

THE DAILY DRUNK PRESENTS: NOSTALGIC AF

A VIDEO GAME ANTHOLOGY

EDITED BY NICK OLSON

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*Suggested listening music*



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**Jared A. Conti** grew up with a family vending machine business, playing coin-op arcade games every Saturday night until his eyes bled. Much later, he never got the chance to play Tony Hawk or Wrestlemania games because everyone was busy getting high and spending more time making their characters look as real-life as possible than playing the actual games. Jared can be found at [theoracularbeard.com](http://theoracularbeard.com) and on Twitter as @OracularBeard

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## Editor's Note

By Nick Olson

When Shawn reached out to me and pitched the idea for an anthology based around nostalgic video games, I was immediately sold on the concept. When I kept reading the DM and saw that he wanted me to edit it, it was the fastest yes I've ever sent someone. To say I've been shaped by my love of video games is a serious understatement. I cut my teeth on the NES, my first game being that *Super Mario Bros./Duck Hunt* combo that was ubiquitous back then. I had the process down pat even at four years old, knew exactly how I needed to blow on the cartridge's contacts and dock it in the system to ensure that I got a working title screen and not random flashing colors. Figured out every secret and warp zone in *SMB*, would time my final flag jumps to coincide with a 6 as the last digit so I could see maximum fireworks at the end level screen, later took the opposite approach when I'd give speedrunning the game a shot. *Duck Hunt* was quickly mastered when I realized that I could just hold the light gun right in front of the TV screen and not have to hear the mocking laughter of that cursed pixelated dog.

As I got older, and the systems changed with me, the passion stayed the same. I dove headfirst into the Pokémon craze just as it first hit the states, played out my copies of Red and Blue, constantly swapping out double-As along the way. Heard about the Missingno glitch and risked my save data to venture into the unknown and capture the creature that the early internet said

should under no circumstances be captured. (It didn't do anything to my data, FYI. I think I lucked out.) We got an N64 for Christmas, a copy of *GoldenEye* with it, and I was young enough that I had to ask my parents who "Zero Zero Seven" was. What followed was a lifelong obsession with that game, its mechanics, player movement, strategy both for multiplayer and speedrunning. I'm not ashamed to admit that some of my first writings were fanfictions in that universe, and I spent many a late night and "sick day" exploring the Caverns, unlocking Aztec and Egyptian, grinding for hours just to beat my own best time by a second. And don't even get me started on the split screen multiplayer.

I've long struggled with my dual identities of being an avid gamer and a writer. In my younger years, I saw these identities as being at odds with each other, like I'd have to quit gaming in order to be a "serious" writer. Luckily, I quickly disabused myself of those notions. I've put references to my favorite video games in plenty of my work, including my debut novel *Here's Waldo*, where the nostalgia and gaming culture of the late '90s bleeding into the early '00s is practically its own character.

There's so much to be said for exploring the vibrant, creative worlds of video games, to lose yourself in a digital setting and get to a level of familiarity where a game's geography can be as real and recognizable to you as your own hometown. I know my old block back in Des Plaines, IL as well as I know the Facility in *GoldenEye*, level 8-4 in *SMB*, each boss fight's layout and ideal strat in *Wolfenstein 3-D*. All that to say that gaming is a part of me. It's as intrinsic to my identity as writing and editing is, and editing this anthology

was some of the most fun I've ever had as an editor. I was blown away by the range, the skill, the detail on display in these pieces. I still am. I hope you enjoy them as much as I do, that they inspire you to get that old console out of storage, repeat that startup ritual, and bring those digital worlds back to life.

—Nick

# Aliens Ate My Babysitter

*By Jay Miller*

The first video game I ever played was Commander Keen.

*Goodbye, Galaxy!* followed by *Aliens Ate My Babysitter!*

The year was 1996. I was three. I remember it fondly

because it was the first I mastered. A sidescroller DOS series

(much like *Mario Three* with a sort of phaser), complete with

underwater level and secret passageways, aliens, pyramids;

and in one, if you stuck around AFK for a while, Keen would moon you.

The music, the graphics, the spaceship and story, it stuck with me.

I finally had nostalgia enough to revisit the series when I was 21.

I sucked at it. I had to look up the easter eggs. And the longplay.

What struck me most was how impressive it was that having played this

game nearly 20 years ago had given me a lifetime of confidence.

Keen really kicked my ass. Games like that deserve a comeback.

## Bowser and the Seven Stars

*By Josh Sippie*

I knew I would never open a Pokémon booster pack to find a holographic Charizard. I knew I'd never get to get a hamburger *and* chicken nuggets at McDonalds in the same trip. And I knew that Bowser and Mario would never be on the same team. They were blood rivals, they hated each other. They were Harry Potter and Voldemort, Batman and the Joker, Flash Gordon and Ming the Merciless. No compromise. No middle ground. The baddest bad and the goodest good do not shake hands. Unless there's a hidden palm zapper involved, and even then, only if Batman is Adam West.

Then Super Mario RPG: Legend of the Seven Stars for the SNES happened. And to my naïve little seven-year-old mind, the world changed. Bowser stood in a line, swirling his chomper over his head like a shelled cowboy, next to Peach and Mario. United. Fighting towards a common goal. Fighting on the same team.

The same fucking team.

The very idea that there was a bigger bad guy out there than Bowser was incomprehensible. Is there a bigger baddie than Palpatine? I think we learned enough from Snoke to say that you can't go bigger than the baddest baddie, which in the Mario universe, Bowser always was and, deceptively, still tries to be.

But there's a caveat. That one time when he joined with Mario to fight Smithy.

One might say that it was self-serving. That Bowser only joined because Smithy took his castle. I'll nod once and say, "Yes, but..." there was genuine chemistry between Bowser and Mario. Between traditional hero and traditional villain. It didn't matter that there was a bigger baddy than Bowser. What mattered is that a bad guy turned good. Forget the circumstances. All you need to know is that a bad guy turned good. *The* bad guy.

From that moment forward, my perception of villains in video games and movies and books and the whole media spectrum changed. Villains became more compelling than heroes. They had so much more to give the story, with such a higher capacity for surprise. And what is storytelling without surprise? What would it take to turn Joffrey Baratheon good? What would it take for him to fight alongside Rob Stark?

You might say this is a contributing factor to why I bought a Kylo Ren bobblehead as soon as I left the theater after seeing him kill his dad. Why I still believe that Wario is going to have a turn of heart and prove invaluable to Mario's next heroic enterprising. The badder a bad guy gets, the more satisfying the redemption. But also the more anticipation that a redemption could happen. I never had that anticipation before Bowser joined the party. Maybe I should have had a better understanding from Darth Vader's redemption, but it didn't really hit home like Bowser did because it was so short-lived, and only on his deathbed. You *need* Bowser to beat that game. Without his incredible strength, you lose. Smithy smacks the shit out of you.

Heroes are too easy to understand. Too predictable. I don't care about Flash Gordon. We all know what he's going to do and if he falls to the dark

side or destroys the earth on his own accord, then he's an asshole. It's not an attractive character arc to go from good to bad. Just ask Seymour from Final Fantasy X. Nobody likes him. But if Ming starts an intergalactic food pantry? That's *way* more admirable than Flash saving the universe. From a character standpoint, anyway. Because the path it took to get there is so much longer and requires so much more justification and character building. It didn't take Flash as long to get from New York Jets quarterback to savior of Earth. But Ming going from "the Merciless" to "the Charitable"? That's a path I want to see.

Bowser is much the same. Bowser's path to go from kidnapping Peach as a weekly exercise to fighting alongside her? That's a long path. A path that you have to see to believe. But through the abandonment of his army and the loss of his castle, he becomes a hero without losing his essence. He keeps his sense of humor, he keeps his ferocity, he is quintessential Bowser, he's just redirecting his focus for good. Nothing else changes. It isn't forced on you, Bowser doesn't become a powderpuff. He's still the nefarious turtle you want him to be. But he's on your team.

No other character in the most storied gaming franchise in human history has that kind of path. They're all one dimensional. Mario jumps on bad guys because he's a good guy. Peach gets kidnapped and occasionally hits people with a frying pan or a parasol. Yoshi yips adorably and shits eggs. But Bowser? Bowser broke the formula. He changed the fabric of video game villainy. Don't let his modern treacherous façade distract from what he did that one time when he defied the moral fabric of the gaming multiverse.

Try Again?

*By Harmony Dimmig*



## Choices to Make

*By Jared Povanda*

I picked Totodile because dinosaurs were cool (okay, fine, Totodile was technically a crocodile, but I was too young to know). It was blue, and I liked blue. It had sharp teeth, and I was a little boy who didn't yet know to be afraid of sticking your hand in places it didn't belong.

I played Pokémon Gold on my Gameboy Color, volume low, screen angled to the moonlight to see the pixelated monsters and the cities of Johto in their low-res glory. I should have been sleeping instead of running circles around New Bark Town, unable to read everything needed to progress in the game. I didn't care. Encountering errant Sentret and Hoothoot on those lackadaisical summer nights was more than enough to make me happy.

This was before the Twin Towers fell. Before my brother's many leg surgeries. Before the bullies terrorized me in middle school for being skinny and weak and nerdy and quiet and bookish. The type of kid who loved Pokémon beyond the age of communal acceptance. Before I began to feel upside down and inside out, all of my soft parts on the outside of my body—a particularly ineffective final evolution.

At six, I pulled the covers over my head, clunky book light clamped to the screen, and I played. I didn't get very far, but damn did I love going nowhere for hours.

I begged my parents for Pokémon Silver months later, uncaring that the games were practically identical. Lugia beckoned me like Ho-Oh, the

cardboard packaging thick and holographic. I picked Totodile again and again. I would beat the game, then start it all over, spending hundreds of hours capturing and battling, gaining gym badges and fighting my rival (the thief ???) with his too-pretty scowl and perfect red hair.

When the batteries on my Gameboy Color inevitably died, I got a Gameboy Advance SP, and then a Nintendo DS Lite. Years of these games, of these Pokémon. Eventually, I befriended Cyndaquil and Chikorita, and I beat the games with both of them, but Totodile was always my favorite. Mine. The strongest, capable of anything.

I could say his high attack stat was why I identified with Totodile. If he could fight for me, then I wouldn't need to fight for myself. If he could bite, the bullies wouldn't be around long enough to make me cry on the locker room floor. But when I was little, I loved him because he was cool and blue. I loved him.

One of the cities in the Johto region, Olivine, was home to a large lighthouse. You could cross the sea from there to get to Cianwood, sure, but I always loved the lighthouse best. The gray stone floors, the twisting path, all the way to the Gym Leader Jasmine and her sick Ampharos. You were tasked with getting medicine for Amphy, and if you couldn't, didn't, you wouldn't progress. I held his small life in my hand, and I had to choose kindness. I had to choose to save Jasmine's beloved companion. I knew the adventure would continue when I did, but I didn't realize, not until I grew up, that Amphy's electricity, his light, is all that shines against the darkness to eventually guide those bobbing in the cold water home.

## Brotherly advice

*By JR Walsh*

*from Luigi to Mario*

Eating the fireflower  
makes you spit rolling meatballs  
& your enemies fall to Hell.

Eating the solitary leaf  
after smashing your head into bricks  
grows you a raccoon tail.

Stars pepper you in strobing rainbows  
until you no longer hunger.  
A princess will sing your heartbeat.

Brother, let me retire here.  
I search clouds for gold, my boots  
crush heathens & poison mushrooms.

No wrenches to crank. No drips to stop.  
Here, I am the adored gladiator in green,  
a simple moonlighting plumber, no more.

You may summon travel between worlds  
with music & hope & the right tools.  
May this flute serve you well.

## Debug Mode

*By Charlotte Reynolds*

I came across the phrase in a cheat code book,  
one of those slim, well worn volumes  
passed under school desks  
and behind backs,  
its incantations copied onto lined paper  
with the solemn accuracy  
of medieval monks.

The ritual was simple enough,  
I whispered to the console  
DebugMode = true  
and became a spirit,  
slipping through the seams,  
hovering in places  
that were never meant to be seen.

Distant mountains flattened  
into .jpegs,  
the locked doors  
I had eyed with wonder  
hid nothing  
and far away from the maze of bright rooms —  
a tomb.

No one was spared,  
the merchants, the villagers,  
friends and villains,

all of them,  
lined up like terracotta soldiers  
in a textureless crypt  
where no ambient sound could reach,  
blinking, stretching,  
fidgeting, leaning,  
flicking their hair,  
again,  
and again  
and again.

I could not stay long,  
the computer was wanted by another,  
but that night I lay awake  
picturing their vacant faces,  
wondering if they were still trapped,  
idling in perpetual silence  
even now the game was off.

## Despite Drift

*By Melissa Martini*

1. You are in second grade and afraid to go to school, but you know that you need to or they will send you to therapy again, so you sit at your desk and think about watching Dad play The Legend of Zelda: The Wind Waker each evening and it gets you through the day.
2. You are in third grade and your grandmother is dying, so you sit in the hospital waiting room with your cousin, Game Boy Color nuzzled between you, trying to catch Mewtwo with a Poké Ball because you used your Master Ball on Snorlax.
3. You are in fourth grade and Harvest Moon promises you a Wonderful Life, so you farm and flirt until your cow dies. You marry Muffy, and when Another Wonderful Life comes out, you marry Marlin. He reveals he is dying, too. This hurts worse than the cow.
4. You are in middle school and your parents are flirting with a divorce, so you replay Tales of Symphonia a dozen times and fill notebooks with self-insert fanfiction, tearing out pages and stapling them together, posting your poor grammar on the internet.
5. You are headed into high school and play The Sims 3 for too many hours at a time. You create perfect families full of beautiful female

Sims, modded and making out with other girls. You make sure your Sims are as elated as possible from the start of their lives to the end.

6. You are halfway through high school and Hurricane Sandy has decided to hit, so you head to GameStop to grab a copy of Professor Layton and the Miracle Mask. You play it throughout the storm, your Nintendo 3DS's screen the only light once the power goes out.
7. You are a senior and have just recently been kicked out of your friend group because they don't like your boyfriend (and he doesn't like you), so you have no one to hang out with on a Saturday night except K.K. Slider at Club LOL. He plays a song just for you.
8. You are in college and hiding your Nintendo 2DS behind books, investigating case after case as you work your way through the Ace Attorney series. Your hours in between classes are filled with studying - both for your exams and for court cases with Phoenix.
9. You are lonely in grad school but you are never alone while exploring Skyrim, whether Faendel is trailing behind you, bow drawn, or Farkas is rushing enemies you haven't even noticed yet. He calls you 'love' and always reminds you that he's still around.
10. You are working from home when Covid hits, alienated from friends and family as the world goes up in flames. You go on dates and plan hangouts in Animal Crossing: New Horizons, fishing with your loved ones, holding onto hope and Joy Cons despite drift.

## Letting Me Feel Like a Time Traveler

*By Richard LeDue*

I lost myself in Chrono Trigger  
(a Christmas gift, bought on layaway  
at K-Mart),  
slipping between alternative time-line  
endings as junior high passed  
more predictably: no runaway princess,  
cursed frog knight, or a robot  
proving it had a soul,  
but a closed bedroom door,  
trapping 16 bit music  
that sounded better  
than awkward silences around girls,  
algebra lessons,  
caller ID blocked  
because it was a bill collector again.

Twenty years later,  
I played Chrono Trigger once again,  
letting me feel like a time traveler  
as those pixels looked exactly the way  
I remembered,

even if the game's time-lines were immutable now,  
(no FAQ could change the outcomes),  
and the loneliness of my adolescence  
could have stepped out of a Delorean  
for full dramatic effect,  
but none of that mattered  
as I turned off the SNES  
to go watch my son  
spinning in circles  
in the living room with his mother-  
his eye contact nonexistent,  
he didn't respond to his name  
the way a three year old should,  
and his speech delayed,  
making him another silent hero  
who changed my world.

# The Hard Stuff

*By Amy Chase*

It was youth night at the local parish and by some miracle the docents hadn't confiscated our Game Boy Colors. Three of the older boys were in the corner, tethered together with the link cables of old; thick, tightly coiled, and only about a foot in length, meaning we all had to sit shoulder to shoulder to trade Pokémon. Their voices were hushed whispers as I brought my precious pink handheld into the fold.

"Nick's brother cheated big time, got a Game Shark and can level up any Pokémon you want," said one of them conspiratorially. It took me a few moments to realize what they were talking about- they were doping up, so to speak.

It was true, Nick's brother had glitched his copy of Pokémon Gold to give out maximum Rare Candies, the pocket monster's equivalent of steroids. And here were the boys, sitting around and trading creature after captured creature to buff their levels to impossible standards. Full parties of Level 100 beasts, able to wipe even Trainer Red off the map with so much as a standard Tackle from a basic Pidgey.

At my young age, my thoughts went two ways. In one, the appeal of a tricked-out roster sounded incredible. I could march right up to the Elite Four

in my Crystal game cartridge and overtake the League. I would be able to flaunt the feat to my other friends who had yet to finish their games. But then, I remembered that maximizing every Pokémon's level would essentially end the game. My monsters would be too strong for their own good, and while the eventual aim was indeed to catch them all, I would irrevocably be ruining the adventure for my precious team of well-loved, hand-raised Pokémon.

"No thank you," I said, tucking my Game Boy away from their prying eyes. "I don't want to cheat."

I thought about my Totodile, who was so cleverly named G8ter, a nickname the Name Rater had deemed sufficient. I couldn't ask him to change just for me- after all, the journey was our fun. Taking steps while we waited for the Dittos at the breeder to throw off new baby Pokémon, screeching as Whitney's Miltank did another Rollout move, navigating the dark caverns while I refused to saddle any of my Pokémon with the useless Flash HM. That was what I wanted to play through for myself.

"Let's just give you one strong one, as a gift," said the oldest of the gang. "Trade me a Caterpie, it's fine."

Still, I couldn't deny the siren song of having a trophy monster. I would rehome it lovingly, and only use it in emergencies...

"Fine," I said, succumbing. "Link me." Like a back-alley drug trade, I was taking the bait. I remember it was a Dragonite, leveled to the max and stats locked in place. Frozen in time at its apex. Not only was it an exceedingly

rare and difficult Pokémon to obtain, but all it cost me was the most basic newbie fodder I'd never miss, sent to a farm upstate, most likely, or released upon receipt. I didn't think too hard about it, and eventually my weird completionist guilt faded.

G8ter remained my leading muscle, but since that night, I found myself determined to prove that he too could reach Level 100, without enhancers. It meant never running away from a battle, it meant button-mashing any and every encounter. And I don't know how many hours it finally took, but G8ter climbed that peak, sitting at the top of my party at Level 100 (though I may have used one of the game's naturally obtained Candies to push him at the end of our shared slog. Different situation entirely, by my standards). I never saw those boys again and didn't end up going to the youth nights much after that, but that Dragonite was a pixelated reminder of the easy life I could have had as a minute-made Pokémon Master.

As I think back on the entire incident, it's not lost on me that the cartridge was a translucent blue. Crystal Version. If Walter White had gotten into the Game Shark business, he'd be swimming in more Rare Candies than he could count.

I loved my Crystal Version more than anything. Twenty years later, it remains in my possession along with that pink Game Boy Color. But the grand tragedy of it is that the cartridge is hard-locked. The clever game had its own internal clock battery that could run for near to a decade, but when that battery burned out, it kamikazed the entire cartridge, rendering the game

unplayable. It now calls itself corrupted and refuses to play my save file. And my fiercest friends of childhood are trapped in the plastic glitter shell of a valueless Crystal.

In the end, I don't think the ill-gotten Dragonite cost me the soul of my game. I think, in a sense, it's a beautifully preserved tribute to another lifetime. Of discipline and vice, of sleepless nights and sacrifice. And somewhere inside that crystalline game card, G8ter is running free, knowing that I am proud of him and all we accomplished together. And me?

I'm clean- never touched the hard stuff after that.

## Crying Over Dead Monsters

*By Lane Chasek*

“It’s alright, kid. Pokémon die,” Toby said.

“He wasn’t a Pokémon!” I said, tears streaming down my face as I bit into my cheeseburger.

“Sorry, sorry,” Toby said. “He was a...Digimon, right?”

“He was a Melon Suezo! His name is—his name was Brussel.”

Toby sipped his Sprite and stared down at his scuffed sneakers and the grimy orange tiles of the McDonald’s dining room. Toby was Mom’s boyfriend, and since today was Saturday, that meant Mom worked all day and Toby had to take care of me. Ever since I’d gotten a PlayStation and a copy of *Monster Rancher 2*, babysitting me had been easy. Toby could watch ESPN all day while I unlocked, trained, battled, and combined monsters in order to create the ultimate 32-bit lifeform. But when I started raising Brussel (a green, scaly monster who was just a giant eyeball who hopped around on a single tentacle) I’d found a friend. I trained him for hours at a time, raising his Intelligence and Skill stats so that he could learn telekinetic abilities, feeding him his favorite foods (he loved fish and Cup Jelly), and entering him in battles where he beat larger, scarier monsters. As a socially awkward kid with no pets or friends, Brussel had become my closest companion.

I had no idea your monsters could die in *Monster Rancher 2*. That Saturday I'd been training Brussel as usual, but instead of the next week in the game starting normally, I was treated to a nighttime shot of my ranch, a comet blazing across the sky as ominous music played. The camera switched to the inside of my barn, where Brussel was trying to sleep. Suddenly, Brussel slumped to the floor as his soul exited his body. Brussel was dead. *Monster Rancher 2* had given me a friend and taken him away in just a few short days.

I cried. Toby rushed to my room to see what the hell was wrong, and when he realized that his girlfriend's son was crying over some pixels, he tried to console me, telling me that it was just a videogame, that I could always get a new Pokémon or Digimon or whatever the hell it was I was playing. When words couldn't comfort me, he drove me to McDonald's and got me a Happy Meal.

"You'll raise other monsters," he said.

"I wanna raise Brussel."

"You could restart the game, right?"

I shook my head.

Toby was stumped. He ran his fingers through his graying hair and sighed. My cheeseburger and fries were growing cold and my toy remained sealed in its bag. I was alone with Mom's boyfriend and Mom was too busy these days to help me. Then I thought of Dad, 500 miles away in another city.

When Dad was seven he had a pet rock named Peter. He had Peter for two years, telling him all his secrets, his dreams and secret phobias. Then,

during a family fishing trip, his older sister hurled Peter into a lake. Dad didn't talk or eat for three days, and he wouldn't speak to his sister for almost a year.

Dad would understand how I felt about Brussel, I thought.

"Lane, just be happy. Please," Toby begged.

I didn't respond.

I would raise other monsters in the months to come, including a Grim Reaper-esque Joker and an extraterrestrial Metalnar. They were more powerful than the Melon Suez I'd loved so much, but they weren't Brussel.

# The Great Goddamn Nothing

*By Adam Shaw*

No one told my brother and me after we won McCutcheon High School's overnight charity *Halo* tournament that it would be the most heroic, most accomplished, most Sonic-spinning-and-giving-a-peace-sign feat of victory we'd ever feel. There's a photo of it in the 2004 yearbook, one that I'd tucked away until my wife and I bought a house in the 'burbs, one of those you move to when you have kids, need something quiet, tree-lined streets and all that. In the yearbook photo, Isaac and I are side-by-side. Our grins are ear-to-ear, our thumbs raised in Buddy Christ poses, one pulled close to the shoulder, one extended outward, the distance between the two so perfect you could set a plasma rifle between them.

We won nothing. No trophy, no medal, not even a gift certificate to the McDonald's down the road, the one we'd grab McMuffins at when I taught Isaac the thrill of skipping school, the openness, pointlessness, freedom of it all, like the silent thrill of lurking around Blood Gulch while your partner watches your back from a sniper post. Nothing didn't matter, though, because we were going to start a dynasty, win it all, be the kings of Lockout and Zanzibar and Hang 'Em High in our small midwestern hometown. We were going to do it for no other reason than to do it, be the best, beat the Covenant and Jack down the road and Ethan two neighborhoods away, left

on 9th Street, right on Waterstone Drive, a fifteen-minute walk if you didn't stop at the gas station for a fountain pop.

The summer after the tournament, we spent our nights stuffing our backpacks with consoles and controllers and feet upon feet upon feet of ethernet cables, whites and blues and greens we wadded into bulbous tumbleweeds that we'd later shake out, drag across Jack and Ethan's houses from one television to the next. Jack's dad worked nights and Ethan lived in a two-story with TVs on each level, but Isaac and I had the consoles, the cables, the cases of pop and bags of chips that we'd split across the rooms, half for each team, and mindlessly shovel into our mouths, stopping only to pick a map, fire a shot, wipe Dorito dust off our hands and onto our jeans. We did this until 2:00, 3:00, 4:00am. We beat Jack and Ethan and friends of friends, siblings and cousins and whoever else showed up, too. They won sometimes, but there was always one more game, next kill wins or what about best out of three? It didn't matter.

There are pictures of Isaac and me accomplishing other things later in life, first apartments and college graduations, trips to Europe and promotions at work, professional awards. We smile in front of buildings and castles, hold certificates and diplomas, maybe wear medals or pins on our lapels. We smile because we're proud, because we've accomplished something, earned more money or acquired something new, a car or a job or an update to our LinkedIn profiles, but none of it compares to the great goddamn nothing, the thrill of the *thunk* of a pistol whip kill, the whistle of a needler pumping pink

and purple pricks into an opponent, the unnecessary, inappropriate  
teabagging of a corpse before it disappears, respawns, three, two, one, beep.

## Lavender's Song

*By Joachim Heijnderman*

It's not a great game. There are weird bugs after you talk to the old man, and the type v. type system has some flaws since there are no good attacks against psychics. But I love it. I love the creatures on my team. I love the world and all the characters great and small. But most of all, I love the music. Upbeat. Jaunty. The melody of an adventure.

And then there is Lavender town.

The tune. An eerie, almost metronome sound, followed by a chilling hit of a single note. A ghostly strike of the finger against the keys. Then another, while the melody in the background continues on. Ghosts lurk in the graveyard. Gone are the cute critters and pink puffballs. Shadows rule here. Eyes in pixelated mists. Disembodied hands floating by a head. Something is wrong in this place. Something has died here, and cannot rest. Its music, a dirge in 8-bits, haunts me.

Thank God for my Game Boy's volume control.

## We Traded Hunters

*By Caoimhín de Paor*

We traded Hunters  
back and forth  
on the floor below your bunk bed,  
the hardwood boards dusty  
but deliciously cool on our skin,  
smelling of sweat and faded sunscreen.  
Your game-link cable snaked around  
our little spent legs and plastic cups,  
ice cubes dancing in fizzy orange  
and I watched as the Hunter transformed,  
and became Gengar before my eyes -  
just ones and zeros, just pixels on a tiny screen,  
yet something that meant so much to me.  
And I thought, for as long as I would live,  
I would never again know a day so full and fun  
a summer so sweet and endless  
or a friend as fierce as you.

## Exploring Islands Alone: The Soulful Solitude of *Myst*

*By Jen Julian*

When I follow trails in the woods and come across an abandoned structure or a mysterious, rust-eaten machine, the purpose of which isn't immediately clear, I find myself back on *Myst* Island. I'm more likely to end up there than any place I hiked with my family when I was a kid, or in our sprawling Texas suburb, which, with its loops and dead ends and secret alleyways, offered endless exploration for a preteen with a ten-speed. *Myst* was released for PC in 1994, but I didn't play it until I was twelve or so, its graphics beautiful for their time, its surreal premise and steampunky aesthetic unlike anything I'd encountered. At its core, *Myst* is a point-and-click puzzle game; there is nothing to stomp, kill, throw, shoot, flee from, or set on fire (with the exception of one puzzle, which requires you to light a furnace). There are only two characters with whom you can genuinely interact: psychopathic brothers who have been placed inside book-prisons, both of which will cajole you and snarl at you through fuzzy video screens, demanding their release. You come to learn the brothers' crimes—and the inner workings of the game's world, too complicated to summarize here—through exploration alone. Exploration alone, because that this is literally all you can do in *Myst*, and also because there's no one else around, only the libraries, living quarters, and engine rooms of the world's

ominously-absent inhabitants, plus the detritus they left behind: partially-burned books and diaries, written correspondence, recorded holograms, instructional diagrams, etcetera. Sincere gameplay begs extensive reading, note-taking, and the drawing out of complicated maps, though you can also discover a lot by way of wild clicking, which was my strategy.

To those unfamiliar with it, I've described *Myst* as the loneliest game you'll ever play, but maybe that's not true. Maybe I only think that because I was lonely the year I played it, was in fact experiencing the loneliest year of my life yet, moving from Texas to North Carolina and entering sixth grade in an insular Christian school, where the rules of girlhood had shifted monumentally. I still did the same things I'd always done—played pretend, read voraciously, wrote stories about flying cats in a spiral notebook, failed to understand what it meant to have a crush on a celebrity (or on anyone, for that matter)—but this time I was teased by the boys, ostracized by the girls. Once, I was wandering the woods in my new neighborhood, swamp mud caking my tennis shoes, when two kids my age heckled me from the road: “What are you, a fucking forest ranger?” I was more confused than hurt; it hadn't occurred to me to feel embarrassed about wandering. In that context, *Myst* was an important discovery, a game for which exploration was the sole objective, an indoor solution to an outdoor impulse that was now subject to ridicule. There were no monsters to fight in *Myst*, no princesses to rescue, no timer to beat. You moved through settings at your own pace—through the ship broken in half on windswept rocks; through the rickety village suspended in the canopy of a redwood forest; through the creepy bedrooms of the two

captive brothers, their bone décor and torture devices and hidden daggers evidence of their psychopathy (you come to learn, if you're paying attention, that they are responsible for the lack of people in the game's world, definitely not to be trusted). Ambient music follows you, or birdsong, or running water, or the soft gurgles of an undersea chamber (truly, a recording of one of the game designers blowing bubbles into a toilet, as revealed by the *Making of Myst* video, which came with the CD-ROM). I remember trying to introduce the game to a classmate, who clicked around for a bit and declared it boring, the worst thing a game could be.

I replayed *Myst* this past year during quarantine, a year when walking alone—honestly one of the only things I could do safely outside my apartment—became a necessity. I think it was because of the walking that I decided to play it, because those images came to me so frequently when I was following a mountain path, or coming around a hill, or spotting some building or natural formation in the hazy distance. *This is what it was like approaching the ship at the harbor. This is what it was like climbing the tower, descending to the beach, entering that hidden passageway, crossing that bridge.* I'd retained how to solve most of the puzzles, which cut into that excitement of discovery I'd felt the first time around; it wasn't until I got to an underground maze, which I could only solve by mapping it out with post-it notes on my coffee table, that I remembered the Zen-like patience the game asked of its players, and that twelve was around the same time I began habitually swearing. Still, the puzzles in *Myst* never felt quite like puzzles. They felt like the steady re-remembering of a place, like I was visiting any old

place I'd walked alone in before. Sometimes, I think that much of my adult life has been about rediscovering the pleasure of being alone, the pleasure of being my own self and remembering that solitude and loneliness might cross paths, but they're not the same thing. It's no surprise then that my brain returns over and over to point-and-click exploration, the simple task of moving around in the world and making choices, yes or no. Should I follow that trail? Should I take this shortcut? Should I slosh through this mud, or cut around it, or try to balance over that log? Should I get my feet wet in this creek or climb up that rock? Why not. Why not for my own self. There's no one here, no one watching.

## Top Score

*By Kristina T. Saccone*

The precious Game Boy came into my life with two  
grey cartridges containing whole worlds. Super Mario Land stymied me

DOUBLE

but Tetris just made sense. On the green screen, cubes  
cascaded, turned, shifted, all fell gracefully in the right place.

DOUBLE

In this logic puzzle, the rules did not change when  
Dad got wound up from another bad day at work  
or I forgot to turn the family room lights off  
or failed my French quiz and triggered a raging storm.

TETRIS

I couldn't figure out how to kill Bowser, but my brain  
found order in this waterfall of 8-bit blocks, ten lines.

## DOUBLE

I was a virtuoso with my thumbs, harmony locking pieces  
into place, bumping my score up and up and up.

## DOUBLE

Dad said to focus my energy on memorizing verb conjugations,  
working algebraic equations, reading and analyzing literature, writing artful  
poetry,  
turning down the stereo, and getting a good night's rest.

## TRIPLE

Instead, I closed my door and turned up the tempo

## SINGLE

on the synthesized Russian soundtrack, a trill of electric tones,  
clearing line after line, each disappearing with a crescendo.  
I mastered it. Actually doing something right in a home  
where nothing would ever be good enough for my father.

## TETRIS.

## The Wii Waltz

*By Tanner Armatís*

At the start of 2007, the children in my class collectively received the same Christmas gift: a Wii. We all talked about how the motion controls were the coolest and that this device would change the world. The Xbox didn't matter, the PS2 was so last year, and handheld consoles waited for us in junk drawers. Everybody was on Wii Sports, even the girls. We had records to set and friends to beat. I tried my best to follow the instructions and do as the game asked, but my friends developed tricks to beat the motion controls. They wanted to sit on the couch. I didn't believe them. The Wii didn't have cheat codes or short-cuts. I told them they just had to stand and play the game. I tied the Wiimote to my wrist, stood a few feet from the TV, and I swung at the screen viciously, sweating over long tennis and boxing matches. I shouted curses and belittled my friends as they laughed over their countless victories from the couch. Even in bowling, I had perfect form but Dylan said that didn't matter. He could get a strike every time because of this cheat he invented by holding the Z button down till the last second. After a few days of losing every match against my friends, I accepted my way was wrong. Video games were meant to be played on the couch. I learned every trick and started winning games, even against my older brother. The competitive teasing was shared between our group as there wasn't an indisputable winner every game.

We talked about who our champion was— to fight the other kids in town. Dylan was hotheaded but knew the tricks the best, Colt was inconsistent but when on fire, he was hot, and I was still new to their ways, so we played more until our champion was obvious. We all got too good and decided we should play to our strengths. Dylan was our bowling god, Colt was our boxing king, and I was the tennis master. We went through the neighborhood with nunchucks swinging from our hands— we challenged every kid with a Wii. We won so many matches, some hard-fought, some too easy to be considered, that kids were asking us for help. They wanted us to teach them. And with all the affectionate attention, Dylan thought we should show them the ways. Colt said it was a careful process and needed a strict routine. And I thought holding the Wiimote was like holding a hand during a dance. We agreed and the Wii Waltz began. We switched households and collaborated on appointments at school. Kids paid for our services with candy and soda. Once nerds stuck inside to the confines of our home, we were now prodigies— popular and proud. Soon, through our teachings, we were no longer the best. Tyler rose as the town's greatest. People shared what they learned to others, and we were no longer needed. But we didn't have the anxieties of adulthood, the desire to be wanted, or the wish to cling onto our newfound reputation. We thought the several cans of soda and packages of candy we solicited was plenty for a couple of kids just wanting to play a video game.

violent video games found not to be associated with  
adolescent aggression

*By Sterling-Elizabeth Arcadia*

after you leave

i play

sims by

my-self

all the

way to the

end sims

do have

endings

too at least

points where

they can stop

i play

two sims one

is an artist the

other one

is too

but in sims  
your sims  
cant  
make a  
living off  
writing short-  
lined poems  
so one works  
in theatre  
and one is  
a barista  
these sims  
get to live  
with each-  
other they  
are in  
that place in  
their lives  
where they  
can be  
there  
for each other

i play until

things start

going wrong  
and the two  
sims find  
themselves less  
close than they were

i play until

their relation-  
ship which was  
always open  
with space  
enough for them  
to re-charge  
both apart  
and together  
changes and  
then it isnt any-  
more and they  
talk a  
little less

i play until

they stop  
talking about  
how they can  
support eachother

ones sim spends  
late nights at  
the theatre after  
shows the other  
stops showing  
up to the  
cafe or  
getting out  
of bed

i play until

one day  
one gets out  
of bed thinking  
the other is  
still-sleeping  
and sits in  
a coffee-shop  
for hours  
writing things  
they wish they  
had said  
before they return  
to a half-empty  
bed and bottle

not empty enough  
to kill not empty  
enough to be an  
accident they  
know these  
things they  
have both been  
there before  
and it's still enough  
to cut deep  
enough to bleed  
enough to dye  
the bath  
water red-dark  
enough to be  
an end-  
screen when

i play until

i pull

the plug with-

out saving and

it all goes

down the drain

## The Black Box She's Only Seen on TV

*By Melissa Llanes Brownlee*

Cousin has a brand new Atari in the living room. Tita chomps on her creme crackers, smothered in margarine. She dunks them in hot cocoa, oily clumps escaping to the surface with each dip. She pretends she doesn't want to play it. She wants more crackers and butter and cocoa but she wants Pac-Man even more. She gobbles up all the pellets as she drinks, the largest one, giving her power to eat all the blue obake. You can play Atari when you pau breakfast, Tita, Cousin says as she drinks her coffee. Tita smiles and says mahalo Auntie as she finishes her cocoa and crackers, a breakfast she could never have at home, where it was dry wheat toast and hot Lipton tea because everyone was on a diet, including Tita.

Her parents would never buy her an Atari. They don't even buy her Barbies. All their money goes to her older sister, for clothes and cars, for proms and cheerleading. They had sent Tita down south to her Cousin's ranch so they could help her sister prepare for her junior prom with the quarterback of the football team. Even Tita's father was washing and cleaning the car so he could chauffeur them, like he was a taxi driver instead of a cook at a hotel. She didn't understand why her sister got everything she ever wanted but Tita knew they were different. Her sister only ever talked to her when she wanted Tita to do something, iron my dress, clean my room, wash my clothes on delicate. Tita began to wonder if Cinderella was really a true story.

Tita washes her hands in the big kitchen sink, tippy toeing to reach the handles. She had to use a stool at home to wash and dry the dishes but she didn't want to bother Cousin. She soaps off all the margarine as quickly as she can. She doesn't want to get the joystick all greasy. The obake would surely get her if she does. Tita, make sure you get under your nails too. Okay, Aunty. She spends a little more time than she wants under the hot water and then she shakes her hands and rubs them against her favorite blue rainbow t-shirt. She tries not to run to the living room as Cousin follows her to turn on the TV and check that the dial is set to the correct channel. The black box she's only seen on TV and two joysticks sit on the carpet, waiting for her to insert the Pac-Man cartridge into the slot, which she does, settling down, front and center. She flicks the switch on the Atari as Cousin sits on the couch behind her, Pac-Man and the ghosts dancing across the screen as Tita pushes the start button and begins to play.

# Digital Dogs Die Too

*By Ann Doe*

The day my dog died was the day my mother changed her mind. I had begged her to let me have a Nintendo DS for years now. Always no, always no. That 2000s dream was unattainable. I did not have any friends anyway, so why wasn't I allowed to be friends with Mario and Luigi, competing in the Mushroom Cup?

But then my lovely little dog died. My last friend in this world. A few days later, my white dog had been exchanged. An interesting trade. Take the matted fur and swap it for a shiny white shell.

I did not get to play with Mario, Luigi and their friends. Instead, my mother had bought me an entire catalogue of potential new furry friends. Nintendogs had been all the rage that year. A brand-new game that gave all children the chance to own a pet.

It was supposed to give me a new friend. And for a while, it worked. I took that new puppy for walks, trained it, fed it, competed in tournaments – more than my eighteen-year-old terrier had ever been able to do.

Then summer came and went. Sitting inside, glued to a screen was no longer an accepted coping mechanism and I had to abandon my pixelated puppy. There were other adventures out there, and it could simply not take part in those. A point in which Nintendogs was not so different from my friend up in dog heaven.

With summer gone, I wanted to return to my computerised canine, but the game was gone. I looked everywhere, but that little disc was nowhere to be found. Another beloved dog lost to dog heaven in less than a year. My mother claims to this day that she did not take it, I must have lost it and that it doesn't matter. Digital dogs die too. My new replacement? A maths game that was supposed to make me better at school. Well, if digital dogs can die, they can also eat my maths homework.

## The Warthog Run

*By Michael McSweeney*

We throat-fired brown liquor as autumn sun bleached bone the windows in Bryce's dorm room. Day drinking felt necessary because we needed our wits discarded if we wanted to beat Metropolis in Halo 2 on Legendary without abandoning the Warthog.

How little we heeded our classes as we rained fire on our hearts & stomachs with sticky shot glasses & smoke-gulps from a crude gravity bong (that is: a carved-up plastic vodka bottle, tin foil, recycling bin employed for a whirlpool). We pushed on, guns laughing, this covenant against the Covenant. Our ride lurched through pixels with well-placed grenades, reset after reset, fuck up after fuck up, framerates demanded from our wheezing Xbox. Twenty attempts later we mounted the Scarab & cursed the Elites with our rockets. But we could proceed no more: a crossroads trapped our ride, so we slew the last enemies on foot & watched a new level dawn against windows flooded by night.

I carved a spot for my controller in the table debris, stood & bellowed as I stretched & air fled my bones. What we didn't know was that a great diminishing loomed. First, the Xbox's encroaching blindness, unable to read the discs we fed it. Then, what bound us—the dorm, a shared flair for the twirl of control sticks—faded as semesters slipped like hollow pledges from our fingers.

I last saw Bryce on graduation day. We shook hands on faded grass. He seemed smaller, his eyes edged by a kind of ice, & were we alone I might have asked what happened to us.

But our parents bent their heads politely, tugged our arms, & that was all. A Great Recession beckoned, a next uncertain stage of our lives, our bodies compelled by a plasma summer wind.

# Capitalist Gamification

*By Matt Schultz*

We were a working-class family. Dad spent his days stitching together the U.S. Interstate Highway System with ten-foot lengths of rolled-steel guardrail while mom sorted auto-insurance documents in the mailroom of a not-yet national agency. Left to my own devices, I whiled away my afternoons playing TMNT on an 8-bit NES that was hooked up to a 12-inch Magnavox television I had found in the trash down the street. The volume didn't work, but the picture was just clear enough.

The neighborhood kids would show up in the interstice between finishing their homework and dinner time to watch me play. No one said a word. We all just stared at the screen like a bunch of Wall Street traders waiting for the next big move to become clear. I had figured out that the key to destroying the Technodrome was grinding the Hudson River underwater levels to collect and stockpile the maximum number of Kiai Scrolls, which none of my friends had the patience to do. That metal beast would inevitably steamroll each of them into turtle soup as I easily slipped inside to face the final boss. Cowabunga!

What we were really doing when we navigated that poorly-pixelated rendition of New York City as humanoid reptiles from Upstate was practicing late-stage Capitalism: we worked, collected goods, spent them to destroy the competition, rewarded ourselves with pizza, and ultimately gleaned

super-species power from the toxic by-products of it all. It was the happiest we'd ever be.

## Resident Evil I

*By Shontay Luna*

Give me that mansion in the mountains,  
it was the first house I've ever truly loved.  
That lone, ornate structure in the midst  
of that wilderness known as the  
Arklay Mountains. Seven hundred fifty  
acres, twenty-eight rooms of taught tension  
and/or terror. And I know every single one  
even better than the rooms of my own  
house, which painfully pale in comparison.  
Finding myself gleefully comfortable with  
the hidden spaces and dark corners that  
ultimately reveal truths more horrific than  
anything that could possibly be imagined.  
As immense as it is, it's also deathly quiet.  
The only sounds are my footsteps and my  
blood pulsing through me. The former  
thread through creaky staircases, decaying  
patios and overgrown gardens. While the  
latter pulses through me. And somewhere,  
something can almost taste it. Waiting in  
eager anticipation.

# Explaining the kingdom hearts plot line in six hours or less

*By Magi Sumpter*

destinies tangled  
in disney-tinted daydreams  
polluting the plot  
//

destinies tangled as one lifetime eaten by the dark to persevere. you think you need the gummi ship minigames, but tonight is about the end of the world	in disney-tinted daydreams zipping to colosseums black-hooded figures whose names you learn later to wake up in the ocean, wishing only to drink sea salt ice cream while the heart sinks	polluting the plot with stardust speed, wielding the light's key that never matters. your sidekicks throw all your healing potions. happy endings and <i>zbuzb</i> in the next sequel.
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destinies tangled under paopu shade, in disney-tinted daydreams we try out polluting the plot, focusing on us as one lifetime. just kids—nothing more. zipping to colosseums is fun with stardust speed, but the moral is eaten by the dark. the pixelated black-hooded figures can't beat the child wielding the light's key on their bedroom floor. to persevere is to skip the cutscene, whose names you learn later might not matter. that never matters. they never add much.	you think you need to keep looking for her to wake up in the ocean, breathing deep. your sidekicks throw you out to the wolves, the gummi ship minigames a waste. wishing only to drink up traverse town, all your healing potions gather dust. but tonight is about nega-Riku, sea salt ice cream tasting sweet on blue tongue. happy endings and <i>zbuzb</i> come soon after, the end of the world paused till tomorrow. while the heart sinks into your controller, in the next sequel, you know even less.
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to skip the cutscene,  
the end of the world paused,  
you know even less.

*\*Special thanks to Rachael Crosbie for the poem's form.*

## Zero Out

*By Michael Hammerle*

My older brother and I were gifted a CD player each by our 80s cocaine-dealer looking Uncle and after about a year my older brother wasn't using his CD player as much as I was using mine. So I traded his, without asking him, for a teal Game Boy Color. It didn't come with any games because I didn't trade any music discs with the CD player. (A little fuck you to me from the kid who I was trading—which I deserved.) I was always getting the fairer end of the deal in things like a little brother is used to.

Before I got the teal Game Boy, I had borrowed the original off-white Game Boy from my best bud. My grandmother was always nervous about borrowing so she drove me to his house and made me give it back before I got to really play it. But when I'd started my first game (a tradition was born) I named my adversary Dip Shit. In the rare event that I dig up my purple Game Boy Advance, that tradition is alive and well.

The only way I was able to play Pokémon was when I'd get off the school bus at my best bud's house. He had all the Pokémon games and, through some trading, he had a spare Yellow that he told me I could have now that I had my own Game Boy. I was surprised to learn my game against Dip Shit saved on the off-white console and not the Yellow cartridge. I started a new game and we played until his Mom made us go to bed but I'd caught my first Pokémon that wasn't given to me by Professor Oak, my bud showed me the ropes, and how to get a bike.

But don't forget I traded my brother's CD player without asking so I was playing that teal Game Boy on borrowed time.

I kept the teal Game Boy with me everywhere and my 4th grade teacher, Mrs. VAUGHN, had seen it one too many times, confiscated it, and Yellow, before I had a chance to win the League. (I've been waiting 21 years to call her out in print!)

My brother had finally realized his CD player was gone and I told the truth via him sitting on my chest, holding my arms, ketchup-spit yoyo, and me screaming "I didn't trade your CDs. You still have Garth Brooks and SlipKnot." My brother got off me and went in our room to my night stand by my bed and grabbed all my CD player stuff. I let him and by the next day, when we got off the school bus, he had me in a headlock and was furious.

"This CD player doesn't fuckin' work!" he said in the front yard before we went inside.

"You have to play it upside down," I said. And he made me show him how to get my CD player to work. "Put a CD in it and flip it over, perfect, set it on its lid, so you can't see the CD spinning but you see the battery cover and then it plays music fine," I said.

"You little bitch. What did you trade my CD player for?" he said.  
"Give it to me."

I told him that Mrs. VAUGHN had taken the Game Boy that I got for it. My uncle, he'd also gotten us tracksuits that matched his own tracksuit. And in the pocket was \$50. My brother wanted that money but I'd already

spent it on a sleeve of baseball cards. So over the next month, each Friday, I'd give him my hard-earned allowance until he had a new CD player.

I bugged Mrs. VAUGHN, even told her the story, (that's where I messed up) because once she knew the story, she knew my Gram wouldn't be calling up there for the Game Boy. So Mrs. VAUGHN had my Game Boy and my Yellow. Every 9 weeks since she'd confiscated them she reassured me that at the end of the year I'd get my stuff back.

Come the end of the year I took a witness, my best bud, and she got her key and unlocked her confiscated-things drawer and rummaged and rummaged and came up with nothing.

"I don't know what happened to it," she said.

I didn't even shriek. I just took that news and hid it in my stomach. But I remember feeling like my family dog was stolen because of all my Pokémon on that teal console. I didn't even play with Pikachu really. There was a Mankey I'd raised from a level 5 to a Primeape; and a Rattata to Raticate (which is surprisingly devastating). Pikachu was third in my rotation but I actually looked forward to being reunited with those guys.

I'd graduated elementary school the day I asked her for my Game Boy and Yellow back. While all the kids were listening to Vitamin C's "Graduation" on repeat in the cafeteria / auditorium, me and my friend were running out the door hoping to get my Game Boy back and play all night at his house. We still played all night. He had a kiwi Game Boy and I was playing Red on his off-white Game Boy that my Gram still wouldn't let me borrow.

## Circling the Wagons

*By Jared A. Conti*

McGuffin's got nothin'  
but to propel  
this darn  
campfire yarn  
done spun  
from  
a deserted  
ice cream party  
at the Just A-OK Corral.

Thumb and forefinger  
circling back around.

Your release  
to the great halfpipe  
in the sky  
consequently coincides  
with the remastered  
Tony Hawk Pro Skater.  
Games we used to  
play  
at being adults  
someday, having to grow up  
yet  
let

it languish  
for twenty-some  
odd years.

360° circles back around.

Hanging back, you  
duck out early  
as was your habit.  
No need to be the center of attention:  
that was Bob's job.

Puff, puff, pass.  
It'll circle back around.

Longing  
to pick it back up again  
where we left off  
nostalgia  
welcoming  
with open arms  
carrying me  
drunkenly  
to sober up  
in the pokey.  
The missing windows  
of last night's  
bar fight,  
whites  
in my beard  
stragglers no more

reflected in  
the boarded up plate glass  
you escaped from.

Awake  
and baked,  
the hardpan  
blazing already  
at this time of day.  
Feet of clay  
I didn't think  
I'd have been caught  
in this time-sink  
drink tank  
quicksand  
of a calamity  
I'd never prepared for,  
dusting off these  
trailing  
wailings  
dry gulch parched  
and perched  
a vulture  
waiting  
for my demise  
circling back around.

## To My Brother Wayne

*By Sean Beatty*

I'm sorry I cheated.

Well, it wasn't really cheating.

We were playing 2K,

I was the Rockets

and you were the Lakers,

like so many games before,

my grip slipping on another fourth quarter

lead when T-Mac fouled out. I knew

I would choke again, and I prayed

for digital intervention.

I searched for his replacement

for a grueling overtime

scrolling past *S. Battier* and *A. Brooks*

until I saw a *T. McGrady* that should have

been grayed out, but by the grace of the

2K gods my 6'8" savior risen from the bench.

Despite your protests, I kept him in  
for just enough time to clench the W,  
and I did, and I won. A glitch or a gift?

That depends on which controller you held.

*The game let me do it.* It was my first win,  
but you said it didn't count, and I cried,  
and I yelled that it did, and I'm sorry  
that I didn't take him out, but I would

do it again without hesitation. You never

let me win, so how could I let me lose?

I'm not trying to convince you that

what I did was right, I just know

you'd have done the same.

## Goldeneye

*By Andrew Davie*

I had played Goldeneye when I was in college, but it was only after I had graduated that it became more than a game. I still enjoyed completing missions as James Bond, but the multiplayer battle royal fights to the death held a deeper meaning.

Typically, five of us, all friends from high school, would congregate at one of our houses and play for hours. It wasn't necessarily forbidden to select the character Odd Job (he was significantly shorter than the other characters. Hence, he was more difficult to hit) but, it was frowned upon. It would be similar to hearing a parental figure tell you they weren't angry; they were just disappointed. However, selecting Baron Samedi, who was the easiest to hit due to his height, wouldn't curry favor.

There were many of these paradoxes.

This was Thunderdome, and according to Tina Turner AKA Aunt Entity "Death is listening and will take the first man that screams."

Weapon selection was next, and the group rarely selected timed, remote, or proximity mines considering how much damage one hit would inflict. So, while it certainly didn't stop us from playing a few rounds using those weapons, or picking the rocket launcher, or the RC-P90 machine gun, that fired almost 200 rounds a minute, most of the time we went with handguns. Throwing knives didn't have the gravitas we wanted.

“Perching” was highly frowned upon. Perching /pərCHing/ the act of lying in wait for someone while lurking on a higher level and assassinating them i.e. waiting in a doorway on level two while someone entered the same room on level one and shooting said person.

Most of the memories I have come from playing on “The Temple Level.” Each character would start in a separate room, and the screen would be split into quadrants with a POV from each character. There was also a radar on the screen which illustrated the locations of everyone in the game.

Once the game began, it was kill or be killed. If you died, you were subjected to ridicule. Whether it had been deserved was immaterial. However, the character would respawn in another room. The whole experience is similar to Denis Lemuix’s, the goalie from the film *Slap Shot*, theory on committing a penalty in hockey.

“You do that; you got to the box. Two minutes by yourself, and you feel shame, and then you are free.”

We adopted two styles of play when it came to firing weapons. There were those of us who preferred precision and took the time to aim using the crosshairs feature. This could be time-consuming but would allow for better accuracy. Since all of us were in our early twenties and had played the game often enough, our reflexes and muscle memory were top-notch. The other method was to simply spray the area. The downside included a rapid loss of ammunition but you were more likely to inflict damage.

There were also bulletproof vests in certain rooms, and my clearest memory is the location of a bulletproof vest on the Temple level. It was at the

end of a long corridor that didn't provide any cover. Going for the bulletproof vest was a risky proposition, though it rarely stopped any of us from attempting. If you managed to get the bulletproof vest, you could be cornered in the room. While alliances were never formally made, almost everyone would gang up on the person who went for the bulletproof vest. We did not abide by Robert's Rules of Order or The Geneva Convention. This was total war like Sherman's March.

However, there was never a victor. One session would end, and the next one would begin. It was a cathartic experience for everyone involved and would last late into the evening.

Even though it's been almost twenty years, if we were to regroup and play another round, we would probably fall back into the routine. One of the crew eventually became a Biomedical Patent Lawyer, another runs a hedge fund, a third was a drummer in "Blue Man Group," and is now the percussionist of a stoner rock band. The final person joined The Airforce Special Forces and upon his discharge now guards VIPS for the service. I, myself, became a teacher. However, we would all probably revert to the recent college graduates we had been while trying to shoot each other with DD44 Dostoveis.

## The Woman in the Red Ferrari

*By David Cook*

Dad likes to play car games on our Commodore 64 and he loves Out Run most of all. He pilots his big red Ferrari around the desert tracks and city streets with the joystick, grinning as it drifts round bends and whooping when he wins and the blonde lady passenger gives the man behind the wheel a kiss.

He spins around on his chair. 'Come and have a go,' he says, but I shake my head. It's not that I don't like cars, they're okay, it's just that I don't understand why the game makes me drive with a girl instead of a boy. But I know better than to say that. Instead, I ask if we can play Monty Mole. I can see in Dad's face that he knows why I won't play Out Run and something that I've seen before flashes across his eyes. For a second I get scared, but he just looks at the floor and says 'Oh, go on, then,' and goes downstairs while I change the cassette and the game loads.

Half an hour later, Dad still hasn't come back. I creep halfway down the stairs so I can peep into the living room. He's on the sofa. The football is on, but he's not really watching it. He's just staring into the air, beer in his hand.

I go back to my room and play Monty Mole on my own.

## The Age of Mortal Kombat II

*By Chidiebube onye Okohia*

*There is no knowledge that is not power*

—Ultimate Mortal Kombat 3

### Round One

Sex was the cartridge  
inserted into the *Sega Mega Drive 2*. Consummation was  
anytime Mortal Kombat came on,  
anytime my hands held a joystick,  
anytime my fighter won a  
match. This was my early education  
on sex. *Boju boju, police & thief,*  
*suwe, tinko tinko, canter—*  
were now games I've outgrown.  
Epiphany. My heart  
had been touched  
by the tongues of fire  
of this fighting game.

### Round Two

*There are good*  
*addictions. Sometimes*  
*an addiction is a virtue,*  
*a revelation of care.* I  
slipped out of classes  
to visit video game  
shops; burned my afternoon hours

playing with strangers. Whenever  
Lent came, hunger seemed to hibernate because fast was merely mental.

I

crammed moves  
faster than I remembered  
maths' formulas.  
X-A-X-B-C-Z-C-Z-A-A-X.

Liu Kang's Brutality.  
Falling like a withered leaf  
from the top of my head,  
like pi's 3.14159265358979323846...

Round Three

"Mum, it's just a game" would get you  
a beating for days. Games  
don't spurt blood, reveal gore,  
show broken bones & charred bodies.  
Yet, playing MK was as an  
extension of love, like  
the finishing moves of  
friendship or babality  
even though many parents didn't allow their wards to express this love. Little  
boys  
should be allowed to play; let them learn  
to communicate their emotions.

powerful and mysterious

*By Linda Crate*

i wanted to be orchid  
of *killer instinct* or be with her  
maybe both

spin kick the destruction  
of my enemies on my hands,

turn into a wild cat;

change my outfit to any color  
i pleased depending on mood  
with one click—

i have always loved strong women  
because i have always known them,  
and grown up to become one;

i always loved orchid because she  
was the only female on that game and  
they didn't make her shy or fragile  
but powerful and mysterious  
as the dark side  
of the moon.

## Lost in My 64

*By Zach Murphy*

Wipe off the dust  
Blow in the cartridge  
It's time to journey deep into the Water Temple

Gather up the Bros  
Insert the rumble packs  
It's time to Smash with wily hammers and furious fists

Wipe the sweat off the palms  
Crack the knuckles  
It's time to race on the Rainbow Road

Check the clock  
Grab some snacks  
It's time to float with Kirby

Lost in my 64-ever

# Raging Demon Gave Me A Raging Fit

*By Reggie Johnson*

When I was younger, there was only one thing  
Me and my brother did to settle problems  
Play fighting games  
It didn't matter  
Tekken, Mortal Kombat  
However, Street Fighter was the game we played the most...  
And I hated it  
Because I would always lose when he would pick Akuma  
All because of that Raging Demon attack  
Low Punch, Low Punch, Right, Low Kick, High Punch  
I've seen that slide of instant death more than I've seen MJ do the moonwalk  
To be a kid, to lose so much to that same special move  
You can just imagine the tantrums  
Controllers thrown  
Console turned off  
And thing is, I would keep coming back to play  
I owe my brother that rematch  
I've learned to do the Raging Demon special move now  
I wonder what the outcome will be...

THANK YOU FFVII FOR MAKING ME CRY TWICE AND ABOUT TO BE A

## THIRD TIME

*By Reggie Johnson*

I'll never forget the time I cried over a storyline in a video game

Not once, but twice

And I would say the first Kingdom Hearts game would be a close second

Because Simple & Clean by Utada Hikaru

Was my favorite song from a video game for a long time

It was having to watch Aerith die in the Forgotten City by the hands of  
Sephhiroth

I remember it vividly in my childhood

How could they do this in a game?

Why did you let the villain kill one of the good guy?

I watched my brother play it first shocked

But then doing it myself

I was ready to throw the controller

Enraged thinking it would be a different outcome

I wanted to transport to the Forgotten City

Take Cloud's Buster Sword

And fight Sephiroth myself

And all of the Jenova-life

I wanted to be there for the funeral

In the middle of the city  
And watch as he laid her body to rest  
That will forever be my favorite moment  
In a video game  
And now years late, when Square Enix  
remakes this part of the game  
I'm going to go back to being that little kid all over again  
Crying for a third time

