



**HAYWIRE
MAGAZINE**
ISSUE 2 • CHOICE

Stealth or combat? Swords or magic? Rifles or shotguns? Paragon or Renegade? Hacking or swimming? Games are full of interesting decisions and this issue's selection of choice articles is dedicated to exploring the options, variables, dilemmas and quandaries that define our medium.

In recent years we've come to associate 'choice' with the kind of scripted, binary decisions BioWare is renowned for crafting. Yet as wonderful as these moments are for allowing slight narrative deviation, they hardly represent the epitome of agency, the ability to make meaningful decisions within a specific set of rules. This is what games truly excel at: Every second of play is riddled with options, from the basics of movement to tactics and superordinate strategies.

But it would be wrong to assume that more agency necessarily equals better games. *Mass Effect* and *Minecraft* are completely different games - one is defined by its 'either/or' tree of narrative decisions, the other sets you free to explore, fight, craft and build without instruction or boundaries - but one is as valid as the other. Restrictions can foster creativity. Limited choice adds significance to the options that are left to you.

In this issue we cover choices in all shapes and sizes. Jack Nicholls contemplates the one, game-spanning conundrum of *Max Payne 3*. Andrew Huntly considers the sacrifices we make facing the undead. Stewart Melville explores the appeal of blind decisions. I talk to Failbetter's Chris Gardiner about crafting choice, and I've also been polling our contributors on their choices in key moments of certain titles, with interesting results. You can find them spread across the issue.

As a special treat, we've also included our favorite games of 2012. It is a new year after all, Mayans be damned, and what better time to make short-lived life-altering decisions. Here at Haywire, we're considering ways to fill the off-months in between issues (like insane discussion pieces), acquiring webspace and a Flattr button. As always, you can reach me at haywiremagazine@gmail.com and I'm looking forward to your input. You could also follow me on Twitter ([@deadpanlunatic](https://twitter.com/deadpanlunatic)) for regular Haywire updates and previews.

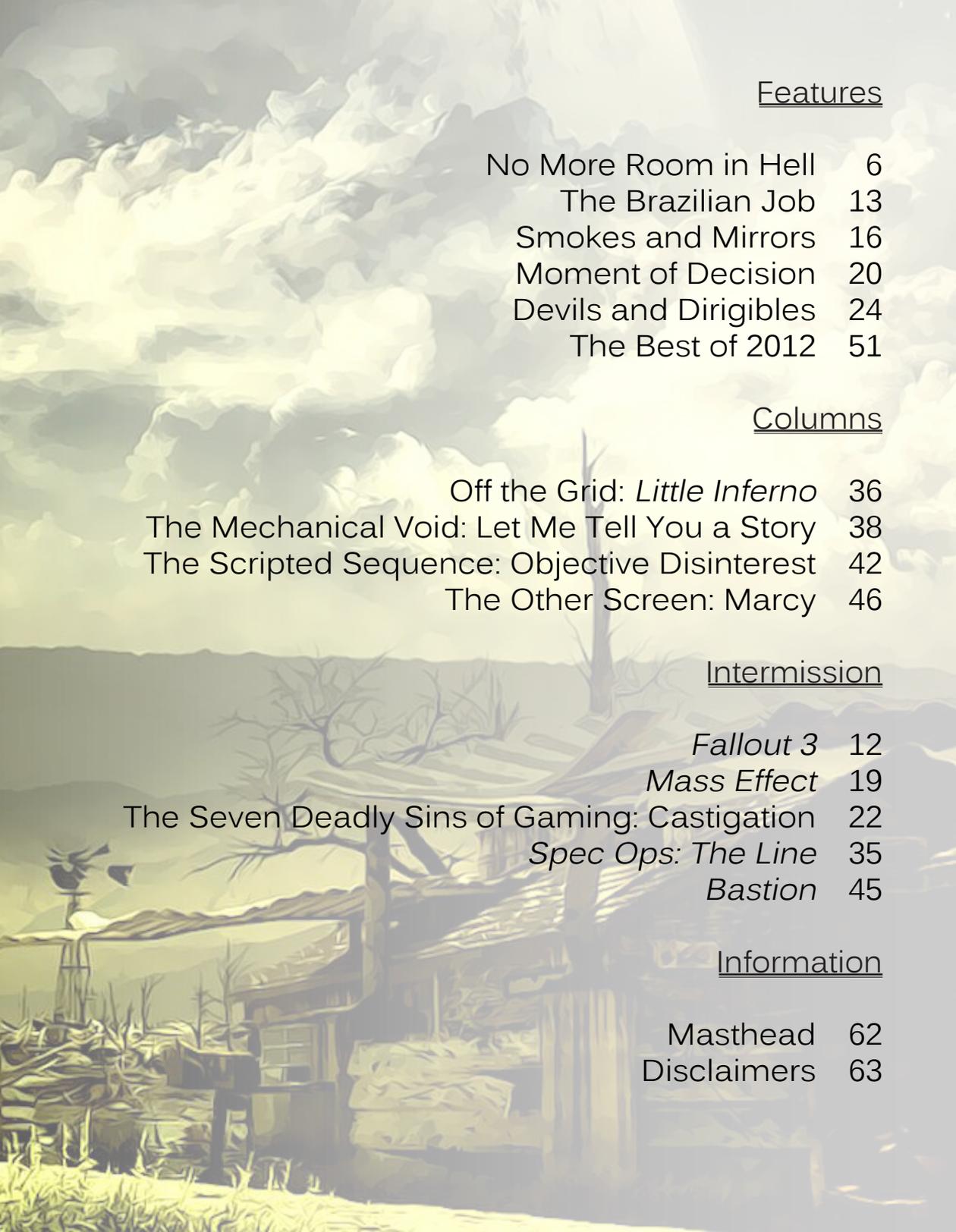
Happy new year everyone. Make it a good one.

Cheers,
Johannes Köller
Editor-in-Chief

HW







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No More Room in Hell

Andrew Huntly finds morality in an undead world.

It feels like we've been trapped in this room for hours, but finally the clawing, gnashing horde have slowed to a crawl, their ploughing force dripping away into a few stragglers stumbling through the window and up the stairs. It's only a temporary reprieve, so we need to keep moving. I take the initiative and head through the window, fighting to see through my monochrome vision. My feet have scarcely touched the ground when I hear the screeching. Distant now, but not for long. Our only option is to push forward to the safehouse on the other side of the bridge, a disused train carriage.

I'm limping, pace completely shot, but I keep going. I know as soon as I turn to sneak a glance behind, they'll

be upon me. One of my compatriots is keeping up, the other two seem to have slipped into the horde, vanishing underneath a sea of teeth and claws. We are close to the safehouse and that solid, red door now, but first we need to make a choice. Should we save our friends at great risk to our own lives or abandon them and go on? The decision is made for me when my final teammate hurls a molotov cocktail into the horde, burning the creatures alongside our friends. They disappear into the crackling fires, and we sprint across the bridge, before slamming the saferoom door shut. If that molotov hadn't halted the ravenous crowd hot on our tail, it's likely we'd be just as dead as our two compadres.

A burst of music slashes through

the thick atmosphere. Our stats flash up, congratulating us for making it this far. And then we find ourselves back in that saferoom, together with our two fallen comrades. We'd seen them burn up mere moments ago, but now they're here with more health than either of us, more ready and prepared than we could ever be.

Moments like these give a strange feeling of disconnect in *Left 4 Dead*, Valve's co-operative zombie shooter. It's a game focused on survival, wherein your only real objective is to push from safehouse to safehouse without dying too much in the process. Exploring levels rewards you with weapons and items, but those tools only carry over if the player in question makes it to the safe zone. With the game's dynamic director system, item locations and even entire pathways can shift throughout the game. There's rarely a complete strategy to be built, sessions focus on improvisation and a dedication to get at least one of you through that door.

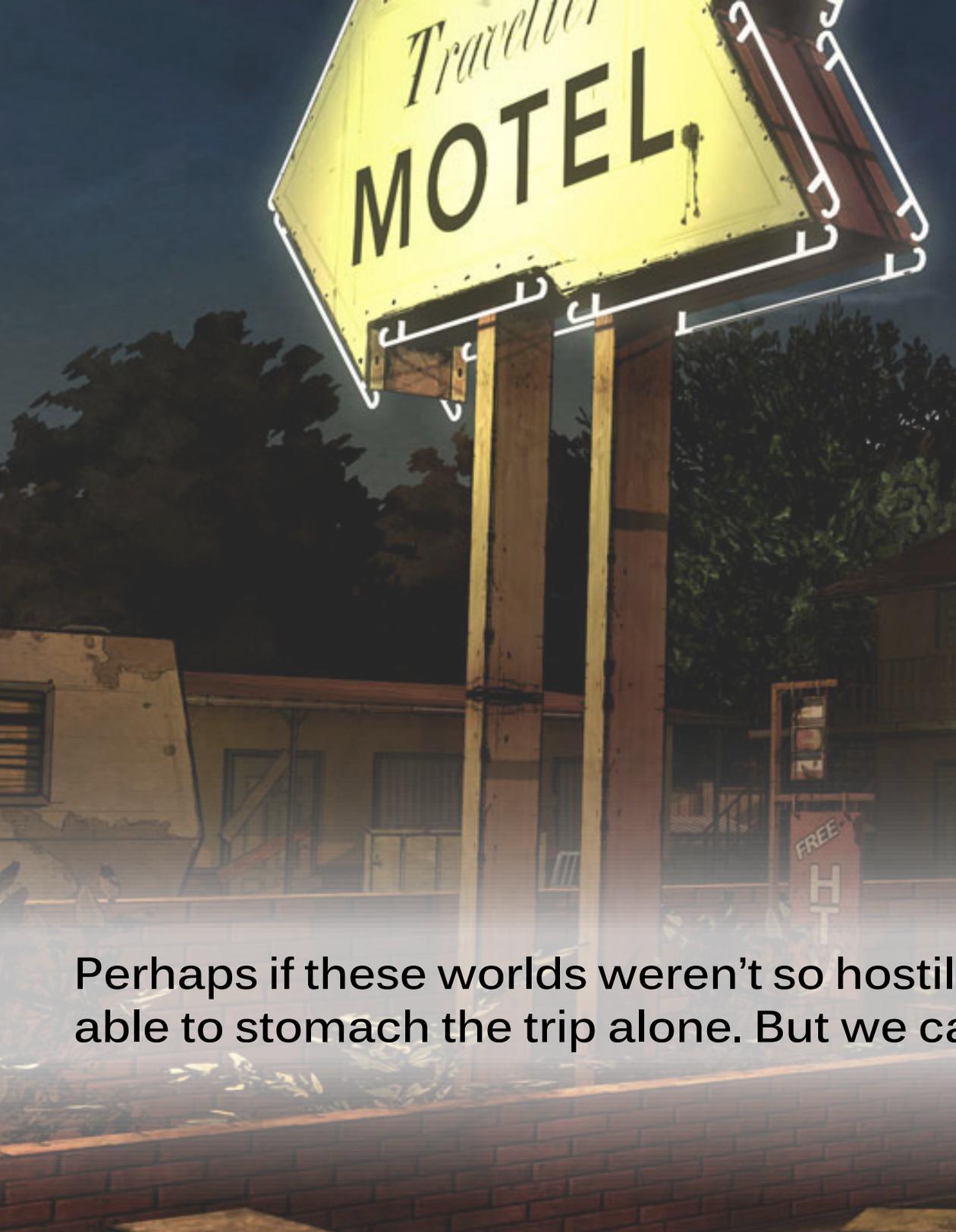
You'd think that such a simple objective would lead to a sense of merciless abandonment, as teammates who can't keep up are left to the grinder.

And yet, risks are taken each and every chapter. Healing items are handed over. Teammates are revived in the middle of zombie hordes when it would be far more practical to leave them. There's only so much good an extra gun can do. Many of these risks are taken out of sheer selflessness to help other players in dire circumstances. I have a particularly bad habit of handing over medkits even while others still carry theirs. Perhaps I'm boldly overestimating my abilities, but I always feel my fellows in misery will need that health more than I ever will.

Who survives and who does not becomes a question of your own desire to see them cross that finish line.

It creates an interesting dynamic, who survives and who does not becomes a question of your own desire to see them cross that finish line.

Those who perish bounce back into the safehouse with enough health to sustain another long haul, so the sensible decision would always be to leave the dying behind. And yet, in my experience, nobody does. When people fall, even knowing they'll come back hobbling and in even further need of aid, there's always a valiant attempt to pick them right back up. The design philosophy encourages abandonment and the preservation of resources, and



Perhaps if these worlds weren't so hostile
able to stomach the trip alone. But we ca

A man with a beard and a young girl are standing in a desolate, post-apocalyptic setting. The man is wearing a light blue button-down shirt over a white t-shirt and has a serious expression. The girl is wearing a purple baseball cap and a white tank top, looking off to the side with a concerned expression. They are standing in front of a building that appears to be under construction or in ruins, with wooden framing visible. The sky is dark and cloudy, suggesting a storm or a gloomy atmosphere. The overall tone is somber and reflective.

le and devoid of life and warmth, we'd be
an't - there's a desire for companionship.

yet players are willing to throw their bullets, medkits and even lives away in the hope of pulling another to safety.

At first glance, Telltale's recently concluded *The Walking Dead*, an adaptation of Robert Kirkman's comic series, seems to be the complete opposite of *Left 4 Dead's* explosive, fast-paced excitement. Built on the foundations of Telltale's adventure game roots combined with Quantic Dream's cinematic approach, *The Walking Dead* adds more explicit choice with telegraphed moral quandaries based around the game's richly written cast. There's even the option to have the game vaguely tell you how characters are reacting to your actions and responses. While the binary mechanics are masked by the game's great presentation, it's clear what choices are to be made.

Left 4 Dead and *The Walking Dead* appear, on the surface, to be completely different creatures, vastly different takes on the zombie apocalypse. But there's a very crucial moral throughline that connects the games - survival versus altruism. At some point in both games, the sensible thing was to walk away, or to kill for my own survival. And yet, those options never felt right. So many choices in *The Walking Dead* were

made to prolong the life of characters I might not even have liked or trusted. When teammates in *Left 4 Dead* lie with their health being clawed away by the horde, there is always a need to break through and see them survive.

With their respective zombie epics Telltale and Valve produced more than simply a vision of the creatures. They created worlds, places that feel as though the civilization we knew had ended and this is all we have left. From the dark roads and claustrophobic forests of *Left 4 Dead* to the barren and hopeless landscapes in *The Walking Dead*, the zombie apocalypse never felt more desperate. These aren't idyllic fantasy lands, where the true weapon is your extensive knowledge of Romero films. These worlds are bitter and hateful. Death and hurt can come from any angle. Perhaps if these worlds weren't so hostile and devoid of life and warmth, we'd be able to stomach the trip alone. But we can't - there's a desire for companionship. However fleeting it might be, and however broken our friends are, it's comforting to know there's someone else there beside you at the end of the world.

I remember the way that molotov sailed through the air and smothered two good people more than any time I

If I could save one life and keep it safe, it would all be worth it.

picked them up. There was no way to save them, and yet a layer of guilt still remained. The game had pushed us, nodded and told us that to just cross that bridge and get inside that saferoom would fix everything. And of course, the two we had just seen burn up, sprung to life before us as though nothing had happened. In the end, it was a necessary sacrifice. But it felt so much like a loss. There was a slightly bitter knowledge that even though they stood beside us now, we'd let them turn to ash solely to survive a little longer. Later, as I played through *The Walking Dead*, I began to realize how small, fragile and precious a single life is. Character's I put emotion and trust into bled away, no matter how much I tried to save them. Instead of

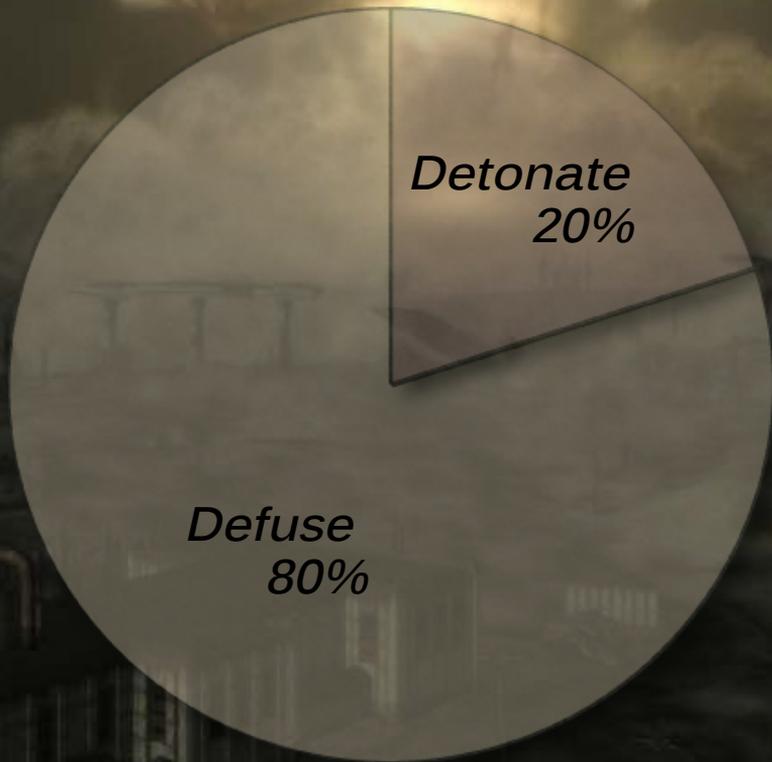
giving up and condemning them all to death, I kept trying. I kept hoping I could do better. If I could save one life and keep it safe, it would all be worth it.

It's this very idea that forces us to run back and pick up our teammates in *Left 4 Dead*, even when we hear the shriek of the horde coming for us. There's so little good left in this world, and we'll be damned if we let it take the final remnants of life from us. In the fight for survival, what's the point of carrying on alone when everything meaningful and real is gone? Nobody said keeping everybody alive would be easy, but when the last cities fall and the dead roam the planet, every small, fragile and precious life becomes a beacon of hope.

HW

Intermission...

Fallout 3



The Brazilian Job

Who is Max Payne? Jack Nicholls looks for the man behind the outrageous shirt.

Chaos. Fire. Max is approaching a man burnt beyond recognition, missing limbs and bleeding heavily. It doesn't take a second glance to know that this man will soon die from his wounds. But we've seen this before. Heard the musings. This exact scene serves as the intro to Rockstar's *Max Payne 3*.

"So I guess I'd become what they wanted me to be, a killer. Some rent-a-clown with a gun who puts holes in other bad guys. Well, that's what they'd paid for, so in the end that's what they got." Max begins, now pointing his gun at the struggling body. "Here I was about to execute this poor bastard like some kind of dime store angel of death, and I realised they were correct. I wouldn't know right from wrong if one of them was helping the poor and the other was banging my sister."

And that's where the intro ends, cutting back to Max' drunken exploits

as a bodyguard for São Paulo's most affluent. But now, after some ten hours of tearing up the city in search of answers, you are back at the gruesome scene to conclude the previous cinematic. But it's not a cutscene anymore. The man before you, we have come to learn, is Armando Becker, head of a corrupt police force involved in human trafficking, organ harvesting and the murder of Max' clients. Do you shoot him?

It's not a very significant choice on the grand scale of things. At this point Max has already shot dead enough people to keep grave diggers in pocket until retirement, and Becker is dying anyway. In a way you're only extending his agony by denying him a bullet. He's already dead. But whether you decide to end his life personally or leave him to burn for his sins speaks to Max' motives, and your interpretation of his character.

Is Max Payne a mad murderer or a



remorseful killer? Have the deaths of his wife and child broken him, left him to wage an endless war on the terrors of his past or does he just want to do some good before death reunites him with his family? Does he kill because he has to or because he is beyond caring? Is he a grim reaper or a lost man trying to make a difference the only way he knows how?

Your personal analysis of Max character culminates in the decision to shoot or not to shoot Becker, but Rockstar have been weaving these considerations in throughout the game. Many of *Max Payne 3*'s combat arenas are swarming with unarmed civilians. You are free to shoot them without reprimand, if you're feeling reckless, or you can go out of your way to minimize civilian casualties.

At one point in the game, while fighting through the police station housing Becker's operation, an armed goon bursts into the room only to see Max standing over the bodies of his slaughtered colleagues, and drops his gun in surrender. You are free to kill him - perhaps you've already shot him on instinct as he threw open the door,

missing this scene entirely - but he's no longer a threat to you. He won't come after you.

The image of surrender is twice powerful, forcing you to think carefully about your next move, to trust him and spare him or to cover your back and punish him. But the fact that this one man out of all the goons you fought surrenders to you in this particular and deliberate setup also shows that he fears you, and possibly for something other

than your superior skills. Does he take you for a madman? Or a crusader?

Perhaps Rockstar themselves consider one interpretation more in line with their intended reading than the other, since sparing Becker grants an achievement while shooting him does

not. Still, ultimately it's up to you to decide whether Max kills only when he has to, or is entirely unhinged. Is he a crazed gunman or unfortunate would-be hero?

So, do you shoot him or not?

Is Max Payne a mad murderer or a remorseful killer? Does he kill because he has to or because he is beyond caring?

HW

Smokes and Mirrors

Free choice? Stewart Melville is rooting through the industry's big bag of tricks.

There's definite excitement in the air whenever a game is drawing to a close. All the time and energy invested is about to be rewarded as the game rolls up its sleeves and throws the toughest challenges yet in your way. Still, only a few more precious steps separate you from that ever-elusive final cutscene, the ultimate prize for all previous hardship. How cruel, then, of *Oddworld: Abe's Odyssey* to treat players to an ending in which the game's villain, Molluk, drops the titular hero, Abe, into a meat grinder.

Instead of the catharsis of a happy conclusion, where everyone gets what's coming to them, we're left shocked, confused, angry even. All that time and patience we invested and all we got in return is Molluk and his cronies cackling amicably at a job well done. Or perhaps at a job poorly done by us as players: After the ending

cinematic has run its course a message appears, berating the player for not rescuing more of Abe's buddies during the game, a condition for earning the good ending. We are then plopped back to the halfway mark and left to try again.

It was a valuable lesson in realizing that, as a player, I had a certain amount of control over how things were going to turn out in the end. I'd spent some

part of the game half-heartedly helping Abe's buddies, but the rest of it whaling on them while possessing machine-gun toting Sligs or dropping heavy rocks on their heads. It was

The consequences do not reflect our actions, but rather our choices.

all fun and games, until the ending cinematic dropped me into a whirling bladed pit of karma. I had brought this on myself. The outcome might not be as complex as the myriad of consequence trees of today's games, but it felt like the game world and its denizens had

reacted to my actions.

Compare this to the several hundred dialogue options players can expect to find in any modern RPG, influencing everything from small conversations to world-changing events. These options are prompts, skewing the narrative in one direction or the other, but they don't technically add a great deal of agency. They present a prefabricated set of outcomes to choose from, a bit like choose-your-own-adventure novels, but with auto-saves instead of holding your thumb on pages to go back.

It's part of a game developer's job to create these kind of boundaries. Any narrative with a clear beginning and end, no matter how many branches or ends it includes, requires certain limits on player freedom. Give them too much and the narrative can be disrupted to the point of internal logical breakdowns. Still, we cannot properly call these prompts enablers of player agency,

since the consequences don't reflect our actions, but our choices.

If the player is aware of what a decision entails, they are effectively deciding which pre-planned scenario they want to watch, making them more a spectator than an active participant. If the player isn't fully aware of immediate and far-reaching consequences, however, a sense of agency can be retained within what is essentially a static narrative. It's these kind of blind prompts that make us hold onto pages for a quick rewind.

But they can also be used to create greater degrees of player agency. In the climax of *Dino Crisis*, Capcom's sister project to the popular *Resident Evil* series, the player is asked to make a decision. The last obstacle to your escape is gone, but your target, Dr. Kirk, has managed to slip away. One of your teammates insists on going after Kirk. Another urges you to stop him, to forget about Kirk and just get



away. A little box pops up, asking you to choose between the two prompts: go after Kirk or stop your teammate and focus on escaping. It's a classic split decisions, with two possible outcomes and consequent endings.

Upon sitting through the credits and seeing the results screen, however, the player might be surprised to discover that there are, in fact, three endings. The third option is achieved by picking one prompt, and then undertaking the actions outlined by the other. You need to twist the game's instructions and perform a mixture of both prompts upon your own initiative. This blind prompt is cleverly buried under what, at first glance, appears to be a clearly binary affair. Faced with two visible prompts, it's easy to miss the hidden third option.

Unfortunately, even when applied creatively, the lifespan of blind prompts is, by nature, limited. Once the consequences are revealed and explored by players, whether on their own or in cooperation with their peers, the blind prompt loses the shroud of mystery that made it effective in the first place. The curtains are pulled back and the inner workings of the narrative are exposed.

The world doesn't seem so big anymore, the story not so versatile and not so infinite in its possibilities.

Even so, blind prompts serve a valuable function in providing the illusion of agency and hiding the intentions of developers. If the direction of prompts are made known in advance, if the action and its consequences are immediately obvious, then the developer is almost telegraphing their punches. Instead of convincing players of their own agency within the game world,

they are making their own role obvious. This is a crucial part of storytelling, disguising the storyteller.

When Abe was dropped into that grinder, I didn't feel as if this was something a developer had made

happen. It felt like something I had made happen, a sign that the narrative had successfully pulled the wool over my eyes and convinced me of my own agency, if only for that precious first playthrough.

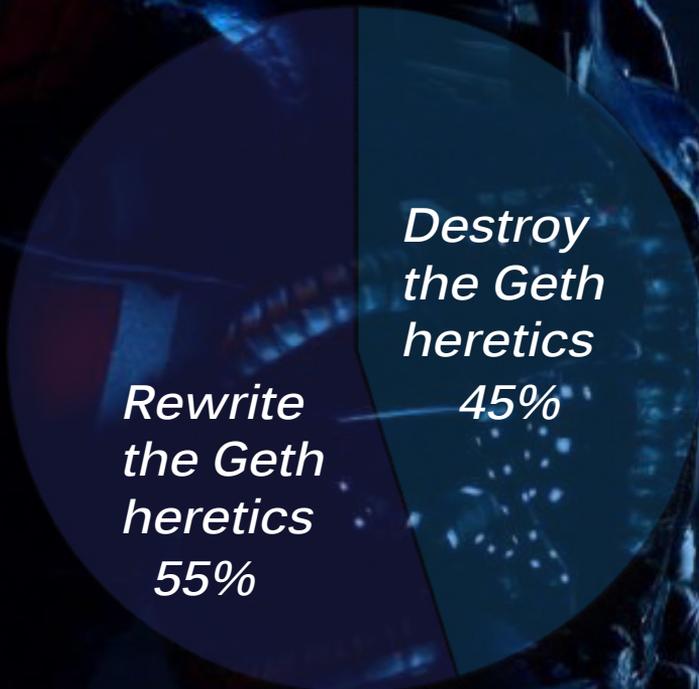
It was all fun and games, until the ending cinematic dropped me into a whirling bladed pit of karma.

HW

Intermission...

Mass Effect

A House Divided...



Moment of Decision



Does the timing and presentation of choices hold meaning in itself?

Trivun Luzaic muses about *Katawa Shoujo's* structure.

Before *Katawa Shoujo*, 4chan's surprisingly tasteful take on love and disability, I had never considered visual novels something I would enjoy, but going through the game's five story arcs, I was slowly converted.

The writing talent, the emotional twists, but most importantly, the choices I had to make. The realization how significantly my actions were impacting the lives of these characters was daunting. I was hooked.

I have no doubt this is a deliberate effort. As soon as our weak-hearted protagonist Hisao arrives at the Yamaku

Academy for disabled students, he is targeted by Shizune as a potential member of the student council she presides, and immediately you are forced to consider whether to fight or

permit her advances. It's a clever device to establish both Shizune's brash, forward character and choice as the central mechanic of the game.

Even more impressively, *Katawa Shoujo* understands

how to weave its decisions into the narrative and structural groundwork. Blind Lilly and her best friend, the scared and scarred Hanako are virtually

Katawa Shoujo understands how to weave its decisions into the narrative and structural groundwork.

inseparable, and their respective paths similarly connected. The first steps towards either of them are identical: They need to allow you in their little group, then you can worry about spending quality time with one of them. Rin has trouble trusting people, so before you can get her to reveal the truth about the accident that left her legless, you will have to confess your own condition.

The structure of each girls' path speaks to her character in some way. For most of Shizune's arc you have absolutely no say in matters, a testament to her controlling nature. The climactic choice takes place in her absence, between you and her friend Misha, exploring how her dominance affects the people around her. Rin, the self-destructive artist, spouts metaphors and non-sequiturs, but sports relatively straightforward choices, perhaps to

show that you can understand her needs even if you can't always make sense of her words. After plenty of kindness and support, Hanako's final dilemma asks you to abandon her in a time of need, to trust in her own strength, to establish you as equal partners and challenge her to come out of her shell. For her, the most helpful decision is the decision not to help her.

Many games use the same basic narrative mechanics as *Katawa Shoujo's* branching storyline, but few use them so effectively, so beautifully. Not only does it provide meaningful choices and portray their consequences in a meaningful way, it actually uses the grand structure of its decision tree to characterize its layered protagonists allegorically. Perhaps even BioWare could learn a thing or two from this humble project.

HW



Intermission...

The Seven Deadly Sins of Gaming: Castigation

Excuse me? Raid Leader? May I just have a quick word?

Let me first say that I understand your frustrations. If it wasn't for all of those pitiful players wishing to learn, you wouldn't have to keep demeaning their learning process. You picked up those skills perfectly well after devoting sleepless nights to their acquisition, so there's no reason that others can't do the same before they have to be put under your care. You've heard all about the excuses of fun, family and friends – The Three F's of Failure. No-one can expect to take down gods if they're not 110% focused on you.

And you are a godslayer, when everyone turns up, shuts up and listens up. The Three Ups of Success.

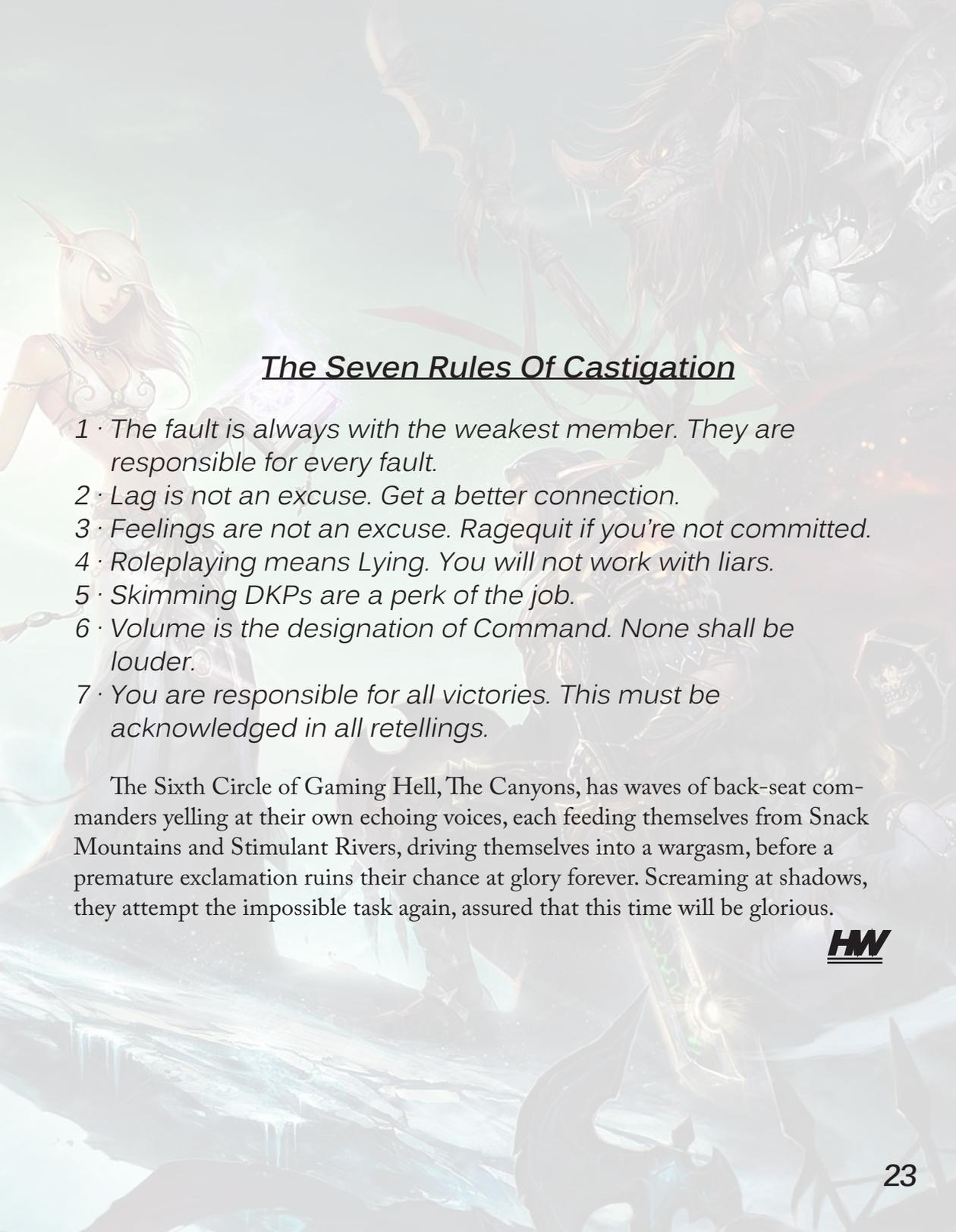
Your precise knowledge of DKP, kiting, aggro and loot tables makes you invaluable, and it's only hampered by those that ask questions. I know that you keep a small text file of every infraction: Each early DOT, each late buff, each lost aggro, each question – and you punish every one.

You have to. Every hesitation takes away their chance of nearly becoming a fully-armored Adonis such as yourself.

All of your armor is provided by the guild you work for. You never had to ask for any of it – just took it as due payment for your labor. And they would have never reached the glory of the Upper Planes without you. They would have just sat in the Lower Heavens, like the filthy casuals.

You would never be described as a cruel person, far from it. The people who leave the guild crying were only holding the rest of them back. Especially that one liar. And they won't happen again. Ever.

Never again will you drop your guard long enough to entertain such ideas as roleplaying. Sick, perverse lowlifes that pretend to be something other than they really are. You've always been the raid leader, and whenever the raid is on Gaming Hell, you will be there – bellowing from behind.



The Seven Rules Of Castigation

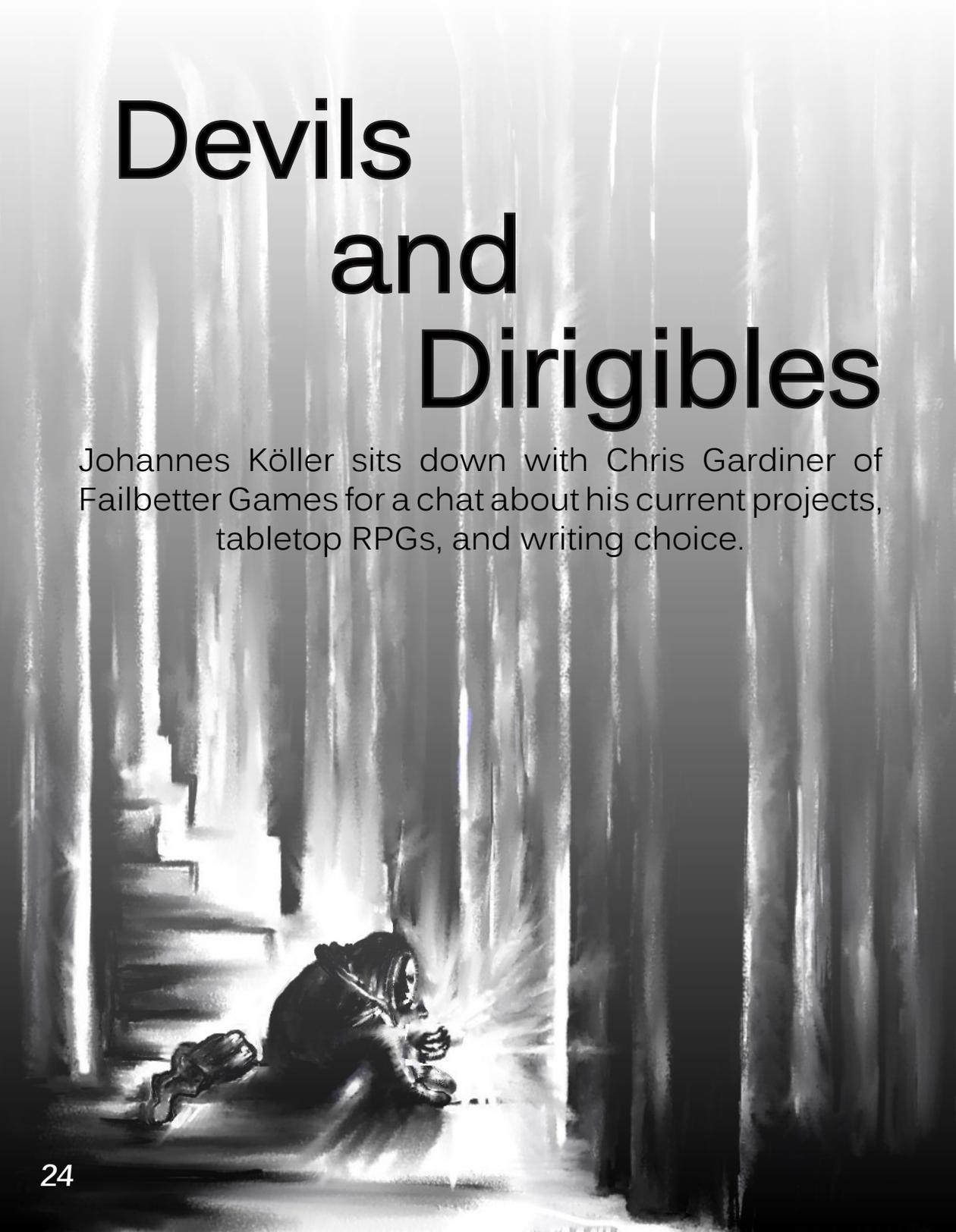
- 1 · The fault is always with the weakest member. They are responsible for every fault.*
- 2 · Lag is not an excuse. Get a better connection.*
- 3 · Feelings are not an excuse. Ragequit if you're not committed.*
- 4 · Roleplaying means Lying. You will not work with liars.*
- 5 · Skimming DKPs are a perk of the job.*
- 6 · Volume is the designation of Command. None shall be louder.*
- 7 · You are responsible for all victories. This must be acknowledged in all retellings.*

The Sixth Circle of Gaming Hell, The Canyons, has waves of back-seat commanders yelling at their own echoing voices, each feeding themselves from Snack Mountains and Stimulant Rivers, driving themselves into a wargasm, before a premature exclamation ruins their chance at glory forever. Screaming at shadows, they attempt the impossible task again, assured that this time will be glorious.

HW

Devils and Dirigibles

Johannes Köller sits down with Chris Gardiner of Failbetter Games for a chat about his current projects, tabletop RPGs, and writing choice.



Many browsergames tend to focus on resource management, creating huge armies and throwing them against fellow players for off-screen battles. Not so in the world Failbetter Games' *Fallen London*, where one might spend their time seducing artists, hunting secrets and picking sides in the game's various conflicts.

This unusual, thematically rich formula has proven a massive success. The game continues to grow, recently Failbetter added the spin-off prequel *The Silver Tree* and launched StoryNexus, a platform for people to build their own interactive narratives. With me today to discuss all these exciting developments is Chris Gardiner, former lead writer of Failbetter, who's currently working on a new game, *Below*.

Chris Gardiner: Hello! I have pre-prepared a list of long words, which I intend to deploy strategically to help me sound intelligent. Now watch me try and squeeze the word 'thrombogenesis' into this interview.

Haywire: Nice of you to join us. Now, despite interesting side projects like *Machine Cares*, the one thing people immediately associate with Failbetter Games is still *Fallen London*. Could you tell us a little about the beginning of that project? How did the idea of a Steampunk Victorian London come to be?

CG: *Fallen London* is the product

of Alexis Kennedy's brilliant, alarming, occasionally terrifying imagination. There's a lot of weird stuff in Alexis' head (Bifurcated Owls!), and we should all be very glad he's got a harmless outlet for it. He lives in London and has a keen eye for the city's history, plus a gift for both the chthonic and the comedic.

He first started work on the game in 2009, writing and coding the whole thing himself. He quickly partnered with Paul Arendt, who provided the art that has come to be a huge part of *Fallen London*'s success. Things snowballed from there.

HW: How much content does the game have at this point, if you could give us an educated guess?

CG: I believe it's well over half a million words, now. Or most of a Bible. It'll take a new player months of play time to reach the level cap.

HW: What's it like to contribute to such a beast? How do you keep things consistent between multiple writers?

CG: Consistency is a constant challenge. *Fallen London* uses a rigorous system of sub-editing and review to make sure all content has been thoroughly checked by several pairs of eyes. There are shared documents recording the setting's major plotlines and secrets, and solid search tools so contributors can find other references to whatever they're writing about.

At the same time, the setting is

broad enough to allow room for stylistic differences. The dreams are tonally very different from the slapstick of Shroom-hopping, which is different from the two-fisted exploration of the Unterzee. There are key principles writers all adhere to, but beyond them there's plenty of room for variety.

There have been many conversations about whether something is too bawdy, too contemporary, or too grisly. Occasionally these are heated.

HW: Speaking of the width of the setting, you were not content to just have all this content but also include numerous exclusive, character-defining choices. What does the writing process for those look like?

CG: It looks very careful, like someone poking a tiger with a stick. We try to avoid incurring too much content debt - if a choice locks off a significant amount of content, we need to write more content to replace it. This is the traditional problem with branching narrative, if each branch is exclusive, the amount of content you have to write multiplies fast, and the player only sees a fraction of it.

HW: So, ideally, you're looking for self-contained choices?

CG: Partly. Let's break down your phrase "character-defining choices" for a second. Alexis likes to talk about choice as consisting of three elements: choice, complicity and consequence. Choice is the decision you're faced with - do you save this person, or damn them. Complicity is the player's engagement with the decision - this is where good, provocative writing helps the player invest in the decision and treat it as significant. Consequence is how the game respects the decision that was made.

Consequence is where it can get expensive. But a little can go a long way in that regard. You don't need to be sent off on a whole unique path to feel your decision has consequences, if the game finds other ways to make it matter. Often, opening new options is just as engaging and more fun - there's an early quest in *Fallen London* called "The Case of the Comtessa," which ends with such a tough decision. Whatever choice you make, you'll later have the opportunity to think back on your decision and say how you feel about it

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now.

That recalls the event, acknowledges that it happened, and grants meaningful rewards, but it requires only a modest amount of new content.

Other times, of course, you do want dramatic consequences. If you pursue academia it's possible to get thrown out of the University for taking a stand. And if that happens access to the area is lost until you can reopen it. But that's still just one area out of the - Thirty? Forty? - in the game.

HW: How many of these binary, either/or decisions are currently in the game?

CG: It's the minority, partly because being able to go back on them makes for a good story. You've been thrown out of the University, now are you going to accept that, or are you going to fight against it? Really interesting decisions are ones that you keep making, day after day. Decisions like fidelity, or not touching drugs, or working in a job you find objectionable. Choice is rarely final.

That also makes the choices that are final all the more powerful.

There's a particular example in

Fallen London, a quest for knowledge called "Seeking the Name." Every step along its path is painful, awful and costly, and the further you go, the worse it gets. There is no big reward at the end of it, only the promise of more suffering.

It is incredibly popular. But to pursue it you have to choose to do so over and over again, even when the game is begging you to turn back.

HW: Interesting. That does sound diametrically opposed to the way choice is used in triple A titles, where it's usually confined to these few, dramatic moments.

It was intimidating,
writing for patrons.
Like drawing a
caricature. You're
always thinking
"Will they think this
is funny? Or are
we going to get
punched?"

CG: I think that's another effect of branching narrative. You reach a decision point and have to choose option A, B or C. Which lends itself well to drama.

But often, our choices are the result of a dozen smaller decisions that led us to that point, and it turns out we've been making the choice for a long time.

Another technique *Fallen London* uses is Quality Based Narrative - rather than being binary, each choice affects one or more qualities that exist on a scale. So if you choose to help a Revolutionary, you gain points in a quality called

Concept art of “The
Blacksmith’s Daughter,” a
playable character from *Below*



Connected: Revolutionaries, rather than going down the “You Are Now Allied to Revolutionaries” branch. Multiple decisions can increase (or decrease) that quality. And at different levels, the quality opens new options. Maybe you can learn bomb-making from them, or trade for one of their mysterious projects.

Now, your relationship with the revolutionaries isn't the result of a single choice anymore, but the cumulative effect of multiple decisions, each made in its own context. Maybe you help them out when it's a question of freedom of the press, but stand against them when it comes to planting bombs.

HW: How do you differentiate between players who see them as an ambivalent force and those who just haven't been raising the quality though?

CG: A number of ways. Maybe the quality can't rise above, say, ten unless you've been more committed in your support. Maybe helping the Revolutionaries print pamphlets will let you get the quality to 10, but not beyond. To get past that point you might have to take more drastic action. Attending rallies. Providing alibis. Making bombs.

Now you know anyone with the quality at ten or more is more committed to the cause.

Or you can track the player's allegiance separately. Once you get Revolutionaries to a certain level,

perhaps they ask you to become a full member. If you agree you gain a new quality to represent that. We call this a lateral, and the key thing about laterals is that they can change. So you can choose to betray or leave the Revolutionaries in the future, and the lateral reflects that. But even afterwards you might still have friends on the inside, or knowledge about them you can use - that's what your Connected quality represents.

HW: We've been speaking at length about how to render consequences while keeping most of the game accessible. I'm curious how your spinoff tale *The Silver Tree* fits into this. What are the benefits of disconnecting it from the main game?

CG: Firstly, scope. *Tales of Fallen London: The Silver Tree* is a prequel to *Fallen London*, and if we'd done it as a flashback within *Fallen London* it would have had to be the Cliffs notes version. Treating it as a separate game let us delve into the personalities and relationships that drive its story.

Secondly, freedom. I don't want to give anything away, but some of the endings you can achieve in *The Silver Tree* don't just violate *Fallen London* continuity, they slaughter it, butcher it, and render its fat into tallow. It was important to us that the player's choices radically affect the outcome. There's something empowering about being able to break history.

HW: I suppose you might also have wanted to try the Kickstarter model.

CG: We were very keen to experiment with Kickstarter. But when we talked about the initial ideas for *The Silver Tree* it was clear it would work best as a separate game. The story drove the shape of it, there.

HW: Offering personalized narratives for donations still seems like a slight modification of your previous approach. What has the experience of writing those been like?

CG: Weird. Scary! There were a couple of tiers of Kickstarter rewards that offered bespoke content. One was us creating new non-player characters based on backers, who anyone can meet in *Fallen London*. That was lots of fun. The backers provided little self-descriptions, we provided three *Fallen London*-style titles for them to choose from (like “The Reclusive Turophile” and “The Bawdy Cardsharp”), then wrote a story card about the one they chose.

The other involved crafting bespoke stories that only the backers who pledged at that level get to see. We

filled those stories with revelations and secrets. There are a couple of people walking around *Fallen London* who know the truths behind some of the setting’s darkest mysteries. Stuff that no-one else knows.

It was intimidating writing for patrons. Like drawing a caricature. You’re always thinking “Will they think this is funny? Or are we going to get punched?”

HW: So you’re not yet planning to exclusively write one-of-a-kind stories for the very affluent?

CG: Nnnnnno. Not a risk.

HW: I imagine doubling your intended goal in under two days was still a pleasant surprise. Unfortunately your new project, *Below*, has not achieved similar momentum

and you had to cancel its Kickstarter. What do you think went wrong?

CG: I’ve speculated extensively about why the Kickstarter didn’t make it at the *Below* site. Ultimately, I think it was three key things:

The timing. We launched this Kickstarter hot on the heels of the old one, and in the month before Christmas

So when you’re lost in the dark, hounded by terrible creatures that have never been seen in the world above, you’re doing it for a bloody good reason. It’s a narrative Rogue-like, essentially.

too.

It's a poor match to our core audience. *Below* isn't part of the *Fallen London* franchise, and that makes it a harder sell.

Compounding the above, we didn't post enough updates or reach out enough to other potential audiences.

There were other factors, too, but I think those were the most significant.

It's heartbreaking to see a Kickstarter struggle, but even with its problems, *Below* attracted enough interest that it's worth me completing it. It might not make sense as a Failbetter project, but as a personal one it's well worth it and I'm very happy to be able to see it through.

HW: So you're looking to pursue it on your own time and funding? Or what exactly does freelancing for Failbetter entail compared to full employment?

CG: Mainly, it means fewer bug emails. But it also means I'll be concentrating on design and content for specific projects, rather than the mix of writing, project management, community wrangling, support and

other duties from before, while also pursuing my own projects and doing freelance work for other folks.

HW: Since you are so personally committed to seeing *Below* through, how would you summarize its appeal?

CG: *Below* takes the common fantasy conceit of delving into a dungeon and asks a very obvious question: Why on earth would you do this? It looks to

the roots of the genre - Beowulf, Theseus and the Labyrinth, Moria - and grounds its heroes in a society, giving them friends, loves, duties, mistakes and ambitions.

As you explore the dungeon you sustain yourself with memories of your life above. But the more you draw on them, the more tangled and drastic your reasons for venturing into the

dungeon are revealed to be. Ultimately, your home might be at stake, or your mother's happiness, or your chance at a future with the person you love.

So when you're lost in the dark, hounded by terrible creatures that have never been seen in the world above, you're doing it for a bloody good reason. It's a narrative Rogue-like, essentially.

Really interesting decisions are ones that you keep making, day after day. Decisions like fidelity, or not touching drugs, or working in a job you find objectionable. Choice is rarely final.

I also wanted to make something that was more folkloric than traditionally fantastic, and something more ‘game-y’ than *Fallen London*.

HW: Digital narratives changing into more complex ludic systems - games have already been through this development once in their early days. Are you going to follow it much further or where is the drop-off point for how gamelike you want to be?

CG: That’s a good question. I’m a big fan of tabletop RPGs, particularly ones that have strong, driving connections between their mechanics and their fiction (like *Burning Wheel* and *Apocalypse World*). The games I enjoy most are ones where the mechanics serve the creation of a story. You can still get pretty damn ludic and achieve that, as long as the mechanics follow from, and generate, the fiction, everything begins and ends there.

I don’t think that there needs to be a trade-off between story and game. They enable each other. The challenge is in making them fit.

The biggest restriction on how fiddly and complex *Below* can get is the StoryNexus UI. Try to track or fiddle too much and things can get very busy. This is basically a good thing, it helps rein in the temptation to over-complicate.

HW: But is it still aiming for a different audience than *Fallen London*?

Recently you’ve begun polling its players whether they see themselves more as readers or gamers.

CG: Yes, Failbetter conducted a short survey of *Fallen London* players - you can see the results here. I think *Below*’s intended audience overlaps with *Fallen London*’s in some regards (it’s very texty, for example) except that, as already mentioned, it’s more game-y than *Fallen London*. You’re managing your resources more, and there are clear terms of success and failure. Then there’s the aesthetic. *Fallen London*’s weird Victoriana is a big part of its appeal. *Below*’s setting is very Dark Ages, and its feel more folkloric than gothic. Its inspirations are fairly obviously in *Dungeons and Dragons* and similar games, although it took the earliest and sharpest left turn it could. In some ways it’s a reaction to those games as much as a descendant of them. But I hope it’ll appeal to gamers who’ve played *D&D*, rogue-likes and other dungeon-delving games, as well as fans of folklore and classic fantasy.

HW: And on top of all that, Failbetter is also establishing StoryNexus, a platform for people to create their own interactive narratives. How has it worked out so far?

CG: Good! Just take a look at the StoryNexus site and see the variety of games already on offer, and the number’s growing all the time. Particular high

Scarrovv

««« Concept art of the monster
“Scarrovv” from *Below*



BELOW

points for me are *Winterstrike* - a beautifully-written, lush planetary romance (a tragically unexplored genre, these days) - and *Zero Summer* - a weird western packed with vibrant detail.

StoryNexus is a ridiculously powerful set of tools, with new functionality added regularly. It doesn't require any programming knowledge, so it's a very accessible platform. That means it's seeing lots of imaginative content: educational games, interactive poems, groundhog-day style stories. It's exciting to see all these new things appearing!

The games you make on it can be played in a web browser and are easily shared via social networks, so players don't need to download or install anything, and can play anywhere they've got a net connection. And, of course,

StoryNexus has built-in tools to let you monetize your game. It lets anyone make games and earn from them.

I think it'll be a great way for new game designers and writers to make samples of their work to demonstrate to prospective employers. Just as the best way to break into comics is to make a damn comic, the best way to break into games is to make them and prove you understand what's involved. I can't wait to see how people continue to push the platform and medium.

HW: Nor can I. These are all very interesting projects we've covered. I want to wish you good luck for *Below*, and thanks for joining us and providing these wonderful insights. It was a pleasure.

CG: This has been fab. Thanks!

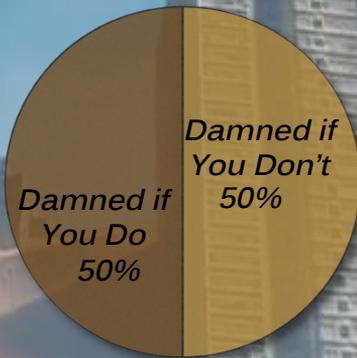
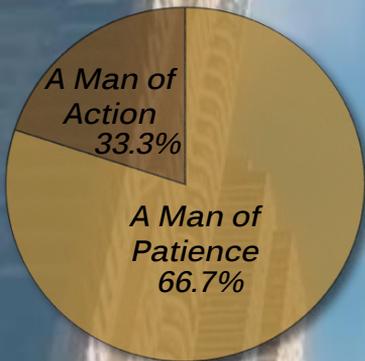
HW



STORYNEXUS

Intermission...

Spec Ops: The Line



Off the Grid:

Little Inferno™



By Zachary Bricton

One of the first ‘toys’ I could throw into my *Little Inferno* fire place was a credit card, an unsettling notion that didn’t exactly instill confidence in my purchase of Tomorrow Corporation’s latest title. Touching the plastic to the heat quickly swallowed it in flames, spewing coins to spend on more toys. It’s pointless, but what’s both cruel and interesting about *Little Inferno* is that it knows its pointless, and yes, perhaps even a waste of money.

Little Inferno would have you believe it’s entirely without objectives, as your quirky neighbor Sugar Plumps reminds you in her letters describing the game’s aimlessness. In actuality though, it’s about matching, burning clever combinations of toys to meet a certain quota before advancing to new catalogs to order from. Descriptions of

possible matches, like ‘Spring Time’, can be challenging, but in this case, simply hinting at the pairing of an alarm clock and flower.

Once you get several catalogs deep, memory begins to play a key role as matches span across both the old and new. Protein supplements, galaxies, nuclear bombs and opera singers, there’s a lot of bizarre stuff to throw in the fire and to keep track of for when new matches are unlocked. For example, to achieve the ‘Online Piracy’ match, you’ll need to remember the toy pirate from the first catalog and pair it with the internet cloud you can purchase in the fifth.

That sort of contemporary reference and charm is frequent in *Little Inferno*. There’s even several pertaining to other popular indie titles like a cardboard

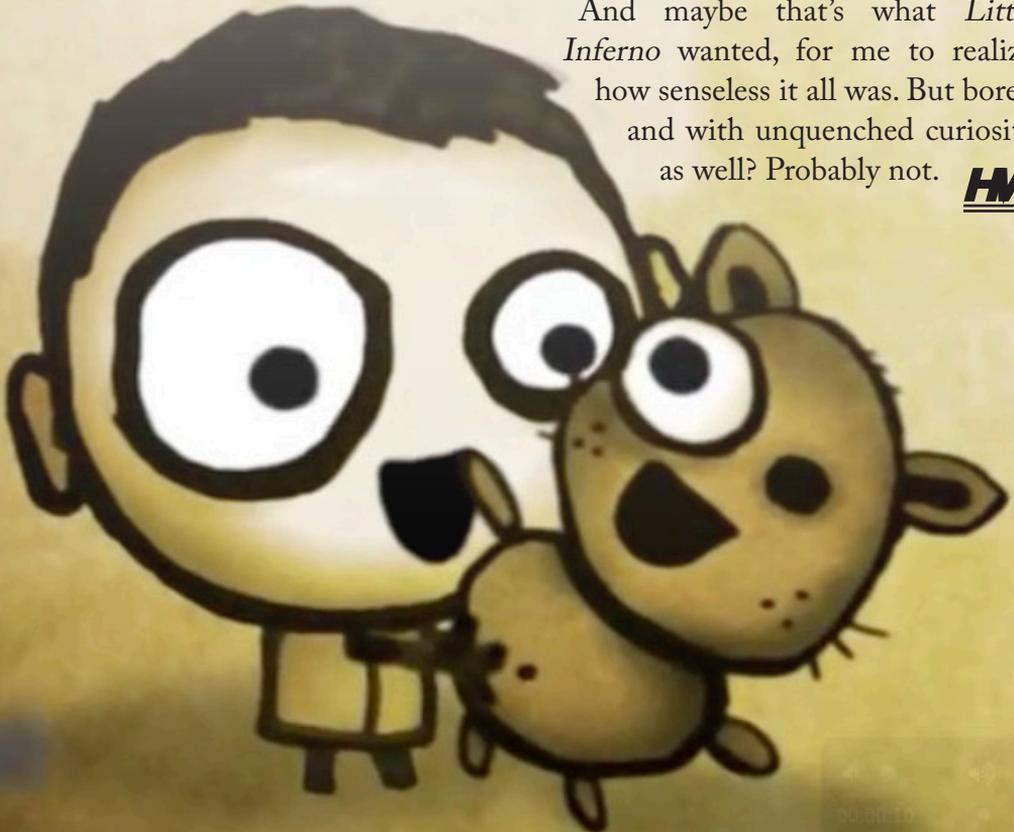
Meat Boy or the spider from *Limbo*, and item descriptions are often funny jabs at consumerist society. But if that's what the experience is ultimately getting at, it feels too transparent to make its cultural criticisms powerful. If anything, the game and its ending feel a bit preachy.

Not that the fireplace can't be entertaining, as various items give off all sorts of disturbing and pleasing effects in the flame. But they soon die down, leaving you with a feeling of emptiness, which may very well be the point of the game. Creating brief pleasure and then

leaving you in the cold as you spend several minutes waiting for your next shipments to arrive, downtime probably intended for introspection.

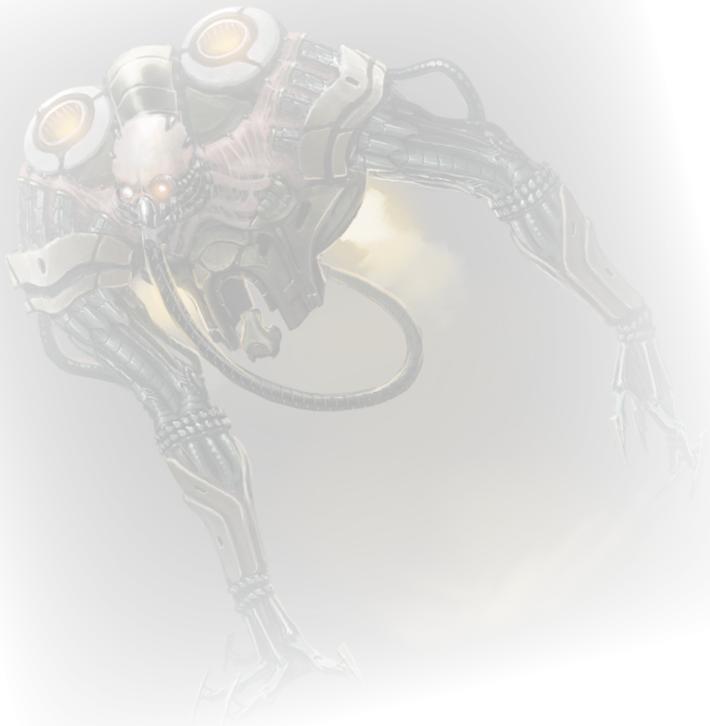
But at these times I found myself deviating from the game, minimizing it to check Facebook, using the bathroom, even brewing up a cup of tea as I waited for the last toy to arrive. Sugar Plumps' letters and the constant forecasts of snow had made me anxious to see a meaningful finale - Kyle Gabler's foreboding musical contributions add to this - but I was far past the enjoyments of the fire itself.

And maybe that's what *Little Inferno* wanted, for me to realize how senseless it all was. But bored and with unquenched curiosity as well? Probably not. **HW**



The Mechanical Void: Let Me Tell You a Story

How gameplay
can be used
for narrative
purposes.



By Joshua Ens

All forms of media ultimately hope to evoke some sort of emotional response. Literature, film, television and videogames have a mostly interchangeable language of tools and devices geared for achieving this. However there is one distinct method

only games can use, as the name already suggests: gameplay. Gameplay is not inherently loaded with meaning, serving primarily to progress the plot of a game, but it can be used to explore its themes and settings too. Unfortunately this useful method is underutilized by most

game developers, with most instead relying on the channels established in other media: visuals, audio and text. So we're going to look at a couple of games that, while still utilizing all these traditional forms, go one step further in using gameplay not just as a means of progression, but also a means of growth in storytelling.

In *XCOM: Enemy Unknown*, for instance, you combat a vastly more powerful alien threat with a very limited amount of resources. The franchise is known for its unforgiving gameplay, making you balance your own research, troops and the good will of supporting countries. But try as you may you can't do all of it. In trying and failing to win every battle, the primary theme behind *XCOM* emerges: You can't save everyone.

Once you've accepted this fact, the game begins to take on a new dynamic. As missions grow harder, the soldiers you spent so much time customizing and naming after your friends will die. Soon the effort to individualize each soldier isn't worth it and your ranks begin to fill with generic faces; cannon fodder to throw at the alien threat in hopes that some emerge from the meat

grinder hardened, and more lethal. You begin to prioritize countries, protecting those that provide better resources and taking missions less likely to result in losses. *XCOM's* plot may provide context for this struggle, its setting the necessary scenery, but its gameplay truly establishes the theme

Another game that explores a similar technique, although not until the very end, is *Halo Reach*. As you, the last Spartan on your squad left alive, stand alone against a massive army of aliens,

you are given control and told to survive. There is no cutscene, just you, firing your weapon in the hope of taking down enough enemies for some breathing room before more come. It's hammered home that this is not a battle you

can win, but it's also not a fight you can bring yourself to just give up on.

The last stand is a manipulative way of creating this narrative gameplay. Everyone loves a hero after all, it remains an excellent way of execution and exploiting the player's emotions more than any monologue could hope to. The drive for the player to succeed, matched with the impossible odds before them, creates an immersive, emotional mixture that remains one of



the most efficient way of enveloping the player in the story.

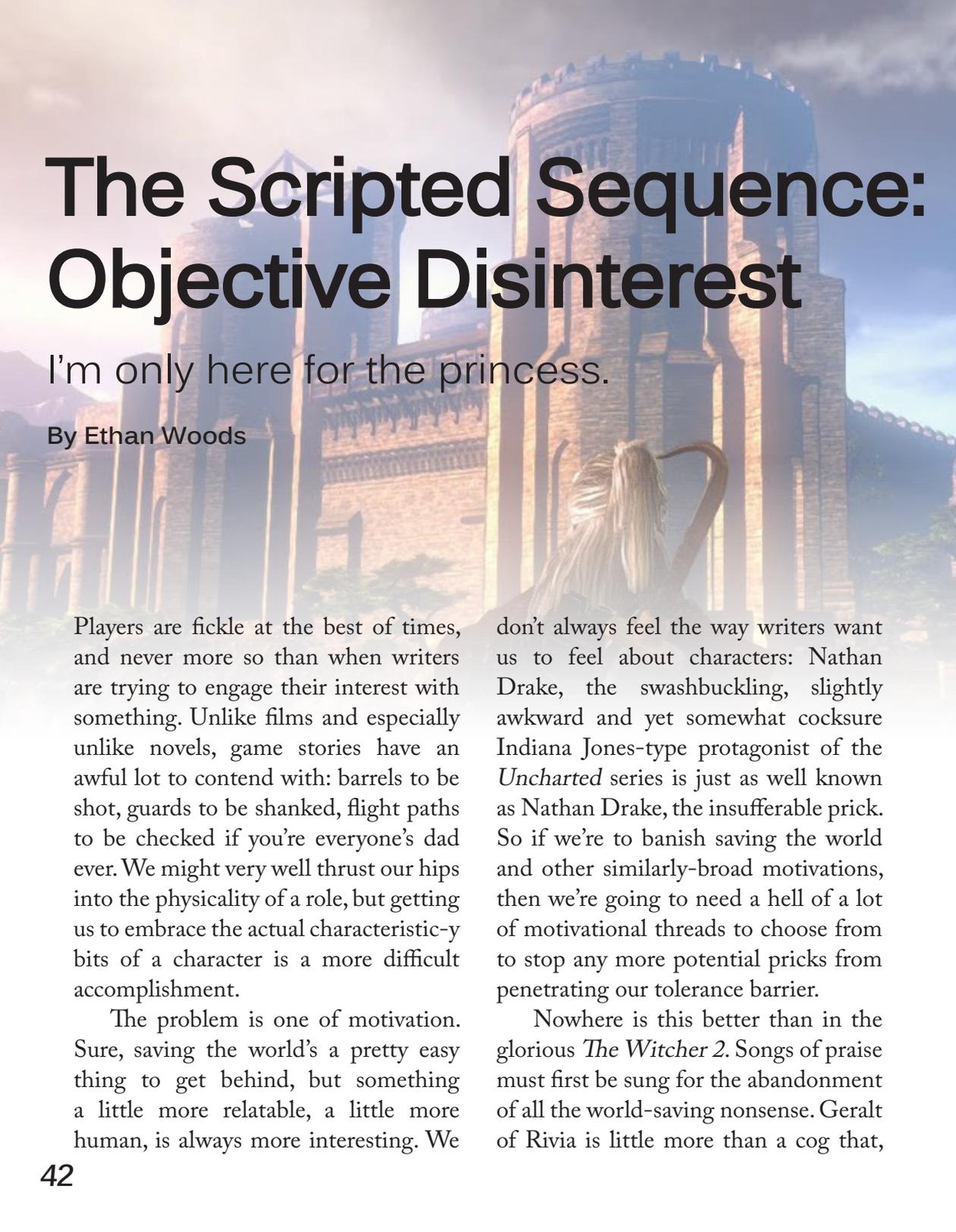
The final example, *Spec Ops: The Line*, has been used a lot in recent media, but it bears repeating how uniquely the game uses mechanics for narrative purposes. I'm about to spoil parts of the game to you, so if you haven't played it yet, browse at your own discretion. About midway into the game, your team takes control of a mortar loaded with white phosphorus while entrenched against a sizeable enemy force. You can try to shoot your way out, but eventually it becomes apparent that you cannot fight them all with conventional arms. You, as the player, have to go pick up the computer that directs the mortar's camera drone and spot targets for your team, a scene not unlike similar set pieces in the *Call of Duty* franchise. You clear out your enemies, the vehicles bunkered down in the area. Eventually you come close to a final large group and again pull the trigger.

Now the game makes you walk through the camp and witness the gruesome results of your handiwork, all the destruction you have wrought. You see men screaming and burning to death, but they are still soldiers. You can almost justify it. Then you reach that final group, now a patch of bodies clustered together, and see that they were civilians. Women and children

charred to the bone by your hands after you burned the men protecting them from the battle.

It is at this point you realize that you, the player, are now the monster of war. It is very sobering to see. However it could have been done better. It attempts to employ the player's emotions by taking the usual habits of shooters and flipping them their head. In theory, this works excellently. In execution, however, it lacked an important detail: obscuring information from the player. It is painfully apparent that you're supposed to bomb that encampment, and the scene is just scripted enough to ensure you do every time. It takes away from the experience of making the gameplay set the scene. Though it plays it a little safe, this noble attempt still succeeds, remaining a solid example of gameplay used to establish tone and theme.

Games remain the pinnacle of interactive media. However, they are held back by their desire to mimic traditional non-interactive media in its styles of storytelling. Though there are some examples of excellent narrative gameplay in recent titles, they are still far and few between. In order to push the boundaries of interactive narratives, we must continue to experiment with plots in games, if we can ever hope to succeed changing the way we view gameplay in relation to narration.

A character with long blonde hair and a horned helmet is seen from behind, looking towards a large, imposing stone castle with multiple towers and battlements. The scene is set in a bright, sunny environment with a clear blue sky.

The Scripted Sequence: Objective Disinterest

I'm only here for the princess.

By Ethan Woods

Players are fickle at the best of times, and never more so than when writers are trying to engage their interest with something. Unlike films and especially unlike novels, game stories have an awful lot to contend with: barrels to be shot, guards to be shanked, flight paths to be checked if you're everyone's dad ever. We might very well thrust our hips into the physicality of a role, but getting us to embrace the actual characteristic-y bits of a character is a more difficult accomplishment.

The problem is one of motivation. Sure, saving the world's a pretty easy thing to get behind, but something a little more relatable, a little more human, is always more interesting. We

don't always feel the way writers want us to feel about characters: Nathan Drake, the swashbuckling, slightly awkward and yet somewhat cocksure Indiana Jones-type protagonist of the *Uncharted* series is just as well known as Nathan Drake, the insufferable prick. So if we're to banish saving the world and other similarly-broad motivations, then we're going to need a hell of a lot of motivational threads to choose from to stop any more potential pricks from penetrating our tolerance barrier.

Nowhere is this better than in the glorious *The Witcher 2*. Songs of praise must first be sung for the abandonment of all the world-saving nonsense. Geralt of Rivia is little more than a cog that,

quite against its own will if you so decide, has a habit of falling into the workspace of much larger mechanisms. His interventions are less preordained and ultimately glorious, more relentlessly unfortunate and messy. But further octaves should be reserved for how *The Witcher 2* juggles several balls worth of motivations and incentives driven by character, not plot. This is a somewhat revealing hymn, and spoilers follow. Listen at your own risk.

Perhaps you are incensed in the aftermath of Foltest's assassination and seek revenge, leading you to travel with Roche, a member of the dead king's secret police. Or perhaps you thought the King was a royal dick and couldn't care less about his murder, in which case you might side with Ioverth, the elf terrorist-cum-freedom-fighter who aided in his assassination. Maybe your desire to recover Triss Merrigold from the Kingslayer's clutches eclipses both the regicides and political machinations in which Geralt finds himself. But then what of the politics of the region? Can the security of one person be placed above all others? And

Geralt of Rivia is little more than a cog that, quite against its own will if you so decide, has a habit of falling into the workspace of much larger mechanisms.

let's not forget the overarching plot of the series: the search for Geralt's old flame, Yennifer, and the recovery of his memory.

Each thread is personal, emotionally or intellectually driven, explicated by the plot so gently that they feel like entirely natural objectives. Characters ask for your thoughts and feelings just often enough to force you to think about which narrative lead interest you, whilst the game itself reacts to your priorities with convincing consequences: prioritize the assassin Letho and the region's politics over Triss' rescue and she will be noticeably upset, the relationship between her and Geralt tarnished. Some might argue that such threads are still too illusory to matter (you can't, for instance, ignore Letho), but then what else do they need to be? It's a matter of making the player a character, something which is an illusion to begin with.

The Witcher 2 is not the only game to benefit from such an approach either. Although some grumbled over being forced to work with Cerberus in *Mass Effect 2*, the game's willingness

to let you editorialize the matter, both explicitly, and even simply through Shepard's tone of voice when nattering away to the Illusive Man, permitted, if not a full range of motivational threads, some degree of player-protagonist integration.

But I know what you're thinking, Keith. *The Witcher* and *Mass Effect* games are all ruddy RPGs! What about story-driven games in all those other fancy genres? Well, we'll generally have to accept that any sort of dialogue options are out, but otherwise the

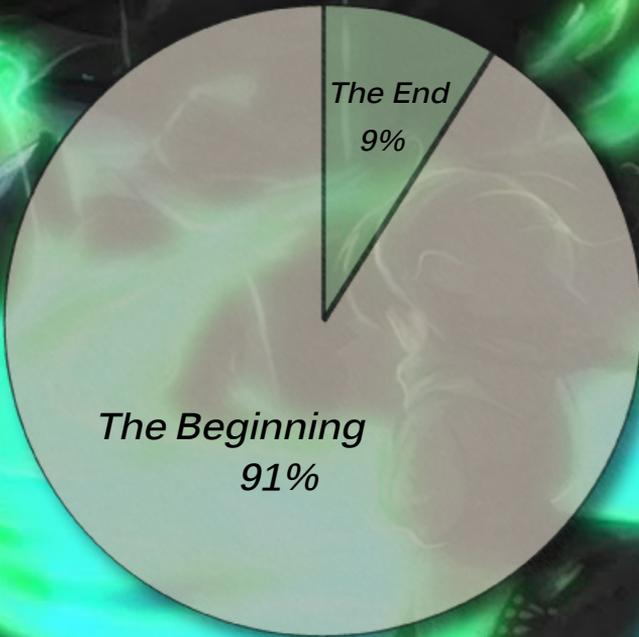
premise remains the same: make the threads about something real, something we can relate to. Not just saving the world, or the galaxy, or defeating the seven-millionth nutty Russian. Instead, make it about characters, emotions, and thinky-mystery stuff that engages the brain a little. Because you'll never interest all of the people all of the time, but you can sure as shit interest as many as people as possible, in far more interesting ways, for much of the time.

Yeah, me neither.

HW

Intermission...

Bastion



The Other Screen: Marcy

A soft-focus photograph of a man and a woman in a close embrace. The man is leaning over the woman, his hand resting on her head. They appear to be outdoors, possibly near a body of water, given the light and background. The overall mood is tender and intimate.

Andrew Huntly shares his personal favorite film of 2012, *Martha Marcy May Marlene*.

Not very much happens in *Martha Marcy May Marlene*. Its structure is jarring and muddy, its shifts through time not conveniently stamped with dates. It's a scattered puzzle of a movie, with only the scarcest hints given to times, places and motivations. And in the end, that's what makes it such a rapturing journey.

The film opens on a cold grey morning, as the girl we'll come to know as Martha creeps away from an old farmhouse. Accompanying her she only has a clumsy looking sweater and tiny backpack. She darts across

the road and into the woods, hiding from the shapes of people that follow her through the trees. Eventually she finds a town, managing to contact her sister, Lucy, who picks her up and takes her home. During her stay with her sister it becomes clear that whatever is in Martha's past isn't done with her quite yet.

Chronologically, *Martha Marcy May Marlene* almost tells two different stories. We have what can only be assumed to be the present, as Martha struggles to cope with the emotional trauma of her past while living with

her sister. The second narrative slowly unfolds and exposes the trauma, as Martha found herself seduced into the ways of a cult living out in the rural and barren countryside. These two narratives intertwine throughout the film, providing something of a contrast between the two times of Martha's life. Her indoctrination into the cult isn't through fear or panic, but through the soft tenderness they give her. The girls are all amicable, all friendly and all kind, while the boys are all attentive and flattering, their gaze carrying not quite lust but something more than cordiality.

What an immediate contrast this initiation proves to be with her family life. When Martha picks up the phone to her sister, there's no joy in either's voice. There's some concern, but not the warmth of family. Martha's hesitant, almost hanging up the phone before finally relenting, as though caught between two different evils. There's a coldness between the two sisters, with an unspoken bitterness drawn underneath the pair. It's not surprising this girl succumbed to the slightest breath of community, the foundation under her family life is acidic.

It's more a gradually unfolding document than a developing story.

The two communes in Martha's life are socially separated, but both restrict her. From the crippling and demanding prospects of the real world, where expectations are built and lives structured, to the uncomplex and passive life where she's forced to give up her choice and her body in return for that simplicity. *Martha Marcy May Marlene* transitions between these two worlds, just as its central character does. Her tumbling mental state is worsened by her terror of the cult and the uncertainty of the 'real world'. There's something of a depressing realization that Martha may have been broken all along, and been pushed into two different, ill-fitting worlds that have only exacerbated her mental state.

The contrast of these two 'families' is the key to understanding the structure of *Martha Marcy May Marlene*. It's not a film about traditional arcs or developments. The essence of a three act structure is there, but above it is some very untraditional storytelling. It's more a gradually unfolding document than a developing story. We're given scraps of information about Martha and the

commune, and major clues are stashed inside nonchalant lines of dialogue. It's up to the audience to put it all together, to establish a connection and interpret who Martha is.

Martha's time at her sister's house is spent swinging between fear and a defensive callousness. The person she's learned to be at the cult comes through in subdued ways, small shafts of abuse that shine through cracks in her arrogant facade. At the cult, Martha sweeps between girlish excitement and horror, as she begins to understand that she's simply traded some societal restrictions for more vile and cruel ones.

By switching back and forth in time, Martha's reactions and outbursts become developed within themselves. Once given glimpses into the catalysts, the delayed reaction becomes much more visceral as we're there in the moment. We've seen Martha go through the pain, and now we can see how she copes. When she intrudes on her sister and her husband having sex, it's foreshadowed by the ravishing but disparaging sex she was once exposed to in the cult. This nonlinear structure is an intelligent device, connecting moments from the past to the present dynamically and immediately. It's frequently confusing, but also incredibly rewarding once the audience clicks into the movie's

rhythm.

However, that rhythm does become harder to keep track of later in the film. As Martha begins to relive the more harrowing times spent in the cult, she starts to unravel in the present day. The film's brooding atmosphere becomes more intense, and the more contemplative nature of the cult and their cruelty becomes overshadowed by Martha's frenzy. Some of the details can be lost when the film becomes a few shades too clever for its own good, though they are still sprinkled around the final reel. The paranoia infested last moments are some of the weakest in the film, becoming more ambiguous and less rewarding as it barrels towards the appropriate, if unsatisfactory, ending.

Elizabeth Olsen's performance manages to secure the more frenetic, less defined moments. When the direction and script stumble, she's always there to ground the film. Martha's journey could easily be cold and hostile without Olsen's magnetic performance, switching between simple adolescence and a demanding complexity with a stunning sense of believability. It becomes a film of discovery with Olsen, the flashbacks amounting to more than ingenious trickery and instead a search into a girl's psyche. Whether or not she can save herself is never the focus - it's

what there is left to save.

The way *Martha Marcy May Marlene* uses its structure and central performance to burrow further into complex and murky psychoanalysis is a feat of intricate skill. The fleeting between time periods and Martha's emotional states is crafted with meticulous care, as to feel the past blend into the present. Martha feels wrapped around these two different places in her life. With her sister, and the real world, she's Martha. With the cult, she's Marcy. She can cope with neither of these identities, too

unsure of the civilized world and too terrified of the depraved submission forced upon her in the cult. It's a frightening, upsetting and saddening film, with accomplished direction and a wonderful central performance. The narrative streams twist and fold to create a portrait of a girl suffering under the weight of the world, sandwiched on both sides by creations cruel, hostile and alien to her. Who is Martha Marcy May Marlene? She's just four names in search of one identity.

HW



The Best of 2012

To celebrate the beginning of the new year, we here at Haywire have decided to honor our favorite games of 2012. Each contributor got to pick one game and about three-hundred words to shower praise on their champion. The list is not sorted by quality, mind. One game per contributor, and they're all exceptional.

Even so, we've missed a lot of good titles. 2012 was a great year for videogames. 4chan's visual novel *Katawa Shoujo* surprised everyone by being tasteful. *Journey* brought us closer to strangers. *FTL* was the first crowdfunded game to see a commercial release, and it was awesome too. *Dishonored* sent us on a vengeful journey through a strange land, *Mark of the Ninja* offered a more focused stealth experience, and *Far Cry 3* ended the year on a high note, despite its own weak ending.

So here's to the exceptional games of 2012, and a whole new year of excellent games to come.

Spec Ops: The Line

It's surprising that *Spec Ops: The Line* managed to surprise me. I went into it after the first wave of critics had informed me of its intentions, its connections to *Heart of Darkness* and, by proxy, *Apocalypse Now*. I even decided to buy my first ever copy of *Call of Duty* to introduce myself to the genre it would be taking apart from within.

Still, I let it lull me in with conventional design and comforting tropes, wondering how the early commentary on Western Interventionism would continue. Then things went darker. And darker. And far too late I realized that *Spec Ops* did not mean explore the role of all those other Americans in Dubai, but my own.

Many see the fact that *Spec Ops* leaves you no choice but to commit atrocities as a fault, but that's the actual beauty of the game. It forces you to admit that, even if its rules allow for no other outcome than gruesome crimes against humanity, you are still complicit. You did have a choice. You chose to play *Spec Ops*.

It forces you to consider what our fascination with violent entertainment means. Why do we gravitate towards this military power fantasy? Does it say something about us?

What a confident game. What a weird game to come out of the triple-A space. What a grotesque, haunting, fascinating game.

- Johannes Köller



Super Hexagon

As you grow up, your priorities shift. Free time evaporates to the obligations of work, community, and family. You might even feel like you should be doing something more dignified than playing videogames with what little free time you come across. All of this adds up to spending less and less time with something you once adored. I shudder at the thought of considering myself an adult, but at the age of 23, I simply don't have the time for the bloated 40+ hour gaming odysseys I did when I was 13, and I certainly don't have the patience.

I'll play *Far Cry 3* and *Dishonored* and whatever else, but I doubt I'll ever see them through to the end. I'm much more interested in condensed, bite-sized experiences that I can enjoy in my spare moments. There's something magnificent about the ability of Brendon Chung's *Thirty Flights of Loving* to run its full engrossing course in the span of a coffee break. Terry Cavanagh captures that essence in *Super Hexagon*, too, and for reasons no less difficult to articulate.

You orbit a triangle around a hexagon as the walls close in. Vibrant colors flash, enthusiastic music pulsates and you'll likely last only a few seconds of the herculean one-minute target. But its immediacy and energy make it addictive, and the triumph of eclipsing old high scores by mere slivers of seconds is as satisfying as conquering *Demon's Souls*. These moments are endlessly repeatable, sharable and unpredictable. My friend once told me how his excitable satisfaction from beating Hyper Hexagonest got him some questionable looks on a packed subway.

So for being every bit as satisfying as 'proper' video games aspire to be in a miniscule fraction of the time, *Super Hexagon* is my game of the year. Terry Cavanagh, shine on you crazy hexagon.

- Andrew Walt

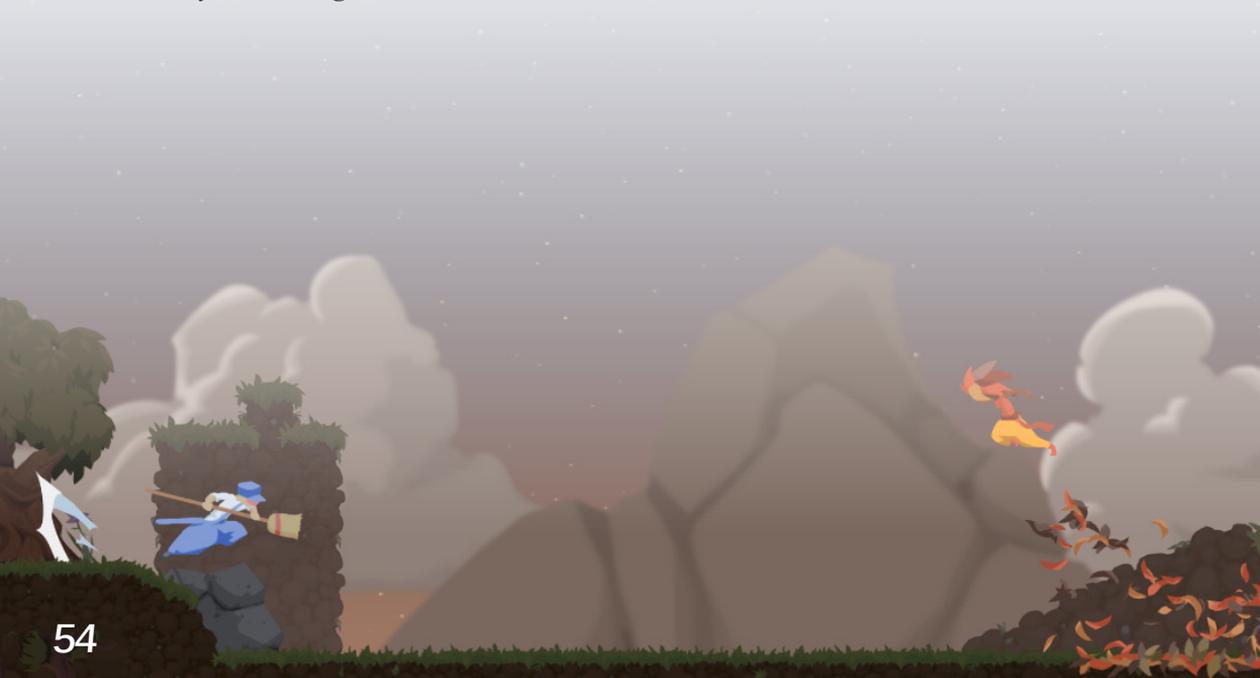
Dustforce

For me, there will always be an expectation of immersion within a piece of media. If I'm too aware of myself as a consumer rather than a character, then the magic is lost. That magic is fueled almost exclusively by the sense of style, atmosphere and expectation. If I'm comfortable as the player with the stakes, the controls and the methods, the experience simply swallows me up until the power button is pressed, or I'm exiting to Windows.

And unlike anything else this year, *Dustforce* managed to capture my soul and keep it as long as I'm playing. A simple comfort like returning to a childhood hangout or eating an old favorite meal, there's something entirely ritualistic about it, as though even if the challenges are tired or repeated, the joy is still there.

And *Dustforce* manages it handily. It's the kind of game I could play now, or twenty years from now, and miss only the feeling between, not necessarily the mechanics. The beautiful soundtrack is largely a part of that, as is the beautiful and effortless art style. Those successes by themselves manage to oust other games that drive me to learn more about the story, or to feel the mechanics once again. Any game that can make me as a player feel that comfortable deserves recognition. Decades later, we may not remember the tricks and tropes of our games of choice, but I don't think I'll ever forget this feeling.

- *Taylor Hidalgo*



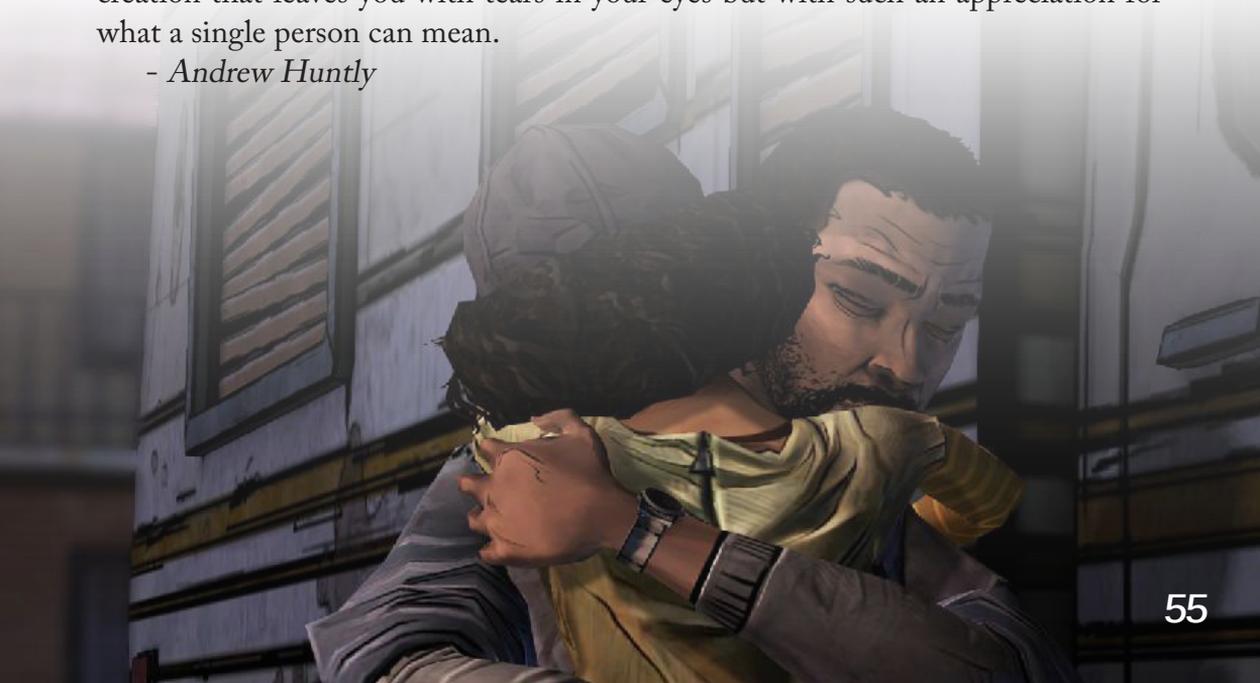
The Walking Dead

Lee Everett's journey across zombie-infested Georgia with the eight-year old Clementine is one of the most emotionally rich stories I've ever played through. The game tells a deeply involving narrative of desolation intertwined with hope, as you come to realize that the laws of conventional morality can no longer apply in this newly ravaged world. All the while, Clementine is there. When I started the game, I tried to hide her from the blackness of humanity, exposed by this desperate apocalypse. But as the game went on, it became clear that this was never a world where innocence could truly belong. Lee could never be a parent to Clementine, but he could be a teacher. He was never the man to shield her from the horror, but the man to help her confront it and survive.

To me, *The Walking Dead* is the story of his redemption from his questionable past, as he fights with his head scarcely above the waters of depravity to ensure Clementine remains safe. This sentiment carried to many other cast members, even the ones who seemed to despise Lee. I didn't always act civil, but I could never bring myself to harm them. Only once did I let vengeful anger take over, and I regretted it long after the fact.

Telltale's zombie epic is a story of emotional intensity, a game in which the world is dead only to make each life you meet burn brighter, where violence doesn't reward but instead leaves bruises. It's a masterful piece of storytelling, a truly beautiful creation that leaves you with tears in your eyes but with such an appreciation for what a single person can mean.

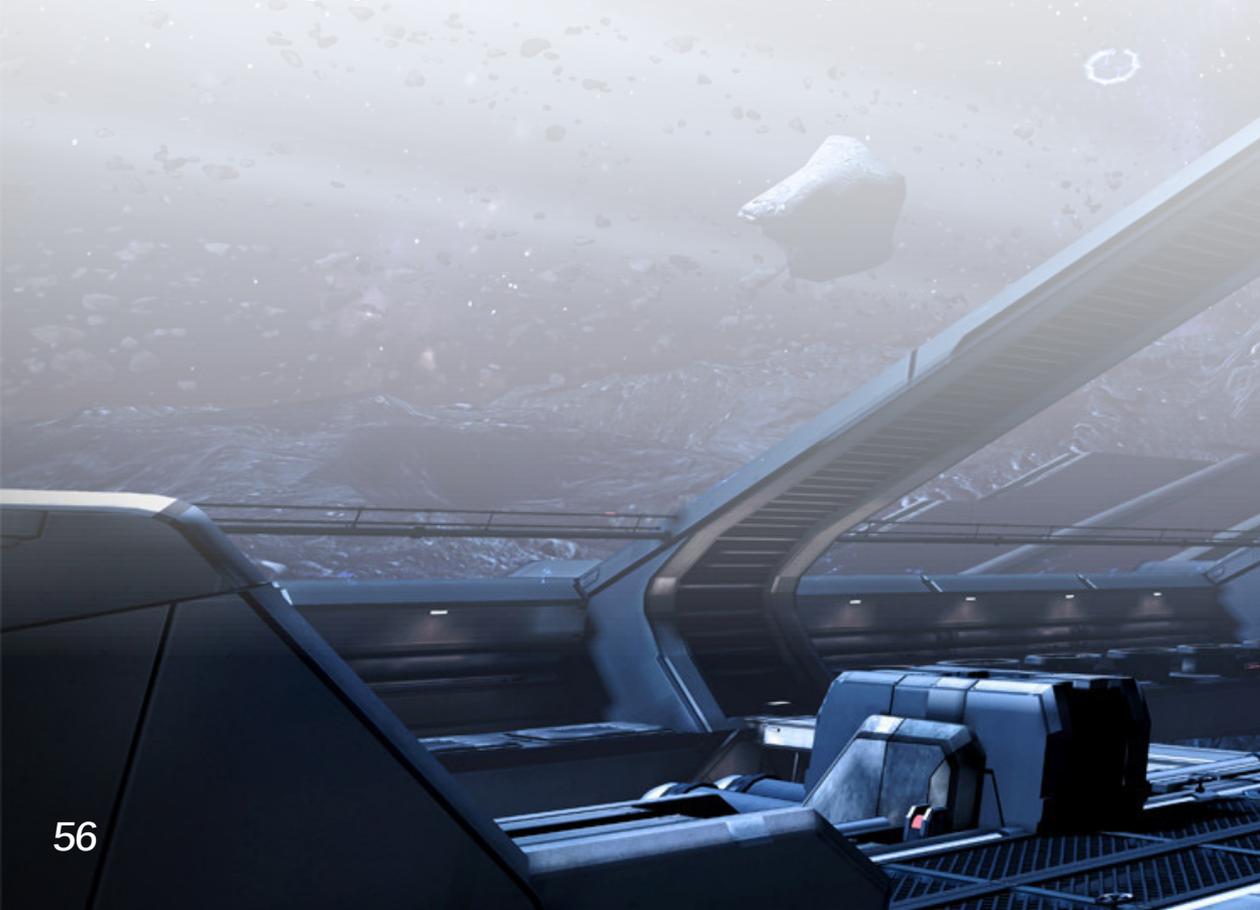
- Andrew Huntly



Mass Effect 3

Mass Effect 3 did something I've not seen tackled since *Shadow of the Colossus*, something surprisingly rare considering the popularity of heroes in this medium. From the start, it was unafraid to take on despair and doubt, accentuating tremendous amounts of heroism and grim perseverance by hacking away at anything stable supporting it. When design needs players to overcome a series of increasingly difficult challenges, evoking despair despite their experience of successive victories and growing competence is no easy task. Yet Bioware managed it.

The brooding apocalyptic tenor of the story is manifested in so many crafty ways that the convincing presentation almost overcomes the game-ness. The structural similarities of Bioware games are often criticized, but this one is superbly adapted to the devastating new scenario. Now quantifiable war assets are collected instead of the usual mystic McGuffins, navigating the world map becomes a perilous activity and large amounts of dialogue all convey that tangible constant menace of the Reapers. Game progression loses some of its comforting satisfaction. You may be

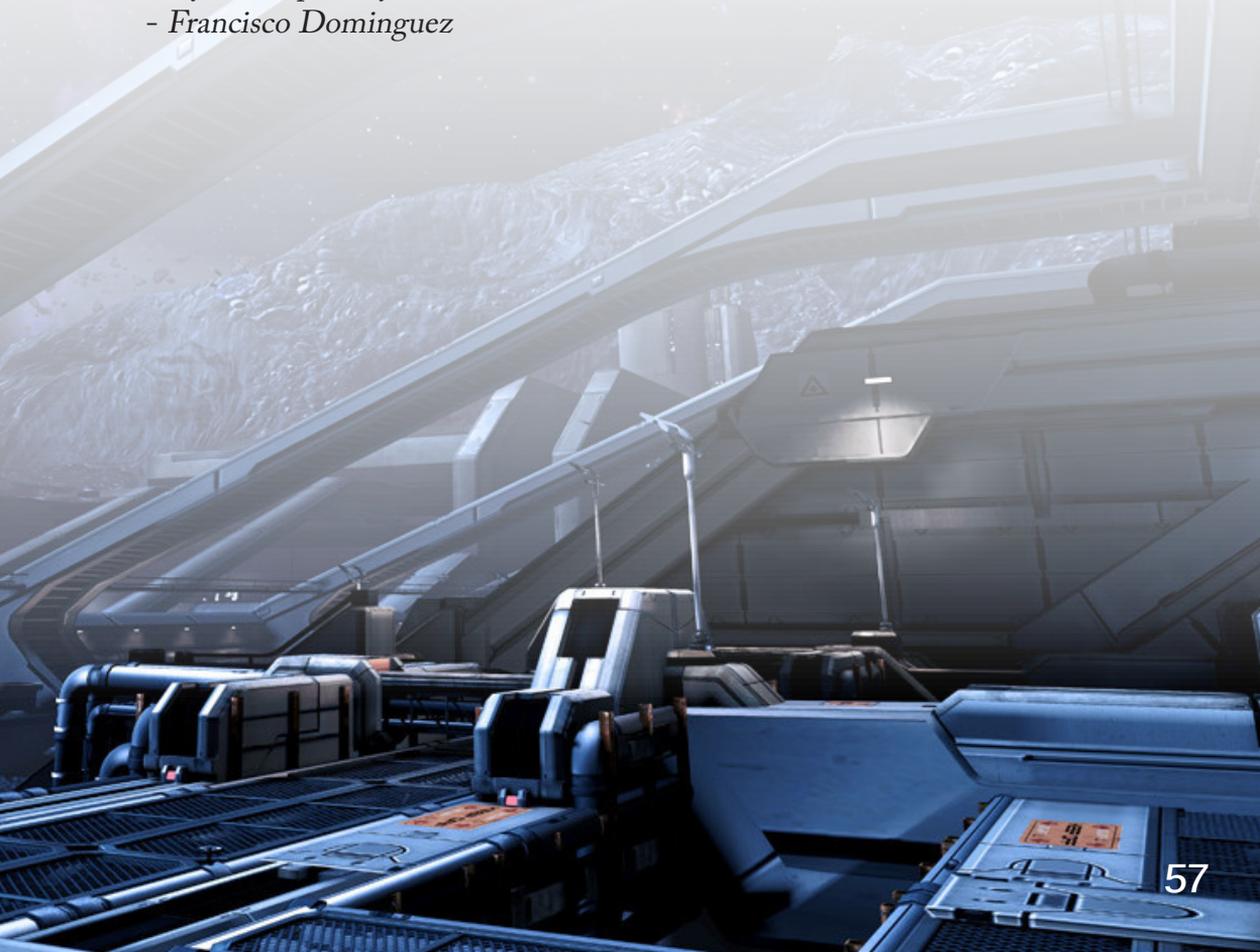


brilliant, but remain a defiantly overwhelmed figure, a lone firefighter in a universe ablaze.

This feels a flimsy reason to pick a game of the year. So much care went into the game design and the staggering permutations of accumulated choice, and I focus on touches of detail, but it is the world, characters and story, or at least the acute sense of story, that elevates the game beyond everything I've played from 2012.

Dishonored engaged me more in its enticing virtual spaces. *Hotline Miami* has had me hooked with its compulsive gameplay and challenging but coherent obstacles, aided of course by that sensational soundtrack. These games were triumphs of world building too. But *Mass Effect 3* remains the richer experience for me, the one that left the strongest memories, despite its widely dissected flaws. Maybe it benefits unfairly from the work of its predecessors, familiarity with characters and the world along with the escalated events making it a richer experience new entries can only be eclipsed by.

- Francisco Dominguez



Max Payne 3

2012 was a great year in terms of videogame storytelling but I felt that the gameplay presented in the years pickings was a bit underwhelming. There's nothing wrong with games focusing more on narratives than mechanics, especially considering some of the quality tales we have seen throughout the year. But only one game this year really made me feel good just through the way I was interacting with its mechanics.

Max Payne 3 is the only game from 2012 I picked up again after finishing to play some more. Possibly because I play games to unwind and relax, which is far easier and more convenient to do through gameplay than through experiencing an entire story again. *Max Payne* as a series has always understood this, and *Max Payne 3* comes brimming with more funtime activities than ever, including time trials, score attack and hardcore modes of the game, and a surprisingly well-done multiplayer mode. Add all this to the maddening level of detail and polish seen in its stylish and immensely satisfying bullettime shootings and we come to a game I am still revisiting months later to see if I can best my previous New York Minute score.

- Jack Nicholls



Counter-Strike: Global Offensive

There's nothing quite like *Counter-Strike*, except other versions of *Counter-Strike*. So when *Global Offensive* was announced, the prevalent feeling was one of fear, fear that Valve might move the franchise into more contemporary designs. And yet look at what we got, an almost flawless blend of modern visuals and tight, old school controls. New weapons, new recoil patterns to master and a grenade rework that all make *Global Offensive* feel like a unique addition to the franchise, while still abusing the name's greatest qualities.

What really put *Global Offensive* above the competition this year was its new matchmaking system. Everyone always talks about competitive *Counter-Strike*, but few have actually gotten the opportunity to experience it. Now both casual newcomers and rusty veterans can get in a pro styled match on some of the most historic maps of the FPS genre, without all that third party overhead of years past. Granted, *Global Offensive* has plenty of improvements to make to its new system, but this is the first time *Counter-Strike* has actually advertised what makes it great. This is clean FPS, round-to-round drama built around the infinite potential of your rifle and the disciplined organization of your teammates. Give the game a fair chance and it's sure to make your hands shake.

- Zachary Bricton



Day Z

Everything is relative, and so it would be impossible to talk about my game of the year without first noting my second choice. *Mass Effect 3* contained, to my mind, quite a wonderfully unique experience: in its last deep breath before the plunge I could feel an undeniable sense of dread, behind which stood millions of dollars, five years and ninety hours worth of gameplay. In March 2012, those two minutes of choking apprehension seemed more than worth every penny, hour and second.

In May 2012? It was like watching someone sell their soul for a McFlurry and some chicken nuggets. Because all it took for *DayZ* to ram my heart so far up my gullet that it was almost choking me was a concept as old as fiction itself, a shitty little pistol, and the briefest glimpse of another human being's arse. Without a tutorial or guiding hand to steer you after pushing through the vaginal flaps of its server screen, it builds itself as cold, barren and vindictive. If love is blind, then *DayZ* is a pair of correctional lenses forged by the devil. It just doesn't give a shit about you. And with its isolationism and resolute indifference you realize something: an emotional connection doesn't require millions of dollars, five years and ninety hours worth of gameplay. Just a shitty little pistol and the threat of another human being. Maybe the loss of your companions, or even the realization that you've done all you can, and now there's nothing left but to lie down and be eaten. I've often pegged *DayZ* as a game that lets you to tell stories, more than anything though, I think it's a game that just lets you feel.

- Ethan Woods



Write for us!



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What we do...

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