know it suffered seismic disruption. Schools, business, retail — everything changed. Anyone who is part of a hobby or club really felt the impact too, as meeting up with other humans was suddenly a big no-no. What then, for board gamers? People whose hobby revolves around games and interactions with other people, pushing pieces of wood and plastic back-and-forth across a table. Some temporarily hung up their dice towers, not content to make do. Others flocked to online games via offerings such as Tabletop Simulator, Board Game Arena, and Tabletopia. But for a lot of people—yours truly included—it steered us in another direction: solo board gaming.

Those three words on their own—“solo board gaming”—seem pretty paradoxical to some. The concept of taking a hobby that relies on people around a table and doing it on your own. How do you even do it? When I’ve told friends that I play these games on my own, their faces speak volumes. They look like I’ve just tried to explain why I think it’s

a good idea to add smoked fish to a jam sandwich.

The most common response I heard was “Why not just play a video game?”, and in fairness, it’s a good question. There are thousands of video games out there designed to be played by yourself, so, why bother playing a board game alone?

## The Security Blanket

I’ve had an on-off relationship with depression during my forty-something years. I’m lucky that I can spot the warning signs now, but for a lot of people, the mental health issues that lockdown brought with it were something new to contend with. Board games are really important to a lot of people, and losing that piece of recreation, the social interactions, and the simple joy that a game can give them, was a huge blow. There’s a lot to be said for the comfort that familiarity brings to people. For example, if I’m poorly, I’ll always watch the same three or four films that make me feel comforted. Familiarity makes us feel safe.



The physical interaction with a board game is such a tangible thing. Choosing a box on the shelf, sliding the lid off, and pulling out the baggies and boards. These simple actions can trigger almost Pavlovian responses in our brains. It puts you in that happy place, your worries and anxieties get shunted to the background to make room for wooden meeples on a cardboard landscape. Tackling depression (in my own experience) is about breaking cycles of thought. Playing a familiar game for a couple of hours can offer precious respite from your own brain, and sometimes that's all you need.



### Keeping Focus

I should mention that I'm not against playing video games. Far from it, I've played games almost daily for the last forty years. But when it comes to playing video games, my attention span is terrible. I'll play quick-fix games like Rocket League, where I can play for ten minutes and walk away, or longer adventure games that end up in the tens of hours. The problem is there's always something else on the periphery of my thoughts when I'm at the computer. Another screen showing me something to grab my attention, another of my backlog of hundreds of unplayed games to tempt me, calling me onto the rocks of distraction like digital Sirens.

If I take the time to clear the table, choose a game from my shelves, and set it up, then I've made a commitment. I'm invested. For the next couple of hours, the only thing that matters is the game developing in front of me. It has a start, and it has an end, and for some reason there are so few video games that fill that same space for me. Games that I can start



and then play to completion in a two-hour timeframe, games where I dictate the speed and flow of events. In those couple of hours, all I think about is my next move, my strategy, how I'm going to get those next few pieces of wood I need to build that house. As I mentioned above, that interruption to your own internal monologue is priceless sometimes.

### Let's Get Physical

I'm going to use that word again: tangible. There's something special about the physical components when it comes to playing board games, and it's not something I can easily explain. There's a very personal connection that comes from laying the board, the cards, and the components out. It's a similar story when it comes to actually playing the game. If I want to shuffle a deck of cards in Tabletop Simulator, I hover my pointer over it and press R on my keyboard. Guaranteed random shuffles in a fraction of a second. But picking the cards up and performing those shuffles—it's engaging and tactile. It might take hundreds of times longer to do, but that doesn't matter.



I defy anyone to not feel satisfaction when you place cubes into socketed double-layer player boards, or to play with your resource cubes, stack your meeples, or make neat little piles of currency. All of these superfluous actions add nothing to the game, but the experience of playing that game is fundamentally altered. Even drawing the box down off the shelf, to me, adds an amount of excitement and anticipation before I've got anywhere near the game. That's a feeling I could never replicate by sitting at my computer and clicking Start on a game in Steam.

Is it worth it?



All of this gushing over what a wonderful thing it is, to manhandle a board game, is all well and good, but let's talk about the most important thing. What is it like to play a board game by yourself? It's not an easy question to answer, because it varies from game to game. The majority of games with a solo option use one of two methods to play. Some challenge you to beat your own best scores, with the mechanisms of the game remaining unchanged. My favourite way to play, however, is against an automa, or AI opponent.



To the uninitiated, the idea of an AI opponent—the equivalent of a CPU player in a video game—seems preposterous in a board game. How can a deck of cards make intelligent decisions? Surely it's just random chance! The truth, however, is often an experience which is streamlined and built on probability and simple decision hierarchies. What that means to you and I, is that you can easily mimic the experience of competing against another player, while you're on your own.

The biggest problem with playing solo, and it's one that's insurmountable to some people, is still missing the human interaction. You aren't laughing and joking, you're not suspiciously eyeing-up your neighbour, and you're not freaking-out because someone's eating a bag of cheese Doritos at the table. But you're still playing a game you love, or a new game that you're learning, and you can still engage with like-minded people online and feel like you're a part of a connected community.

### Saving Throws

It's no exaggeration to say that board games have been instrumental in keeping my mental health in check over the last year or so. Although I'm not conscious of it at the time, when I finish playing a game, even a heavy euro game, I suddenly become aware of having not worried for the duration. That break from myself is like a miniature holiday. But playing games solo isn't just about fighting depression, it's about having fun, and playing games solo is fun. It's not for everyone, I understand that, but it's a far better option than you might imagine.

Video games have their place, and I continue to play them far more than I probably ought to. It's just that now there's another option for my recreation. The quiet peace of an evening sitting at a table with the noise of the day gone, and without a screen straining my eyes, is wonderful. Passive entertainment doesn't fill the same gap for me, so reading a book or watching TV does very little to hold my attention.

Maybe playing solo board games will be a hit for you, and maybe it won't. Realising it's a viable option though, and one which more and more people are choosing, is the first step.



If you're looking for ideas of games that you can play by yourself, I've tagged up every solo-compatible game I've reviewed, and you can browse through them by heading here:

[www.punchboard.co.uk/tag/solo](http://www.punchboard.co.uk/tag/solo)



# Playing Hades or— what it's like to sit with inadequacy

**Words**  
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**Art**  
Heidi Ostell



**I** KNEW I HAD A PROBLEM when I left my house to buy a controller. After a couple of eight hour days, my hands were cramping from using the joy-con controller contraption that came with my Nintendo Switch, which I got for Christmas only a week earlier. I called my brother—a life-long gamer—who I knew could help me with my problem. He answered the phone, incredulous, as he expected me to say I was playing Animal Crossing or Breath of the Wild, something more my speed. No, I decided to play Supergiant Games's Hades, a rogue-like featuring Greek mythology.

**“Have you ever  
played a rogue-like?”**

**“Are you even any good?”**

**“No,” I said.**

**“On both counts.”**

I had heard about Hades on the podcast Same Day Shipping, a month or so earlier when one of the hosts talked about the intense chemistry and budding relationship between two of the major characters. Then, I watched someone on Twitch play the game for all of 10-minutes. Intrigued by the artwork and Greek mythology storyline, I bought it as soon as I got my Switch. I didn't know what kind of game it was. Based on my limited information, I anticipated a dating/life simulation with some fighting mixed in here or there. I had played Legend of Zelda: A Link Between Worlds a few years earlier and did okay, despite my lacking combat skills. I can muddle my way through Super Smash Bros—never a winner, but definitely a contender. I thought it would be fine, that Hades

would be easy for me to learn.

When Zagreus—the playable character—dies somewhere in the realm of Hades, he finds himself walking out of a pool of blood into the House of Hades, where his father (Hades) barely acknowledges his son's fleeting attempts to escape. Zagreus also finds a host of Chthonic gods who hope to aid and assist him on his journey to the surface. Before each escape attempt, Zagreus chooses a weapon and heads out, fighting his way through chambers, hoping to reach the outside world. When he dies and finds himself back home, he can permanently upgrade his weapons and make himself stronger. The problem was, even when I died and came back, I barely grew stronger. My first two days of playing were full of near constant death and respawns

## Now approaching Olympus

due to my ineptitude at figuring out what the hell I was supposed to be doing or how I was supposed to get out of Hades.

Despite my continuous failures, I kept playing. I found myself enraptured by the artwork and intrigued by the ever-developing storyline. Generally, when I realized I was terrible at something, I'd just quit. I hate being bad at things, and often find it a waste of time to keep trying. I've never seen myself as a quitter. In fact, I'm rather persistent—when I know that persistence will allow me to get what I'm after. Hades and most other games, though, lack any external reward or praise. The only thing I'm getting if I do well is my own enjoyment, which sometimes isn't enough for me. My lifelong tenacity has measured success in awards, publications, and awe. Even the video games I played prior to Hades were chosen for very specific reasons—I knew I could succeed, or rather, there was no way to be bad at the game. I don't win or lose at The Sims. I just play. Hades kickstarted in me a need to succeed regardless of external factors. My only motivations to keep playing were that I spent \$30 of my limited game money on Hades and I really wanted Zagreus to romance Thanatos.



WHEN I STARTED PLAYING HADES, I was at a personal low. Perceived failures after failures compounded on each

other until I believed that everything I had worked for my entire life suddenly didn't matter. Even though I completed a Master's degree with flying colors and showed promise in becoming a full-time climate communicator, I was unable to find a job upon graduating at the beginning of the pandemic. In need of money and health insurance (thanks America!), I turned to teaching seventh grade reading at a public school in my area. I hated it, despite receiving praise from administration and fellow educators. My apartment was my least favorite place on the planet, outfitted with a revolving cast of problems that the property managers could not or would not fix. My grandmother—the person in my life who I was closest to—had passed away just five days before Christmas. COVID cases were rising in the Southern state where I lived. I had no reprieve.

Alone in a shitty apartment after the holidays with a week left before I had to be back in the classroom, I set up my Switch and started the game. Normally when I feel this down, I turn to re-reading old favorites like the Percy Jackson series or marathoning trashy movies to keep my mind off of the creeping depression in the back of my mind. At the time, those two activities were not active enough. They didn't require enough of my attention. Hades required everything I had. So, I learned to be okay with being bad. I'd read online about how other players beat the final boss for the first time on their

30th attempt. On my 30th attempt, I was lucky to get past Megaera, the boss of Tartarus, with whom Zagreus seemed to have a complicated relationship. I forwent my button-mashing haze for careful attempts to understand what the buttons did and how. Back at the House of Hades, I built up my relationships with the other characters, strengthened Zagreus using the magical mirror in his bedroom, and started some redecorating. I realized that I didn't have to be good at the game. It didn't matter—not too much, anyway, because I was still progressing and getting better. I enjoyed the things that first intrigued me about the game—the storytelling that featured a fresh take on Greek myth, the life simulation aspects. The fighting was still a major part, though, because for anything back home to progress, I had to clear chambers and make it to the surface. I had been making progress, getting further and further, making it to the surface only to get absolutely slaughtered by the final boss. Attempt after attempt I tried to get my first clear, but I had reached a plateau.

In my overwhelming desire to win, I got stuck in a bad habit. I attempted run after run using the same weapon, aiming for the exact same build. I had gotten comfortable, spending 60+ runs with the spear, because I had only ever gotten far with the spear. I didn't want to fail by trying a new weapon and then losing in Tartarus. I had worked so hard to progress past Tartarus, Asphodel, and Elysium, that I didn't want to risk ruining a good thing. I didn't have a good thing, though. My reliance on the spear was fear, that same fear of losing that almost kept me from the game. I was afraid if I didn't use the spear, I would die early on. After one

of my deaths, I made a decision. I would use a different weapon. I chose the twin fists and completed my first successful run. I made it out, past the final boss, into the world above. At that point, I had made over 90 attempts at escape. It had been five months of playing this game, with over 125 hours logged. I felt so accomplished that afternoon when I finally saw the victory screen.

As I finally sat with victory, I realized how far I had come. Hades gave me something to focus on and work toward when I didn't feel like focusing on or working toward anything. It was this constant chatter in the background of my life that reinvigorated my love of stories and helped me through a really intense grieving process. It doesn't matter to me that I'm still not great at the game. I'm constantly improving and find joy in the long, slow process of getting better. Sticking with something, especially when things get rough, is a quality Hades taught me that I never want to lose.

# SNOWRUNNER

SAM MCNALLY

AND THE JOY OF TEDIUM

It's five AM and the sun is beginning to breach the horizon of the Alaskan wilderness. Ice, snow, and mud block the road I've been driving on all night now, and I take a moment to look at the beautiful scenery. I can almost smell the frost-covered pines from inside my 16-wheeler, and I wonder what it would be like to make a life out here in the—

shit.

*I've flipped it.*



**F**OR THOSE OF YOU who don't play video games, and especially those who don't play niche video games about wilderness-based logistics, Snowrunner is a truck driving sim which boasts "the most advanced terrain simulation ever" meaning that your big, heavily laden trucks are going to get stuck in mud. *A lot*. You'll be driving various goods such as bricks, girders and oil rigs across Michigan, Alaska and Taymyr, occasionally having to take even bigger crane-equipped trucks out to precarious slopes and rivers to rescue the ones that you flip or crash. It is, by definition, very fucking tedious. It's slow, repetitive and at times incredibly frustrating. And yet, I can't seem to tear myself away. Time seems to move differently when you have that game open. I drive down one stubbornly muddy road, getting stuck and winching myself forward on the trees and telegraph poles, or reversing to try again on more solid ground and before I know it an hour has passed. I'm fully aware that I'm getting stuck on the same roads, delivering the same imaginary bricks to the same digital warehouses, but I keep going back to play more. Even at it's most frustrating the game is a strange kind of fun I can't seem to define.

One of the more egregious moments I had playing the game was when I was trying to winch a new truck out of a river in Michigan, only to have both of them flip on the slightly steep hill nearby. I went back with a crane... flipped that too. I even flipped the even *bigger* crane I brought to try and fix that mess. I have a screenshot of trucks scattered sadly on their sides across the countryside, like some sort of diesel-powered graveyard. There is a recovery function in game: if your truck gets stuck beyond all help you can just have it teleport



to the nearest garage, but I found myself just refusing to use it. Imposing my own made-up rules on the game, partly out of stubbornness and partly for the satisfaction of figuring out how to solve the problems I've made for myself. Fixing an enormous, upside down, off road semi-truck and trailer that's scattered cement pallets across the land is a completely unique experience. I just go back, try again, and continue to wonder what it is about the game that I find so captivating. It's not just that it's relaxing when it's going well, because most of the game is covering up for when it hasn't gone well. And it's not that there's any great overarching story either; I love games that tell a story, but the only story in Snowrunner is a loose series of missions about building oil rigs and pipelines in these pristine and hostile environments. Something I despise in real life, yet with the promise of a new truck upgrade and a little job well done riff upon delivery I turn into a dirty little digital capitalist. Maybe it's because all the stories in Snowrunner are the ones you find yourself. The scout cars that fall into rivers, the truck I brought home despite having no tyres left. All set to wonderfully relaxing and beautifully scored music, with some stunning environments that I really do occasionally just stop playing the game to look at. After learning that turning your camera to look at the horizon as you

drive really *is* the fastest way to lose a truck. A lesson I must have learned about five times now with how pretty this game is. You can make your game orders of magnitude harder just by deciding to drive at night on unlit country roads instead of skipping to the morning with the press of a button, but there I am on pitch black roads with nothing but headlights and stars to guide me. It's finding these moments of difficulty and failure that make the game worth playing. It is an exercise in patience, but it feels so rewarding to make it, because you decided you wanted to do it the hard way.

It is through playing this game I have come to the conclusion Sisyphus would have been fine with his punishment if he could unlock differently coloured skins for his boulder and maybe push it up hills with a different background now and again. Time and again I saw my truck fall to the bottom of a hill, only to decide to come back and push again the next day.

If you've read this and thought to yourself "this doesn't sound fun at all, it actually sounds unbelievably boring" just know that it was my initial reaction as well, but I have been proven immensely wrong. You never know, you might find yourself having the same perplexingly peaceful amount of fun that I did.

# Every now and again...

I BOOT UP A GAME that I've already beaten. It's not to replay the story or do any missions, it's simply because I want to be in this virtual space. I want to exist in it and move through it, looking, listening and feeling the environment. A pretty backdrop alone isn't what gets me to jump into these worlds again. Besides, I can satisfy that urge just by watching gameplay clips or video essays. Instead, I want to be present and really feel my interactions with the space I'm in, whether that's just for 20 minutes or a few hours. For me, the deciding factor of what game world I wish to experience again is based on the traversal.

Traversal is something I've come to appreciate a lot more over the past few years and it's what I believe to be one of the most important yet often overlooked aspects of video games. Going from point A to B is an afterthought a lot of the time - maybe it's just filler or a way of representing the scales of these game worlds. It's very easy to find ourselves so concerned with what happens at our destinations, but never what goes on in between. Traversal can be demanding and exhilarating, however it can also be reflective and calming, and it's the latter that I've noticed plays a part in some of my

favourite games ever. But it is worth noting that not all of these games are necessarily built to mainly focus on traversal.

I enjoy the quiet interludes between high-action sequences and the multiple methods of interactivity with virtual space, yet, I also love demanding and fast-moving traversal! Neither is better than the other, it just depends on what mood I'm in and what kind of experience I want to have. But for this piece, I want to delve into the calming quality of traversal and how it differentiates itself from more action-packed movement.

Before getting into what I personally consider to be relaxing games due to their approach to traversal, I want to cover titles that I don't feel fit into this category. Parkour games like *Mirror's Edge*, *Ghostrunner* and *Dying Light* induce more pressure due to combat, time counters and horror elements. The player is rewarded for getting places as quickly as possible, so as much as you have the choice to take your time, it doesn't necessarily feel like you're being encouraged to. That's not to say games that involve fighting or horror can't be relaxing, but for me there's more of a mentally demanding catharsis to these types of games. It's definitely something that can help me wind down, although I find myself gravitating towards those that require less energy from me.

There's also the factor of skill levels which would make gameplay easier, so it is still possible to end up in a calming state of flow even in more typically stress-inducing games. Regardless, the movement in these games is presented to the player in a more suspenseful way thanks to other elements, even though the traversal mechanics could be relaxing on their own.

There are many examples of games that have very unique traversal mechanics, with games like *Spider-man* that translate the famous web-swinging into a functional and fluid method of movement. Your character moves through the city streets with satisfying speed and the noise of passing traffic grows louder as you swing closer to the ground, disappearing as quickly as it came as you are propelled upwards again. It makes travelling between missions fun and this traversal mechanic cements itself as a major part of the core gameplay. Another example of unique traversal is *Gravity Rush*, where your character glides and falls in the direction of your choosing. Its manipulation of physics not only gives you a fast, effective method of movement, but also a strangely tranquil one. The areas of the world are floating in space and some are situated higher or lower, making use of the traversal mechanic both horizontally and vertically. The colours change as you enter each area, transitioning from rusty, amber palettes to more relaxed greens and blues, reminding you that you have entered a different region. But controlling your dives through the air became a bit frustrating for me when in the context of battle. I preferred just exploring

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the world and people watching, taking in the detail of the places around me. *Mario Galaxy* also has an interesting use of gravity, as you jump between galaxies and planets of all shapes and sizes. I adored the smaller planets, especially the ones near the start of the game that lacked any real danger to your character. Running around trying to catch rabbits as the ethereal, calming soundtrack plays in the background is an experience that I can recall so vividly in my head. It eases you into the gravity mechanics and making your way around a spherical object and the art direction, music and traversal all comes together perfectly.

As much as you'd probably expect me to say walking sims are the epitome of traversal, I'd actually argue that it's not the case. The simplicity of traversal and mechanics in these kinds of games mainly serves to highlight another feature of them, whether that's the story, environment or something else. Movement is purposefully simplified and buried underneath the more dominant parts of the gameplay experience, which works for these games! It's not common that you feel the weight of your character and feet, instead you just drift through space. So despite the name, I think that the majority of walking sims don't actually



**“Plus, the term ‘walking sim’ is sometimes used to invalidate a game or imply it’s boring in online spaces.”**

focus on traversal specifically. The term neglects to encompass the amazing stories and environments that the games are actually about. The variety of games that fall under this category is astounding and it’s probably gaming’s worst umbrella term.

I really like the idea of having no objectives, it’s the reason why I jump back into games I’ve beaten, to fast travel to all the areas I’ve unlocked easily and to enjoy the fruits of my past labor, along with that sense of familiarity thanks to already having a lot of playtime. Postgame settings also have a kind of homeliness to them and that made me think about another aspect of traversal that matters to me, which is the context.

Difficulty is one of the factors that I like to take into consideration when thinking about games that give me a sense of peace. I’m drawn to games that aren’t so heavy on combat, or at least make it very easily avoidable. It’s not always due to difficulty assigned to combat, but rather the violence of it. If I crave some direction with goals or side quests, I usually gravitate towards games like *Death Stranding*, whose gameplay tasks involve kindness. It’s nice to just be a delivery man bringing people items and resources that are important to them, and helping other players in the asynchronous multiplayer facets of the game.

In regards to what my favourite examples of relaxing traversal are,

*Death Stranding* and *Breath of the Wild* share my top spot. Both Sam and Link are able to conquer the obstacles of their environments in different ways whether that’s by foot, horseback, vehicle, zipline or paraglider. With Sam you have to pay closer attention to the terrain you’re walking across, as one careless step can send you tumbling down a steep hill, damaging your cargo and making BB cry. You’re encouraged to get through these places more carefully and while this might seem a little taxing, it actually became second nature to me very quickly. With Link, the weather conditions also affect his movement, as climbing a slippery cliff will sometimes cause you to lose your grip and slide back down. There are consequences to making wrong choices, but nothing that means you can’t get back up again and carry on.

In *Breath of the Wild*, I would search for hills just so I could shield surf down them and jump onto little rafts to sail across the water. Sometimes, I would even allow myself to be carried away by the flow of a river just so I could put Sam’s otter suit to good use. Neither of these choices were the better option of travel for me when trying to actually get somewhere, but both were fun mechanics to engage with. Both of these games feature combat, puzzles and quests, but I find it incredibly tempting to jump back into them just to explore these worlds. The traversal is satisfying and relaxing on its own, they are still varied enough to keep me engaged and I find myself in this perfect zen state. *Death Stranding* is also a game that encourages you to rest, which gave me the opportunity to really take in my surroundings and

honestly, it taught me to be a lot more mindful. I learned to take my time and I carry these lessons with me even now. I appreciate virtual worlds so much more and allow myself to truly feel connected.

Some other great examples of calming traversal include a Short Hike, which is a game where you make your way to the summit in search of a phone signal, but to do so you'll need to gain golden feathers in order to fly higher. Gaining these golden feathers will include tasks like trading coins or sea shells, or even finding them around the map. You can go fishing, enter a race or talk to the other animals on the island and overall, it's an incredibly wholesome experience. Traversal becomes easier as you acquire golden feathers and unlock more reachable areas and it progresses fairly quickly, not allowing the player to become frustrated but still providing enough content if they want to take their time.

I also thought about the time I spent with Final Fantasy XV, where I remember the warmth from the company of my friends and the bonds between these people were the essence of the game's experience. The whole thing feels like a road trip, which works very well given that friendship is arguably one of the largest themes.

Whether it's camping

at night, engaging in conversations, seeing photos that Prompto took to end the day or enjoying a nice meal together, it has a wonderful sense of just "hanging out". I'd often set my waypoint for the car and put it on autopilot, I would just let it drive me to my destination even for long distances because of how much I enjoyed the downtime. The map is quite empty, which actually benefited the road trip aspect because realistically, that's just what landscapes are like. Apart from driving, the game also allows you to traverse by riding chocobos. I don't think it's too far of a stretch to say this is the best chocobo riding in any Final Fantasy game and while I'm not usually someone who pays much attention to animation, it stood out to me as impressively believable.

Overall, my favourite and most memorable examples of relaxing traversal have been those that can take away tension, but not necessarily goals and drive - although, sometimes doing nothing is everything. The worlds I'm exploring are also a very important factor, along with the soundtrack in some cases, creating a vivid and positive echo in my mind for certain moments, ones that can stick with me for many years to come. I don't want interactions to only be fun, but meaningful too. Games about kindness and helping people are a kind of safe space for me and undoubtedly contributes to how relaxing I find it. I let my guard down as stressors or violence aren't present, or become skillful enough to no longer notice them. The tranquility of traversal has so many layers, which makes it my favourite aspect of game design.

# LEARNING

# TO

It's 3AM and I've woken up sweating again. Looking out of my window onto my street every window reads various praises for the NHS and everything is perfectly silent.

It feels like the world is ending.

# FORGIVE

# AT THE END OF THE

# WORLD

**AT** THIS MOMENT IN TIME, we are a few months into a pandemic and I am sober even though every fiber of my being wants a drink to make the thoughts in my head go away. Sometimes we think we have moved on from events that happen to us but eventually our bodies and minds catch up. Trauma makes it hard to move forward - the brain just constantly replays the same thoughts over and over again trying to make sense of them. Standing up at my window, I was starting to realise that these thoughts would never make sense and that I was more ill than I initially thought.

Art can help us understand ourselves and help inform our view of the world and never before have I been informed and changed by a game than I was with *The Last of Us Part 2*.

When talking about the game, Neil Druckman has stated that ‘...if the first game was really about the love between these two characters, this story is the counter of that. This story is about hate’. It’s hard to argue against hate being a

very key component of *TLOU2*; it is a revenge story at its core and I think one of its biggest successes is its portrayal of loss and trauma, so much so that I found myself moved by both of the lead character’s journeys. However, when looking at the whole picture, a full 30 hour playthrough of the game, the themes of hate and revenge take a backseat to what I interpreted as a game about forgiveness.

The biggest surprise of *TLOU2* was its second protagonist in the form of Abby. Half way through the game, the player is hit with a jarring perspective change to someone that they thought would be the game’s antagonist. The player then starts to see the world through her eyes. This choice manages to toy with the player’s sense of empathy. The player sees that both of them have to deal with their separate traumas and how they cope with them. As I played the game, I felt oddly represented in the way that grief had soured the world to these individuals. Looking at the two characters’ journeys their stories seem more defined by how they overcome their trauma rather than the actual trauma itself.



The two characters' journeys mirror each other but whereas Ellie's journey is that of revenge, Abby's journey shows us the lack of closure even as vengeance is enacted. At the beginning of the game Abby kills the man that murdered her father- her 4 year journey of revenge is complete. The player can gauge however that this act of killing another really hasn't changed her much. When the perspective shifts to Abby's, the player sees that she is still suffering from nightmares about her father - and that stopping his killer has brought no resolution to the trauma she feels about his death.

The player sees Abby's interactions with Yara and Lev, a couple of young people who Abby feels a sense of protection over. Whilst connecting with these two, Abby starts to reconnect with her old self - the person she was before joining the WLF and before the loss of her father. The player sees that by helping these two, the nightmares about her father get replaced by more positive images of Lev and Yara happy and it's clear to see that helping these two is really what has been the driving force of getting her to move past her trauma.

It can also be argued that later in the game when Abby has the chance to kill Dina and get revenge once again, what stops her is Lev calling out to her. I think in this split moment Abby realises that nothing good will come from getting revenge. She's been here before and it did nothing for her, it brought her no peace. Her only way to move forward is to forgive and let this go.

The player also has Ellie's journey throughout the game, which for the majority of the game is a revenge story not dissimilar to what we have seen many times before. What sets this apart is how the final flashback recontextualises the events that have come before. In the last conversation between Joel and Ellie we learn that she wanted to try and forgive him for what he did to her. Not only does this round out the core theme of the game but also makes us understand why Ellie let Abby go at the end. Ellie had her chance to forgive Joel taken away from her and in her violence and rage at his death forgot that that is what she originally needed to move forward. While on that beach holding Abby underwater, she goes back to that moment on the balcony and understands that nothing good will come from the anger and hate and that forgiveness she once felt toward Joel gets passed down to Abby. By forgiving Abby, Ellie allows herself to find a way forward and not be stuck with the same thoughts and images going round and round in her head.

The Last of Us 2 stayed with me for a long time after I finished playing and slowly I began to understand these characters' journeys and how much they reflected what I was feeling at the time, these feelings of mental instability and a complete inability to move forward from trauma was who I was at the start of this pandemic. This not only made me feel seen but also informed how I was going to find a way to get better. What became abundantly clear, however, was that within the cycle of anger and hate I wasn't finding any way to move forward. I wasn't exactly going to wake up one day and decide that I could move on, but I knew that hate is something that is often easy and forgiveness is incredibly hard, that's why these characters take so long to get to that point. It's made me realise that finding a way to forgive is often what we need to survive and move forward. Furthermore, in my mind if these two characters can learn to forgive at the end of the world, then maybe my world isn't ending at all and amidst feeling like my mind was falling apart there was hope.

Over time and with a lot of effort, I have allowed myself to move forward and forgive but I don't think I would be there without this piece of art that allowed me to see and understand the emotions I was feeling inside. Yes, The Last of Us 2 is about many things, hate, anger, revenge. But its most powerful message is how to find a way to move on from pain and loss and find hope moving forward.



# Once upon a time...

MELISSA FIELDING

THERE WAS A LITTLE GIRL.

Once upon a time, in a land made of snow, there was a man who hid his child from evil. Once upon a time there was a wicked witch, with hair as red as blood, who wanted to kill our hero. Once upon a time, the little girl grows up with a knife between her teeth instead of her tongue. Once upon a time Hanna hunts down a deer and to cut out its heart.

Between German woods, an urban sprawl filled with CIA spies and kind old men, and wicked witches in power suits, Joe Wright seamlessly blended folk and thriller in the 2011 film *Hanna*.

When all modern storytelling takes its roots from folk tales it's easy to find influence from the brothers Grimm and the like in any art. But killers in traccies and a techno soundtrack are a far leap from a book of Hans Christian Anderson stories. But what is the fairy if not a neatly wrapped parcel of morals? A wolf is just a man lurking in the dark hungry for a bite of flesh. The wicked witch is just another spinster. Lost children are simply lost children. So what is the thriller is not an identical book of monsters.

The American spy movie was born out of mid century paranoia. Europeans = bad. America men = your hero's. But around the 2000's the Bourne series hit screens and was often described as 'anti American' because of its honest portrayal of the government as incompetent and needlessly brutal. A contemporary film a dience couldn't be spoon fed propaganda anymore - or at least you would hope so. It wasn't the first or last to point fingers or grow wary or suspicious but post 911 Hollywood milked fear and suspicion for all it's worth.

It's all the same stories no matter the politics. Matt Damon is our knight, rescuing damsels in distress as he goes on not only a journey of self discovery but a revelation and mistrust in his homeland.

Whereas *Hanna* puts a strange spin on the genre. Of Course there's guns and blood and scary Americans and Scary Europeans but

*Hanna* is a tale of pubescents. Shy kisses shared between friends, the loss of innocence and glitter eye shadow smeared everywhere. Little Red Riding Hood is a story of puberty; a girl old enough to go into the world without her mother's hand to hold, the harshness of the colour red, men looking to trick you round every corner. Fairytales are littered with heroins who are no longer children, but it's a far stretch through the forest until you find womanhood.

There's a weird limbo to being a teenage girl that feels vicious and gentle. We get 13 year old Saoirse Ronan gazing at a storybook with amusement, longing for childhood things as they slip from her fingers - then the thrill of riding on the back of motorbikes and first kisses and... killing a man.

It's more than a European folktale about wickedness. But it's not quite the pilgrimage of pubescence either.

There is of course the more obvious imagery. Dead mothers of princesses remembered in youthful beauty and childless hags grow bitter with every year until they lure children in to eat them. But Marris, our witch, dances a fine line. Not dead enough to be a maternal ghost but certainly cruel enough to play the old crone. Like the new wife that sends Hansel and Gretel away rather than feeding them. Or the queen that dreams of eating Snow White's heart. The figure of the evil stepmother is jealous and obsessed.

The fairytale of course ends quite happily. Evil is defeated, the immediate danger is removed but there is no true resolution to a folk tale. We don't get to know what happens in the 'happily ever after' but we don't need to be told. *Hanna* talks about the heart. At the start of the fairytale she hunts her prey with an arrow that misses, she fires a bullet and cuts out something steaming hot with blood. At the end of her journey Hannah is hunted by the witch but it's a trap. Because Hannah has always been the hunter - never Snow White. We already know what happens in the end.

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