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Who makes the cut?

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DARK SOULS III

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FROM SOFTWARE



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APOCALYPSE EDITION*



* WHILE STOCKS LAST



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FANTASY SPECIAL

» For as long as I can remember I've been an avid fan of fantasy. As soon as I could read my head was stuck in a book and my brain was consumed with heroic deeds, fantastical creatures and the triumph of good over evil.

When I was around 10, the *Borrible* trilogy by Michael de Larrabeiti changed my view of fantasy. It was my first experience with contemporary or urban fantasy and instead of a cut and dry differentiation between good and evil, the *Borribles* themselves were militaristic vagabonds and thieves and their greatest enemy, the British government, may have been dictatorial and xenophobic but they were portrayed not as evil but instead as misguided. From then on my understanding of fantasy broadened and I no longer saw much appeal in the simplistic stories I once loved. Instead I started reading original versions of fairytales and modern re-tellings thereof. I discovered the deeply political, extremely acid tinged writing of Moorcock, the baroque insanity of Mervyn Peake, the fungal horror of Jeff VanderMeer and much, much more. That one trilogy changed how I looked at stories, and set the foundation for a lifelong love affair with the genre.

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TOP 25 FANTASY CHARACTERS
Did your favourite make the cut?



HYPER

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Digital Cinema

Duncan Jones on Bringing Warcraft to the Big Screen

CLANCY BROWN AND PAULA PATTON TALKED ABOUT
THE MANLY VOICE OF **JOAB GILROY**. TRUE STORY.



ACTING IN MODERN DAY CINEMA

"Clancy Brown is quite a character and we stuck him on a rocking horse to make him look like he was riding a wolf, and that day took about six hours to get a couple of seconds of footage just because we were laughing so much the whole way through it."



Videogame movies don't have the best reputations. They're either terrible or they're brilliantly terrible, and your interpretation of their value invariably hinges on how close you are to the source material. Street Fighter fans find it tough to like the Jean Claude Van Damme vehicle despite it having some genuinely brilliant moments.

It doesn't help that films based on games are invariably bad – the only movie with a Rotten Tomatoes score over 40% is *Final Fantasy: The Spirits Within* – which means they generally only deliver fan service to a group they usually don't understand in the first place.

Warcraft will hopefully be different – although it's come a long way to get there. As Blizzard has tried desperately to find a way to bring the fantasy series to the silver screen they have repeatedly struggled to find a story people would be happy with. When Sam Raimi (*The Evil Dead*, *Spider-Man*) was attached to the project

it cast the humans of the Alliance as the 'good guys' – a move many who are close to the source material rejected outright.

When Raimi left, it seemed like the movie had returned to being the filmic equivalent of vapourware – it was in the ether. In fact, the *Warcraft* movie has been around for so long that, when it finally releases on June 10 next year it will have been more than a decade since it was first announced. So what's happened in that time?

UNDER PRESSURE >> Two years ago there was a glimmer of hope – Duncan Jones (*Moon*, *Source Code*) – attached to the film and began making changes. We sat down to talk about the film with Duncan Jones at Blizzcon, and he told us about the changes.

"Yes, the film has been thought about, has been a sparkle in Blizzard's eye for a long time," he said enthusiastically. "[Blizzard has] twenty years' worth of history obviously to draw from. And I think the fan base has been there for such a long time, eager for a film and they tried to make it for a while. I've been involved for just about three years now.

"So when I came on board, there was a different take on what the film was going to be and it was slightly different and one of the things that I suggested, as a player myself for twenty years, was that, you know, in the game you can play on either side," he continued. "You can be a hero on the orc

side or the alliance side. And I think what was missing from the project that I saw at that time, was that the humans were the good guys and everything else were the bad guys, and that wasn't *Warcraft*."

"So when I came in and I talked to Blizzard, we immediately saw the film in the same way. You need to be able to see heroes on both sides. And my pitch was, 'Look, let's do a war movie where we spend equal time with both sides. And let's have a hero, let's have Durotan on the orc side and follow what he's going through and why the conflict is something he doesn't necessarily want, but knows he's going to have to face. And Lothar on the human side is going to do exactly the same thing.'"

LFG >> The passion Duncan Jones has for games extends well beyond the *Warcraft* franchise, and it's obvious that he's committed to bringing videogames to films the right way. He seemed extremely keen to emphasise his gaming credentials – talking about growing up with an Atari, a Commodore 64 and so on. You can see the passion when you talk to him – it's not just for filmmaking, but videogames as well – having been around enough people who're handsomely paid to feign interest in games, it was easy to see that Duncan Jones' passion is real.

And that's important, but as we already mentioned, making a good film is more important.





"I was very, very fortunate, on Source Code, my last film, I worked with an editor, Paul Hirsch, who cut Star Wars, the first one," he said when we asked about the film's tone. "And he's done amazing films throughout his career, he's like one of those legendary Hollywood guys. And I dragged Paul onto this film. He was apprehensive, knowing the amount of post-production involved and what the editing was going to be like. But thank God I did because, you know, he is a master and he has an awareness of timing and rhythm, and he's like a musician in that respect. And having Paul Hirsch on board to just keep it tight and keep it moving, and just keep the energy up and just the fun of it all.

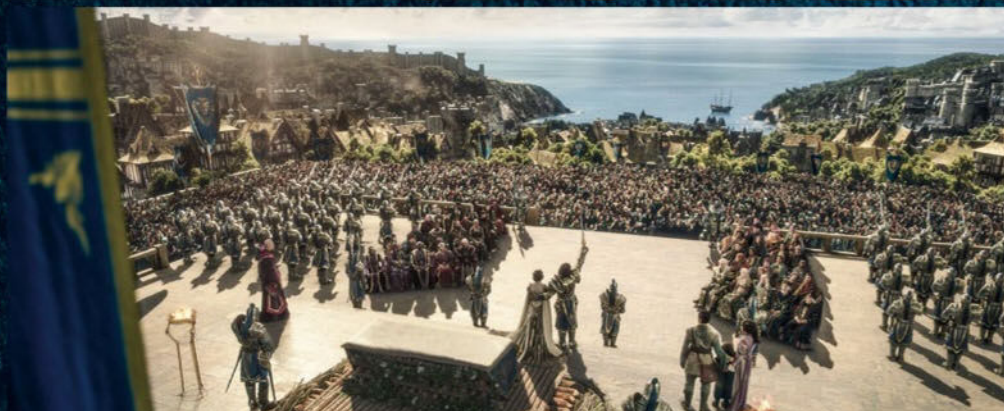
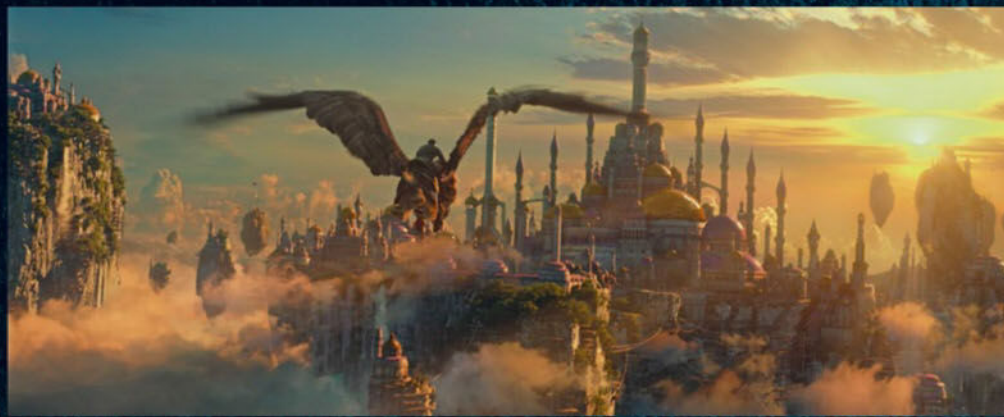
"That's, you know, that's what makes the Indiana Jones movies, I think the old Indiana Jones movies so much fun to watch," he explained. "And the early Star Wars movies, and I'm sure the new one too. But the early Star Wars movies worked so well. You know it's that excitement and that energy and meeting new characters and seeing things you've never seen before. And that's what we've tried to do."

Ultimately, for Duncan Jones, the end of terrible videogame movies is nigh.

"I know that Michael Fassbender is doing the Assassin's Creed movie, I've got a lot of hope for that as well," he said. "We're going to come out first and we're going to be good. So we're going to get the kudos for breaking the streak. But I think it's time, you know? There's no reason why a movie based on just about anything can't be good, it's about the people who make it. David Fincher made The Social Network out of Facebook, right?"

CLOSE TO HOME >> While Duncan Jones is trying to make a movie out of a game, Cory Stockton, Lead Game Designer on World of Warcraft and Blizzard veteran, is trying to reinvigorate people's passion for it. And passion is what drives the team on World of Warcraft – enough that there's an air of apprehension about what the film is doing with their spaces.

"I'm crazy attached because



I've been on the team all ten years," he told us. "I've designed a vast majority of all the dungeons that are in WoW and the zones. To me, and I think to anyone that you talk to about WoW, is that the most popular and important character in all of WoW is the world by far."

Anyone who has played through World of Warcraft can will agree – the world is as important to the game as those who fill it. Everyone has stories about Barrens chat or raiding Stormwind, or ganking Stranglethorn Vale. We spent literally hundreds of hours in Dalaran manipulating the Auction House, waiting for our guildies to get their shit together so we could raid. We got Cory to elaborate on the actual changes being made to the space in the film.

"Obviously, we've been involved with aspects of the movie and knowing the locations, getting to see things," he explained. "There is nothing there that's crazy. Duncan is super, super, super into WoW. That's one of the reasons we chose Duncan as the director because he didn't become a fan of WoW once he became the director of the WoW movie. He was a longtime fan of WoW from before. I think Duncan

had a vision in mind where, obviously, he wants to do what works best for the movie.

"He also wants to respect the world that we've built," he continued. "I don't think there was ever really a lot of tension there about that. I think there was this mutual respect level. All the stuff we've seen I think feels cool. Seeing Stormwind [in the trailer] is just so awesome. I think there's different aspects, obviously, different places. Dalaran might look a little different than the Dalaran that we know, like from the Lich King [expansion]. I think that's totally okay.

"To me, it's like I love Star Wars," he said, laughing. "Star Wars Rebels – the animated series – has taken liberties that are different than what we know as the trilogy, but I think it's cool. They're not messing it up per se. They're just creating new stuff, and I think in general we're totally ok with that. I don't know, I think the trailer was just so cool."

And he's right, you know? The trailer was cool, and it's hard to not be excited about the film. But with a franchise this big and this long coming, it seems like the odds are stacked against them. Let's hope RNJesus is on their side. **||**

DANIEL WU ON WORLD OF WARCRAFT

"My wife has played for years. And I'd promised her that I would take a year off to help with the baby, you know? But then this audition came up, and I told her 'I'm going for it,' and she was mad, saying 'but you promised!' Then she asked what movie it was for. Then she goes 'You better nail [the audition]!'"



WE ARE ONE, AND WE ARE MANY

World of Warcraft: Legion

Every month it seems like someone's telling us that World of Warcraft is dying – the latest round of pronouncements coming after it was revealed that WoW has recently dropped to the lowest number of subscribers since 2005. That sounds a little dire without numbers attached. Even though the numbers have dwindled, World of Warcraft still has 5.5 million subscribers. Guild Wars 2 currently boasts around 7 million subscribers but due to the buy-to-play model, the ongoing revenue from the game is much less. The numbers may be down but the game isn't dying. Not by a long shot.

The game itself may still be healthy, but in the next WoW expansion, Legion, Azeroth is anything but. Bad things, apocalyptic things, are afoot, with Gul'dan breaking Illidan Stormrage out of prison and together they bring the Burning Legion back to Azeroth to conquer or destroy it once and for all. From what we've seen so far, Legion is set to be a massive heroic power fantasy from character creation through to the final raid.

Since World of Warcraft launched, players have been quietly hoping to one day be able to play a Demon Hunter – one of the iconic classes in WoW lore. These

supernatural warriors who wield dual glaives have been introduced in Legion as a Hero class, much like the Death Knights from Wrath of the Lich King. As a Hero class, Demon Warriors not only have a unique narrative starting area, they also have a host of skills and abilities unlike any other class already in the game. Starting at level 98, allowing them to launch straight into Legion content, Demon Hunters can fill either tanking or DPS roles (with only

“**LEGION IS SET TO BE A MASSIVE HEROIC POWER FANTASY FROM CHARACTER CREATION TO FINAL RAID**”

two available specs rather than the three that all others have access to), are limited to the Elven races, and can, amongst other abilities, glide through the air after a jump, transform into a powerful demonic form, see through walls and detect stealth and more. During the current very early alpha, Demon Hunters appear hugely overpowered, but given that there's still the best part of a year before release,

things should be a lot more balanced before the expansion hits the market.

The other classes will receive a revamp in the expansion, as will the way players approach equipment. One of the major facets of Legion will be artefact weapons – powerful weapons for each class and spec (35 in all) gained through class specific questlines and be related to legendary weapons from WoW lore – Death Knights, for instance, will have to search for shards of Frostmourne to construct their weapon. These weapons will stay with the character throughout Legion and can be upgraded through various means to tailor them not only to the player's desired properties but in look as well. We haven't seen much of how this will work as yet but we're excited to find out. “



PLATFORM: PC ♦ CATEGORY: MMO EXPANSION ♦ DEVELOPER: BLIZZARD ♦ PUBLISHER: BLIZZARD ♦ DUE: 2016





IN A HANDBASKET

Hellraid

» When Hellraid missed its 2015 release window, it was widely speculated that the game had been canned. Techland was quick to put an end to the rumours, declaring that Hellraid is still very much alive, albeit in need of additional development time as it didn't meet the developer's expectations.

Outside of the delay caused by the jump from Chrome Engine 5 to 6, it's a smart move by Techland to hopefully help further differentiate Hellraid from similar fantasy-themed dungeon crawlers. Beyond this, it will also make Hellraid feel less like a mod for Dead Island – which is exactly how it started out internally – and more like a game that can stand on its own two feet, much like how Dying Light feels distinct from Techland's two previous zombie titles.

Hellraid follows Techland's recent tradition of a four-player cooperative option atop a story-driven solo experience. For the story, players take on the role of Ayden: a Sean Bean sound-alike who goes AWOL to check on his sister Maerwynn when hellish creatures invade their hometown of Redvale. There's a strong suggestion that Maerwynn dies during the prologue mission and becomes an ethereal guide throughout the course of the story.

As would be expected from Chrome Engine 6, Hellraid looks stunning, even in pre-alpha form. The prologue mission had more fauxpen-world funnelling than we're used to from Techland's recent open-world games, but the lack of open approach is

hopefully one of the reasons the developer is taking Hellraid back to the drawing board.

Unsurprisingly, there's a big emphasis on melee combat. Swords, axes and maces have light or heavy attacks, while blocking and dodging operates as part of a regenerating stamina system. Executing a perfectly timed block parries an enemy's strike, which opens up counter-attack opportunities. Players can even parry multiple enemy strikes simultaneously, which comes in handy given that foes tend

« WHAT STARTS OFF AS A SMATTERING OF INITIAL UNLOCKS EXPANDS TO HUNDREDS OF PASSIVE AND ACTIVE SKILLS »

to surround and attack in unison. It helps that enemy friendly fire is most definitely switched on, which adds a level of tactical combat opportunities atop the simplistic control mechanics.

With a single-handed melee weapon, players can use a shield for easier blocking, while two-handed options sacrifice speed for additional attacking power. That's fairly standard stuff, but where it gets a whole lot deeper is in the freeform approach to unlocking abilities. What starts off as a healthy smattering of initial unlocks

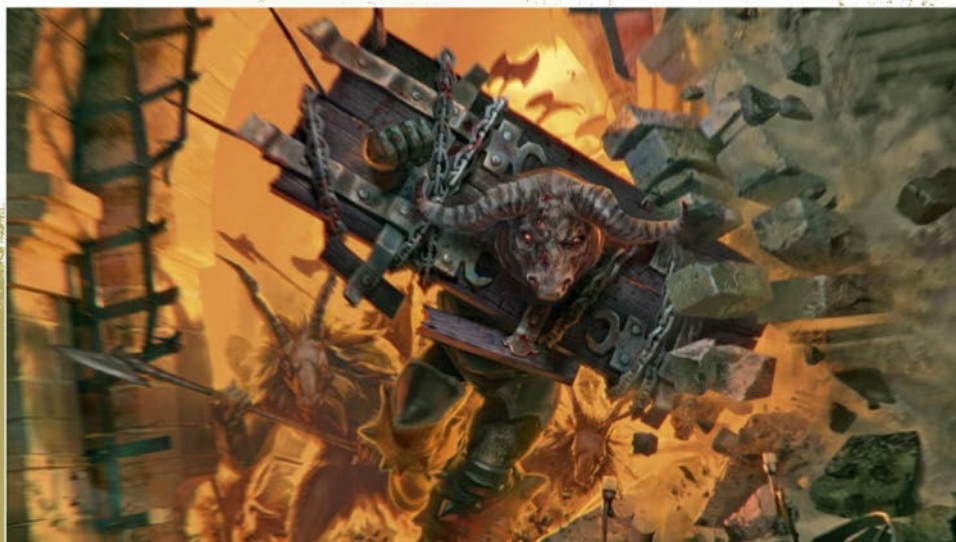


expands to hundreds of passive and active skills that reportedly lead to thousands of possible player builds.

There's also an emphasis on magic weapons, which add additional tactical possibilities alongside the melee weapons. For instance, an ice staff can shoot homing projectiles to chip away at an enemy's health, or fire a constant icy beam that freezes them solid, while a lightning staff is perfect for dismemberment. The arsenal is part of random-generation system that makes it rain loot constantly, kind of like playing Diablo III in first-person perspective.

Given Techland's willingness to walk away from developing another Dead Island sequel and the success of Dying Light, having the gumption to take Hellraid back to the drawing board is doubtlessly a smart move. As long as Techland can nail the all-important addictive gameplay loop that is the hallmark of their zombie games, Hellraid has the potential to deliver something new built on a rock-solid foundation of accessible first-person gameplay. «

PLATFORM: XBOX ONE, PS4, PC ♦ CATEGORY: ACTION ♦ DEVELOPER: TECHLAND ♦ PUBLISHER: TECHLAND ♦ DUE: TBA





The Hearthstone Bubble

How Slow Reactions are Impacting Hearthstone

JOAB GILROY



▶ The Grim Patron Warrior nearly killed Hearthstone. Popular streamers either quit the game or outright said they were only playing it because it was their job.

"It was not a dominant deck in terms of win percentage anywhere," explained Hamilton Chu, one of the Executive Producers on Hearthstone. We were sitting on a level above Blizzcon, up away from the show floor. "Up until fairly high level it was a losing deck. It was actually a very difficult deck to play. Up in Legend it was minorly winning and then the best handful of players in the world had it. They did quite well with it because it's... well it's actually pretty powerful."

For five mana, a player can summon a minion called the Grim Patron with three attack and three defence. Generally speaking, this is a terrible card. The trick with the Grim Patron is that if it takes damage and doesn't die, it summons a replica of itself. When combined with a card which gives other minions Charge, and another which powers up as more minions take damage, and yet another where all minions on the board take damage, a situation developed where players were able to deal more than double the damage necessary to win a match.

"We want to make sure we give the community enough time to figure out themselves," Hamilton explained. "Our preferred way of addressing a card or deck which is still over-powerful or [over] popular is with the next set of content, which is usually not too long after that. So we say 'well let's give people more tools to deal with it and see if the community can come up with ways to change the meta themselves.' That's our preferred method."

But it doesn't always work out that way, and Blizzard has faced criticism recently because of their 'wait-and-see' approach. It's a precarious balancing act, because Blizzard's philosophy involves trying carefully to avoid rolling back on changes made where possible. In the case of Grim Patron, however, they had no choice.

"It wasn't a winning deck until the very highest levels of play, but then it was very powerful," he explained when we pushed on the topic of the Grim Patron Warrior specifically. "The way [Grim Patron Warriors] won was not just strong, it was strong in this very unpleasant kind of way where I can just do this out of hand and there was no way for you to react other than putting the pressure on me beforehand. By that time, you forget that maybe you had those opportunities. On top of that, it was a mechanic that punished you for putting down minions. Because of that, I think we decided to nerf Warsaw Commander."

And with that nerf, Blizzard killed Grim Patron Warrior. But the meta doesn't sleep, and a new challenger has emerged from the depths to provide consternation to players and the development team.

The Secrets Paladin is a deck built around spell cards which take unique advantage of Hearthstone's digital format – they are auto-played by the game when certain conditions are met. Using a minion called the Mysterious Challenger, a Paladin deck can summon five secrets at once – giving a single 6 mana minion 11 mana's worth of value, and creating a considerable amount of stress for their opponent.

For Blizzard, the question will be 'How long do we let this deck do its thing?' Luckily, solutions are already appearing – they probably won't need to step in again. The balancing act for the Hearthstone team never ends, however, and once Secrets Paladin is squashed, a new deck will rise and the questions will begin again.

On the subject of questions they hear a lot, we asked when players would get more deck slots. "We're working on it," replied Hamilton, laughing. "We are definitely working on it."

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ULTIMATE ULTIMA

Shroud of the Avatar: Forsaken Virtues



There's a lot of promise in Richard "Lord British" Garriott's latest game, *Shroud of the Avatar*. That is, if you read the original Kickstarter pitch, or the laundry list of intended features on the Steam page. The reality, though, is *Shroud of the Avatar* isn't close to being finished and, given it's been in pre-alpha since Early Access release in November 2014, it isn't likely to be close to finished anytime soon.

In fact, there's a capitalised warning from developer Portalarium that comes just shy of telling you to not buy the ambitious MMO in its current form. Outside of the normal pre-alpha warnings, the final telling sentence warns: "Please read the negative reviews prior to purchase, many of which warn you of the current unfinished state of the game."

Shroud of the Avatar is slated as a spiritual successor to Garriott's *Ultima* games, which injects fantasy and steampunk sensibilities into a medieval setting. Portalarium is boldly developing it as both an MMO and solo experience, with episodic content planned for the solo experience, and a yet-to-be-proven revolutionary server system that utilises each player's connection to create a super server that will supposedly never have downtime.

Tracy Hickman of *Dragonlance* fame is

in charge of penning the episodic content, which means there's potential for an engaging narrative, separated across five chapters.

The problem is there's too much wrong with the game at the moment for that nugget of narrative hope to have any relevance in the here and now. As is typical of over-ambitious Kickstarter games, a lot of what's on paper sounds fantastic, too good to believe almost. Characters aren't

|| **COMBAT IS CURRENTLY UNPLAYABLE, WITH SHODDY SOUNDS AND ANIMATIONS THE LEAST DAMNING ISSUES** ||

bound by class and can be customised to a player's particular tastes, but there's so much grinding involved at the moment that there's too much frustration required to properly plumb the depths of the 20 different skill trees.

While *Avatar* is generous with levelling early on, the lack of variety and an incomplete feature set necessitates hours of grinding to access later-level unlocks. The pitch for combat sounds fantastic,

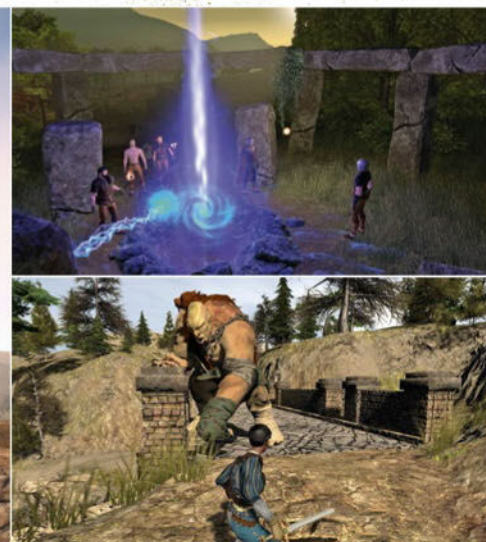
with an emphasis on building a dynamic set of skills, but there's very little in the way of teaching the player how to make the most of the novel feature. It doesn't help that combat is currently almost unplayable, with shoddy sounds and animations the least damning of the issues.

This lack of handholding carries over to exploration that's, in its own way, rewarding in that the only way to discover if an enemy is a higher level than you is by attacking them. Similarly, quest givers aren't conveniently marked with giant exclamation marks over their heads. Instead, players are required to literally type queries to NPCs to follow an investigative trail of characters to discover an eventual quest.

It's a different take on the usual approach to quests in RPGs, but it's one that will doubtlessly outlive its novelty after scores of hours. None of these detractors are aided by the reality that *Shroud of the Avatar* looks decidedly dated, with samey designs for world inhabitants and even the supposedly different in-game locations.

You could buy into Early Access right now, but with so many damning user reviews already and a warning from the developer, it's best to wait. For how long? Nobody knows. ❗

PLATFORM: PC ♦ CATEGORY: RPG ♦ DEVELOPER: PORTALARIUM ♦ PUBLISHER: PORTALARIUM ♦ DUE: TBA





GIGANTIC LEAP FOR MOBA KIND

Gigantic

» Gigantic is a fresh take on the multiplayer online battle arena (or MOBA), a highly competitive genre flush with millions of players, forcing developers to vie for attention with unusual gimmicks and game mechanics. As the name of the game suggests, Gigantic is trying to take one small step for MOBAs and one gigantic leap for MOBA-kind... and it does have potential. With its unique art style and feel, in conjunction with a whole new kind of gameplay objective (in terms of a MOBA) it has the chance of becoming a great game, if not an inspiration to future MOBA developers.

The biggest addition (both figuratively and literally) are the guardians after whom the game is named. Sitting on opposite endpoints of each map, guardians act as defensive sentinels while their team builds up enough kills and experience to fill up their attack meter, at which point they'll awaken and rampaging their way across the battlefield to attack their counterpart on the other end. When a guardian attack by another guardian, it becomes vulnerable to damage from humans; if a guardian loses all its life, it dies and the match is over.

Watching these colossi stomp across the battlefield is awe-inspiring and a vivid demonstration of the game's superlative

art direction. In a genre known for functional, aesthetically unappealing graphics, Gigantic's artistic vision is spectacular, combining Eastern and Western styles into a deeply appealing hybrid. The stylised characters move about brightly coloured landscapes with purpose and finesse, and the large casts of complex personalities adds a great deal to the game's already impressive backstory.

» GIGANTIC'S ART
COMBINES EASTERN
AND WESTERN STYLES
INTO A DEEPLY
APPEALING HYBRID »

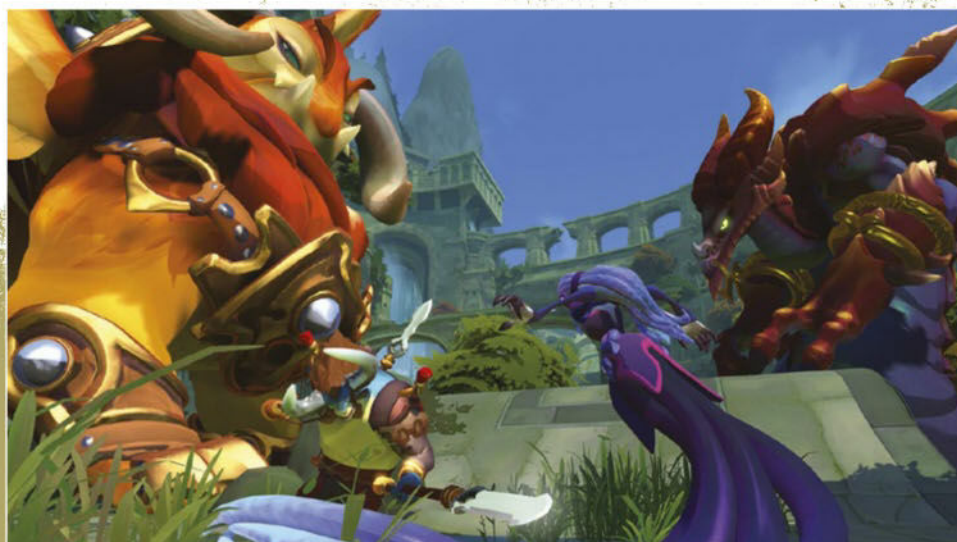
Legendary heroes such as Tyto the Swift and Charnok the Dragon Sorcerer are all seamlessly woven into a lore-rich history which fits the gameplay well.

Developer Motiga has made some really interesting design choices. Rather than being a more strategic top down based game, Gigantic takes a third person perspective similar to Smite (another third person MOBA) in which you have to aim basic attacks and abilities. Where Gigantic

differs from Smite, however, is in its ambitious, highly vertical level design. Take a look skyward and you'll spy traversable temples, enormous statues, and majestic mountain tops, giving the game a welcome sense of verticality lacking in most other MOBAs.

Typically for the genre, standard abilities all have cool downs, but focus abilities (basically your ultimate ability) can be recharged by meeting objectives and killing enemy players. And when you save your focus ability it becomes stronger!

That said, the game lacks some small yet complex mechanics that you would find in most other MOBAs. The absence of minions, for example, means that minion farming is also completely absent, which could possibly lead to Gigantic being perceived less competitive than established genre leaders, but we will have to wait till release to see for sure. «



PLATFORM: XBOX ONE, PC ♦ CATEGORY: MOBA ♦ DEVELOPER: MOTIGA ♦ PUBLISHER: MOTIGA ♦ DUE: 2016



KEY TO MY HEART

Kingdom Hearts 3



Kingdom Hearts 3 is coming to your home console, with its first release outside of a Sony or Nintendo platform. Xbox One and PlayStation 4 owners will soon have the chance to continue Sora's adventure. Newcomers to the series may be left scratching their heads, as this is now the eighth game in the story and there aren't any collections officially announced for the current generation of consoles. Fans, however, have many things to look forward to.

The story takes place after Dream Drop Distance, the most recent handheld Kingdom Hearts title, and will tie up all the loose ends from previous instalments, ending the "Xehanort Saga" (the story of the series' villain). The story will drag Sora across worlds well-travelled in the series, such as Hercules' world, Olympus Coliseum, and the starting world of Kingdom Hearts 2, Twilight Town. New worlds for players to explore include Tangled's Kingdom of Corona and San Fransokyo from Big Hero 6. The cast of each world will mirror their Disney film counterparts, and many Final Fantasy and Kingdom Hearts originals will be returning. Donald Duck and Goofy finally make a comeback, something fans haven't seen in the series since Kingdom Hearts II.

From what has been shown of the gameplay, there won't only be new Keyblades in the game, but Keyblade transformations as well. A mechanic teased with Kingdom Hearts Birth By

Sleep, the series prequel that showed Keyblades turning into vehicles. Some of the transformations include rocket launchers, giant swords and crossbows. The instalment also boasts a new system called attraction flow which summons theme park-styled attacks, among which are a teacup ride, and a Viking ship.

From the E3 trailer, it seems Dream Drop Distance's main movement mechanic, Flow Motion, makes a spiritual return, with Sora naturally interacting with the environment, rather than just bumping

“DONALD DUCK AND GOOFY FINALLY MAKE A COMEBACK, SOMETHING FANS HAVEN'T SEEN SINCE KINGDOM HEARTS II”

into it like earlier instalments. This new movement does not seem to have as much of an impact as Flow Motion did in the 3DS title which had Sora bouncing off walls to extend and power up combos. We have however seen more Kingdom Hearts 2 styled combat which relied heavily on stringing magic and abilities into combos to deal massive damage.

The art style has also evolved, benefiting most from the beefy specs of the PS4 and Xbox One, both of which are considerably more powerful than 3DS or PlayStation

Portable. Comparing the E3 2015 Trailer against 2.5 on the PlayStation 3, lighting effects have been turned up to max, with almost every attack engulfing Sora in showers of light particles. Lighting and lighting effects within the stages also appears to have improved. It was common for the other main Kingdom Hearts titles' to use simple ambient lighting for each of the stages. Now it is becoming apparent that stages will have more dynamic use of lighting, with moving scenery causing changes in shadows and light sources.

Though it's likely there'll be a bunch of costume changes available for our spiky-haired protagonist, most of the trailer sees him in his regular clothing (suggesting a return for Drive Forms, costume-linked power ups that absorbed your teammates for boosts in attack and magic). One thing worth noting, though, is that Sora's regular clothes seem similar to his Dream Drop Distance attire in the Kingdom of Corona. If this change is akin to Halloween Town changes from prior games, perhaps fans will see more world specific costumes.

Yoko Shimomura's breathtaking music also returns, perfectly capturing the grandeur and majesty of the game's spectacular visuals. Unfortunately, fan-favourite singer Utada Hikari is currently uncommitted to writing and performing the theme song for this instalment as she has done for others, but rumours doing the rounds suggest that's set to change in the not-too-distant future. Here's hoping! ☺

PLATFORM: PS4, XBOX ONE ◆ CATEGORY: JRPG ◆ DEVELOPER: SQUARE ENIX ◆ PUBLISHER: SQUARE ENIX ◆ DUE: TBA



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IF I HAD A HAMMER

Total War: Warhammer

Though Total War: Warhammer follows the familiar and well balanced Total War path of splitting the game into two core components – turn based city building and strategy, and real time strategic warfare – the way that Creative Assembly have approached this balance in the first licensed Total War game looks to be very different. Instead of having all but identical mechanics for all factions, TW: Warhammer instead looks as though it is fully embracing the source material, making each of the iconic fantasy races and factions unique and entirely in line with the tabletop strategy game and RPG that serve as the inspiration.

Until very recently, all that had been shown or offered for hands on were the real time battles, mostly featuring Dwarven armies fighting off Greenskin (Ork and Goblin) hordes. These demos have shown some impressive new mechanics in battle – the hero characters equipped with unique items that give them special abilities, scripted combat events, such as reinforcements coming from pre-defined locations, huge magic spells that can cause devastation on the battlefield, giant units and flying creatures that add an extra level to strategy – but they have only given a snapshot of the true scope of the game. Now that the campaign map has been shown, the true nature of Total War: Warhammer has been more fully fleshed out.

As could be expected of a game

steeped in so much deep fantasy lore, the campaign map of TW: Warhammer is more narratively rich than those featured in previous games in the series. Rather than simply showing the world or area in which the game takes place, and having the various factions vying to take more territory, Warhammer instead features vastly different groups, each with very specific looking and feeling homelands, from the mountainous homes of the Dwarves, the peaks of many linked

“ HERO CHARACTERS WILL PLAY A MORE PIVOTAL ROLE THAN BEFORE, LEADING ARMIES AND ADVENTURES ”

by technically advanced bridges, through to the Badlands of the Greenskins to the inhospitable snowy hellscape inhabited by the Chaos worshipping Norsca.

Many of these groups have abilities that sync with their homelands – Dwarves and Goblins are more comfortable fighting underground than other races and can enter The Underway (a system of caves and tunnels that cross the world) to move unseen, to fight or take refuge. The Greenskins are a hard people from a hard place and are by nature combative.

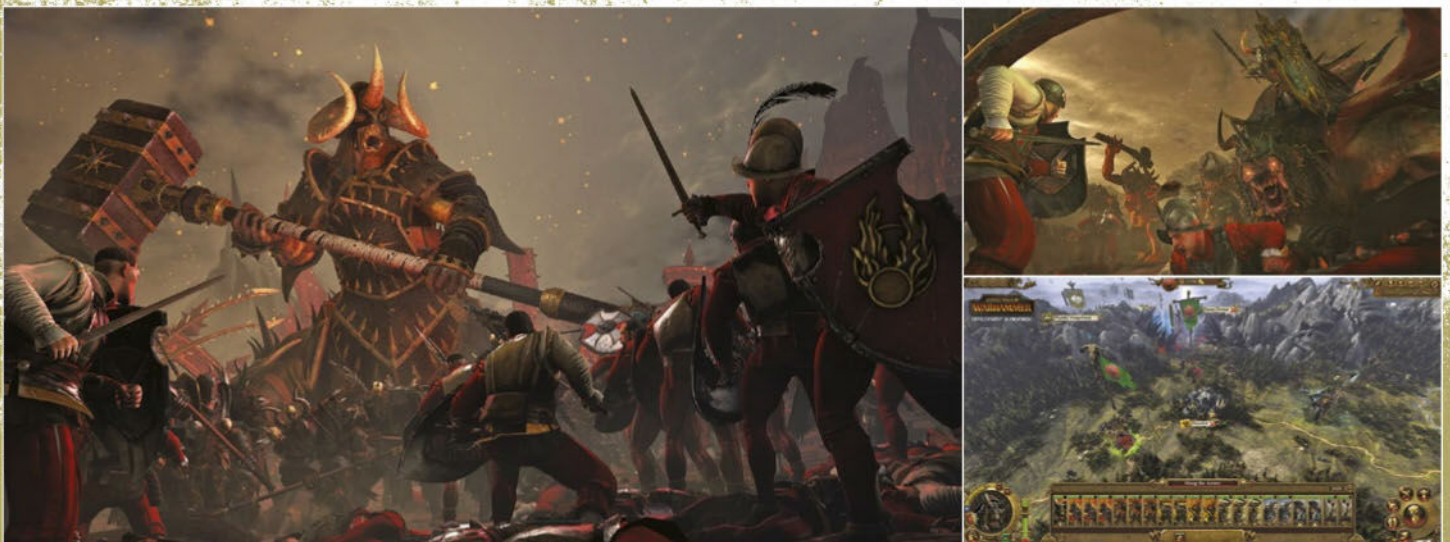


If a Greenskin army's "Fightiness" rating drops too low due to a lack of external conflict they might turn on themselves to sate their bloodlust.

Hero characters will play a more pivotal role than in any previous Total War game, as they not only lead armies but also lead adventures. Story based missions give heroes a chance to accrue their unique gear and skills and further flesh out the lore of the Warhammer universe. These missions are separate from the common world domination goals of all the factions and might see players diverting from their current path to acquire items that could help their ultimate goal.

How this narrative thrust will mesh with the sandboxy city building and real time warfare typical of Total War remains to be seen. We're definitely excited to find out when the game releases sometime in 2016. ☞

PLATFORM: PC ♦ CATEGORY: STRATEGY ♦ DEVELOPER: THE CREATIVE ASSEMBLY ♦ PUBLISHER: SEGA ♦ DUE: 2016





HE IS THE CHOSEN ONE

Nioh

» Koei Tecmo, the company behind Dynasty Warriors, has finally revealed new footage of a game teased over ten years ago. In 2004, Koei had not yet gone through a merger with Tecmo and proudly announced a game based on an unfinished Akira Kurosawa script. The revered Japanese filmmaker, responsible for cinematic masterpieces such as Seven Samurai, Sanjuro and Yojimbo, passed away before completing the film.

The script, titled Oni (a Japanese demon), was picked up by the game's publisher and Hisao Kurosawa, Akira's son. Ni-Oh was born.

Bursting back into the scene this year at the Tokyo Game Show and PlayStation Experience, Ni-Oh left quite the impression.

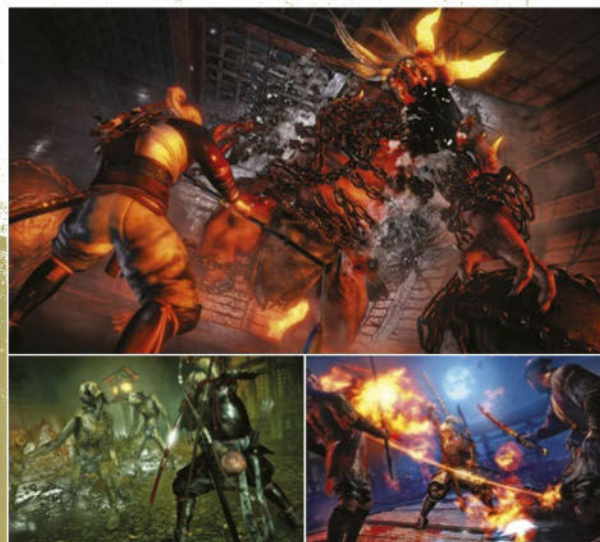
« **GOLDEN GHOSTS IN THE DEMO HINT AT DARK SOULS-STYLE ONLINE CO-OP** »

Japan with various folkloric additions. The plot follows the samurai son of a Japanese Lord and Western woman as he battles regular foot soldiers and various Japanese demons.

From what we've seen, gameplay wise, combat appears very close to an over the top Dynasty Warriors style, but reduced in scale so that it resembles something more like Darksiders or Dark Souls. Speaking of Dark Souls, the appearance of a helpful golden ghost in the game's demo hints at the possibility of Dark Souls-style online co-op, but it may just be an NPC or especially flashy spell.

With big swords, big attacks, and big enemies, Nioh looks like it could be a pleasant surprise for many who were unaware this title was still being worked on. «

PLATFORM: PS4 ♦ CATEGORY: ACTION ♦ DEVELOPER: TEAM NINJA ♦ PUBLISHER: KOEI TECMO ♦ DUE: 2016



DING DONG DELL

Ni No Kuni 2

» Ni No Kuni blew JRPG fans away with its stunning art direction and music, and for good reason. Some of Studio Ghibli's veterans worked with Level 5 games to bring this game to life. Composer Joe Hisaishi was also closely involved, best known for his work on the scores of Ghibli's most popular films. Hisaishi's talents are the only confirmed Ghibli interaction with this new game, however the studio's art style remains influential.

The Kingdom of Ding Dong Dell, the primary setting of the first game, makes a return, but the protagonist, the boy King Evan Pettiwisker Tildrum, is new. Evan is approached by a mysterious figure, Roland, who comes from a different world (similar to Oliver from the previous game) and knows nothing of his new surroundings. After the King is exiled from his kingdom, these two companion brought together by fate must journey through Ding Dong Dell to reclaim the throne.

Much of the game has a very low-fantasy aesthetic influenced by Ghibli's Howl's Moving Castle, with the marriage of magic and technology throughout the world.

Character design has also been heavily influenced by Ghibli greats. In addition to your typical "determined youngster" of a protagonist - a standard trope for Ghibli films, and Miyazaki in particular - one of the party members, and the tribe she hails from, bear striking resemblance to Princess Mononoke from the film of the same name.

We're honestly jazzed for this. After all, it's Ghibli and Level 5 - what's not to love? «



PLATFORM: PS4 ♦ CATEGORY: RPG ♦ DEVELOPER: LEVEL 5 ♦ PUBLISHER: BANDAI NAMCO ♦ DUE: TBA



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Flights for Fantasy

CHRISTIAN READ LIVES THE FANTASY
AND WATCHES IT DIE





» There's an old Hollywood joke - 'did you hear about the blonde who was so dumb she slept with the writer?' Kinda sexist but the point stands: The writer is the person with the least power. Found that out working on Sacred 3.

Here's how it starts, here's how a writing job can go tits up.

My publisher tells me over lunch at the San Diego Comic Con "A computer game thing... someone came. They were looking for you. Something about a job." It is July 2012 and I am flattered to be asked. A year later, I will have grown a sadness beard about the whole thing.

They're in Germany, I'm in Sydney but we get on each other's schedule. Shortly, I'm trading emails with a producer about my experience, working on Secret World and my comics. Then we get to the meat.

'Did you play Sacred or Sacred 2?'

'Of course.'

But this is a lie. I played Diablo 2 like a normal person.

'Are you free to do about 5 months serious work for a nice chunk of change?'

Yes. Yes.

Freelance writing is poverty.

I do a writing test. These are insults to writers with any experience but what else can you do? They tend to be 'Write a scene from two different characters point of views' or 'invent twenty five magic items' or something like that.

They are a trick.

What does the person on the other end *really* want? What are their tastes? What do they like to read and what style do they want you to use? Is it a happy character, a sad one, a drunk or a prude? On the job, you draft, you bounce copy off other people, you have time with characters, you can, if you want, workshop. Tests, therefore, aren't really indicative of what finished writing looks like.

But you gotta play. So you do them and just make sure the grammar is good.

Mine is. I get the job.

The first task is to familiarise myself with Sacred. I hit the wikis, found copies. The first game was punishingly generic. Year Nine D&D campaign in the Library. But I like you can play baddies. Dark elves, vampires,

that sort of nonsense.

The second one wasn't liked because it wasn't fantasy of the Dark Lord Has Escaped variety. It moved through genres and re-imagined what a fantasy game could look like while being clearly not a SF world of predictable scientific achievement. Fresh ideas about what a fantasy world could look like. The New Weird was in and Sacred 2 was, in its own way, part of that literary movement, consciously doing novel things.

So, I am really enjoying it. Most players hated it but most players have no interest in innovation or theme. They are discomforted by the unfamiliar.

The first story meeting comes.

I've got a head full of ideas about how I can continue 2's Kirby-esque themes of Technomancy and machines that slay Gods and Manichean wars between Good and Evil played out against the final stand of a mighty culture. And they're letting me work from home!

"So, you've got to make it nothing like Sacred 2." First directive out of the producer's mouth.

Oh dear. Not off to a great start.

"What we really want from you is a re-envisioning of what Sacred really is!"

If that sounds really great, I envy your youth. Because what it sounded like to me was "We've got no idea. We'll tell you what's wrong when you get it wrong."

So. I've got two weeks. Twenty page Bible. Writing questions: What are the stakes? The themes, the conflicts? What does it feel like in this world? To players, to characters? Have to communicate that on a nerdy level but also on a literary level. How to build on what's there?

I really like my take. It gets me excited. I have a *big* story to tell.

I look at all the magitech from the second game and think... the kids love Steampunk. It was still raging away and there hadn't been a great Steampunk game since what, Arcanum? That was my in - vast angelic empires of dungeon-punk. Oppressed working-classes, internal political threats, a great role for the silent player characters

to inhabit, cool countries, cultures, great baddies, mad new technologies.

You can do a lot in twenty pages. Excited, I handed it in.

"I don't like steampunk."

That's what the producer says verbatim. It's never even taken anywhere up the line. It's not discussed with me or the design team. It's never even read. Just his tastes. "I don't like steampunk. Do it again."

There's nothing more to be said.



Ever worked hard to have something you loved pretty much ignored? Leaves you gutted. Leaves you sad. But it's a gig. No time for feelings.

Second draft! *The Vampire Empire!*

Drawing on some of the dark anti-heroes from the first game, I create a terrifying world of gothic horror and intrigue. A vampire aristocracy and their dark elven secret police! A doomed resistance on one final desperate mission! The last of the Angels! A civil war of monsters! Man, I was going to kick Soul Reaver's arse! This was Bloodborne before that was a thing.

No.

No reason.

Just *no*.

» **EVER WORKED HARD TO HAVE SOMETHING YOU LOVED PRETTY MUCH IGNORED? LEAVES YOU GUTTED. LEAVES YOU SAD. BUT IT'S A GIG. NO TIME FOR FEELINGS.**



**ELECTRICITY
IN MY HEAD.
WHEN WRITING
IS GOOD, IT'S LIKE
NOTHING ELSE.
WAKE UP EAGER
TO GET MORE
IDEAS DOWN,
SLEEP RESENTFUL
I HAVE TO STOP.**

We haggled back and forth on what they do want. Then, the committee-thinking goes into effect.

What comes back to me is basically Star Wars. Peasants rebelling. I get some good ideas in there. Some baddies nicked from an occult group called La Couleuvre Noire. Create a tense French Resistance-style narrative, freeing the world from demons, finding a sort of evil messiah and turning her good. Playing various bad guys off against each other.

They like it! Expanded it out to about 100 pages, writing about countries, cultures, gods, monsters, magic. Just full on World Creation Nerdism. Electricity in my head. When writing is good, it's like nothing else. Wake up eager to get more ideas down, sleep resentful I have to stop.

I know it's just a gig but I get into this.

No good deed goes unpunished.

They want me to come to

Germany. Here's what you need to know about that fortnight - the toilet in my hotel is full of piss on check-in and there's blood on the carpet.

Now, the Sacred licence was owned and produced by Deep Silver but developed by Keen.

They hate each other. Just on a personal level.

Meetings are terse, tense affairs. I'm told to do one task, then another before I'm finished. No one seems to know what's happening or even approved, what's greenlit. Writers should work closely with, for, designers but I don't think they even knew who I am. Only team leaders have been forwarded any of my Bible and they're busy doing their own thing. When I suggest I meet with them to tell them more about the world, that kicks off a fight.

'You were supposed to tell them about the world already!'

'We're behind deadlines, no time for story!'

Soon I am banished into a empty room. The last useful meeting I am part of is when some concept art comes through. Main NPC is a grizzled ranger woman, Aragorn in a frock. We get an achingly generic ninja woman with a bow from some bastard in Italy, who charges a thousand dollars for a few pencil sketches.

I work in comics. "Guys, this is outrageous. This is half an hour's work and isn't even the brief. This guy is taking the piss."

Don't embarrass high-ups, even when they're stuffing up.

I am given few other tasks and

fly back feeling useless.

That's it. Finish up some minor bits and pieces and invoice them. Write a final mail saying I'd still like to be involved on the project. We've barely done any dialogue and I want to give NPCs more backstory through an in-game journal or something...

Never heard from them again. Never once.

Not even a thanks, nice working with you.

A novel's worth of words and then the door closes.

I start on my first novel and forget.

Never play the game. You don't really play your own. Never read the reviews. But mates talk about them. *Something went very wrong* is the one that stays with me. And *this game tries hard to be funny but fails totally*.

I've written Fantasy James Bond Star Wars Tense Paranoid Thriller, not sodding *Discworld!*

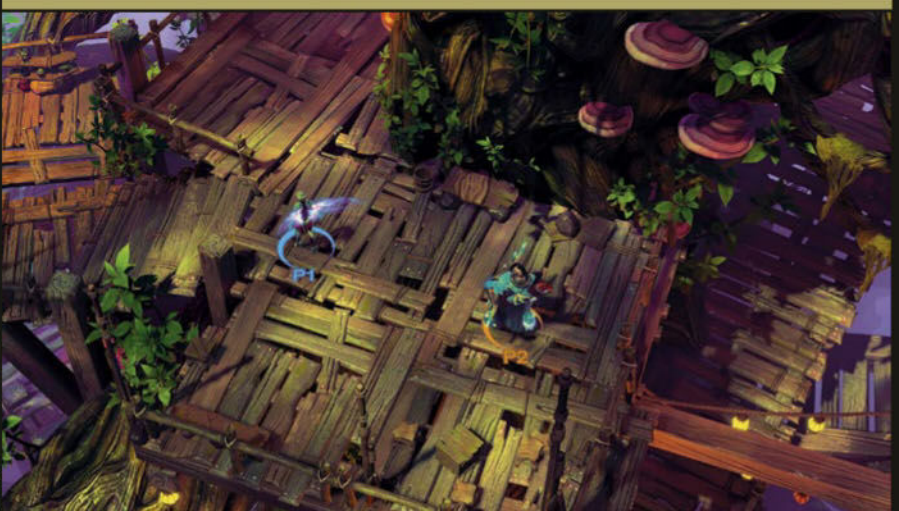
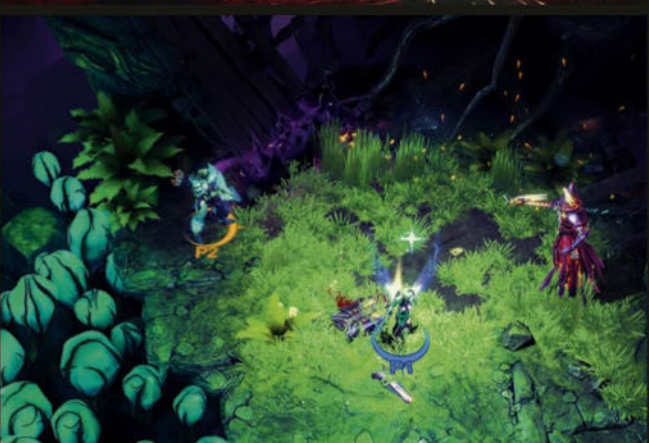
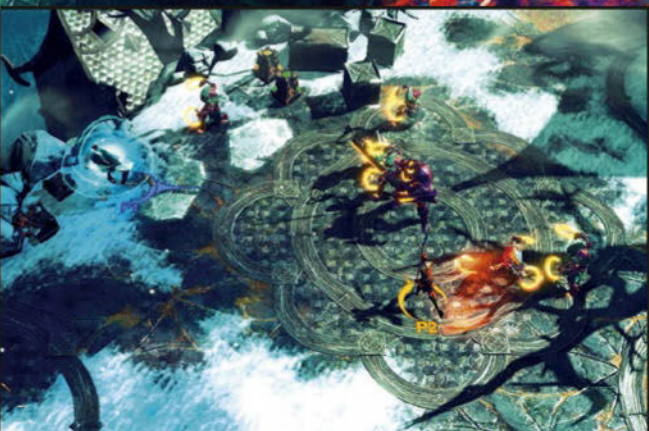
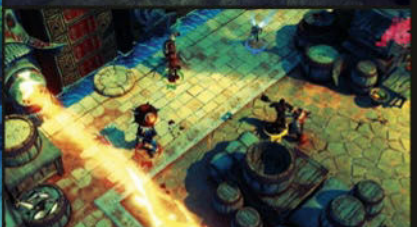
Spend a week half-ashamed and half-relieved. I know they chucked me off before I could finish. What they did after, honestly, *isn't my fault*. Still feel ashamed.

You're supposed to learn practically from experiences like this. What I really figure out is that your heart *will be broken*. And in the horrifying world of capitalist creativity, you have to keep yourself safe, never get too invested because no one cares how you're hurt, or how much you love or how it turns out.

Do it always, forever and always, for the money.

I'm just the blonde. «







The Black Sword

DANIEL WILKS



When I was 10 or 11 I became very ill. I got Chicken Pox and wound up with lesions in my throat and a related lung infection that is rare in adults and all but unheard of in children. I was out of school for quite a while, so dedicated much of my time to reading. I quickly churned through everything unread on my shelf, so my mother offered to head to a nearby second hand bookshop to pick up some reading material. I told her that I would like a fantasy or SF series. She came home with a box – a literal box – of books. Someone had passed on their collection to the shop and I benefitted greatly. In the box was the complete Elric of Melnibone saga, the Chronicles of Corum, Hawkmoon, The Dancers at the End of Time, the Jerry Cornelius collections, Behold the Man, Breakfast in Ruins and more. In one day I went from never having heard of Michael Moorcock to owning 30 or so books he wrote. I had no choice but to become a fan.

I immersed myself in the mythology of the Eternal Champion, a cursed figure destined to be eternally reincarnated to fight in the war between Law and Chaos, sometimes siding with one faction or the other, sometimes striving for a balance between the two, giving the people he ultimately fought for a chance to decide the future for themselves. I read about the Champion's eternally doomed Companion and Consort. Most of all I fell in love with the concept of the Black Sword, the physical manifestation of the Champion's power and metaphor for the cost and weight of conflict. With few exceptions, Moorcock is not a great wordsmith, but when it comes to ideas, few novelists are as inventive or prolific.

Throughout the massive Eternal Champion saga (currently numbering over 65 books and short stories), the Black Sword has taken many forms, from the well-known to the obscure. It has been everything from The Black Sword, an unholy and powerfully intelligent blade wielded by Lord Ereko (John Dakar – the only Eternal Champion who remembers his other incarnations and knows he is the Champion – long story), and Stormbringer, the soul-stealing black runic sword of Elric of Melnibone to Jerry Cornelius' needle gun, Jherek Carnalian's power ring capable of rendering imagination reality, the Black Jewel implanted in Dorian Hawkmoon's head and the silver eye and hand of Corum Jjaelen Insei (an anagram of Jerry Cornelius).

No matter the incarnation and relative level of power, the Black Sword is always both a boon and a burden. It gives the wielder the ability to continue their fight long after others would have fallen, but at the same time exacting a horrible price, whether it be destroying the souls of companions, killing hope or prophesying the Champion's own death. It's more than a simple tool. Even when the Sword is not an intelligent creature it is still a dreadful impetus to take the easiest route through conflict. It's as much the hope of the Eternal Champion as it is the very embodiment of the curse that sees the Champion forever dying in battle.



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What's a fantasy story?

CHRISTIAN READ IS KIND OF
A GENRE SNOB

» It's not that easy to answer. You could say it's about a world where magic is real and swords and all that. Well, there goes Neil Gaiman, for instance. It's got magic in! Lloyd Alexander's once famous Westmark has no fantasy but is inarguably fantasy. We could go on like this all day. What defines a fantasy is up for grabs but a down and dirty simplistic version is this: A story in which something that is imaginary is treated as being real. Be that magic or talking Jesus lions or dragons or curses.

So broad as to be useless, almost.

Why is it so complex to define these things? Well, it's because the genre is old now and grows like a coral reef or a creepy robot bastard, slowly adding bits and pieces onto itself over years or centuries.

So, let's have a quick look at the history of fantasy and sort this out.

HISTORY OF NEVERWAS >> The fantastic has a long, long history.

The Greeks had stories of airships going to other worlds and the Romans had stories of encounters with aliens. Jump ahead two thousand years and you get the Medieval Romances. (Romance in this context means tales of high adventure and drama.) Back then you had Orlando Furiosa (yep) and Childe Roland and, of course, King Arthur. A lot of these are in print and they're recognisably fantasy novels. Evil sorcerers, fair maidens, questing knights, plots and counter-plots and George R. R. sure as hell was six hundred years too late to the incest party.

By the time the 18th century rolls around, knights are long gone and the Gothic takes it place. Lurid tales of vampires and madmen and creepy houses and curses and evil sorcerers and... yep. If it sounds familiar, it is. There are certain things writers keep returning to. At around the same time, fairy tales come into vogue in literary circles and it's all abandoned children and kisses from princes and if you're a fully grown adult who likes Disney,

well, there's some remarkably... frank... versions of those stories the Mouse never told you about.

They leave out all the sex stuff between the wolf and Red Riding Hood, for one. And you'll never sleep straight knowing Prince Charming was a necrophile.

Moving on.

More and more people are literate by now and all they have to do is read and stave off tuberculosis.

In the United States, Weird Tales and pulp magazines arrive and with it in the 20s. They attract writers like Lovecraft, Robert E. Howard and the primal modern fantasy story, Conan. The deeply underrated Clark Ashton Smith is writing Zothique, the final empire of man and Averogne, a fantastic version of medieval France. C. L. Moore throws in the fearsome swordswoman Jiriel of Jory, showing that women writers and characters were there from the start.

Now, pay attention to this bit. Over in Britain, Lord Dunsany is





writing his eerie, playful Pegana stories and William Hope Hodgson gets the staggering, thousand page long century ahead of it's time The Night Land out. Lud-In-The-Mist, widely considered one of the finest literary fantasy novels to ever exist, is published around this time. Gormenghast too.

Already, we're seeing different genres grow up. Some are high adventure like Conan. Some are scholarly works and some blend horror and fantasy. Then Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe comes along, creating the first hugely successful fantasy where people go to another world.

By the 50s, people have noticed The Hobbit. And it all changes.

By the 60s, hippies and heads are deep into Tolkien and Lord of the Rings is a publishing sensation. There's the novellas and restless, amphetamine politics of Michael Moorcock and Tanith Lee and Conan is ghost written, several new cheap paperbacks a year. Other books are published but not many. Deryni Rising in 1970.

Many for what we'd call Young Adults now, like The Chronicles of Prydain, start arriving in the mid-60s.

And then, 1977 rocks up and with it, a book called The Sword of Shanarra. Now, it's an almost one-to-one rip-off of Lord of the Rings, but by the 70s, Tolkien was what the previous generation read. It was disco times now and Flower Power was out. But Shanarra was a huge, huge success.

This opened the door to an explosions of new fantasy novels. From the serious and dark Chronicles of Thomas Covenant, the Unbeliever to Raymond Feist's Dungeons and Dragons inspired (literally, it was a D&D campaign) Magician, The Belgariad and series like Dragons of Pern and Marion Zimmer Bradley's Arthurian works as well as her Darkover books. Dozens more! You're probably cross we didn't name your favourite. At the same time, more serious books are being written, like Little, Big and Samuel Delaney's Neveryon and

Mythago Wood and the formally postmodern delirious Book of the New Sun.

By the 90s, all the geeky kids who grew up reading this genre started experimenting. China Mieville and K. J. Bishop and Jeff VanderMeer and Gilman approached the genre with radically fresh eyes. The New Weird came. And went. But as the 2000s rolled around, George R. R. Martin and his rape and gore and incest tales of Ice and Fire set the way for a new generation of hooded bastards stabbing everyone in the mum. Dark Fantasy has been it for ten years, though inventive writers like Genevieve Valentine and Amanda Downing keep looking at the genre with fresh eyes.

So with two millennia of history and modern publishing behind it, what does fantasy look like now?

Well, it's actually more a series of sub-genres. Some of them may seem as opaque as the difference between death and black metal to outsiders. But here's a quick survey of what it looks like now.



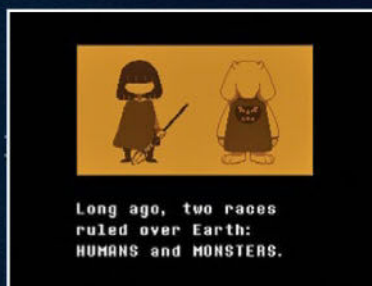
Genres and Sub Genres.

Bangsian

Games in the Genre: *Grim Fandango*, *Don't Look Back*

Named after John Kendrick Bangs, who wrote a series of novels called the Associated Shades books. Bangsian stories are set in the afterlife. They aren't really ghost stories as they're about the world you live on in after death. A common element of these books is famous people chilling together.

Famous examples include *Riverworld* by Phillip Jose Farmer, *What Dreams May Come*, turned into an underrated movie, most of Sebald's *The Lovely Bones* and P. K. Dick's *Ubik*. The shared world *Heroes in Hell* is about... you can guess. It's also a popular genre for religious novels, like *The Great Divorce*. And if you're in the mood for some dark comic genius, try *God Bless You, Dr. Kevorkian*, by Vonnegut.



Comic Fantasy

Games in the Genre: *Undertale*, *Superbrothers: Sword and Sworcery*

Fantasy that's funny. There's only one place to start and that's *Discworld*. But the first modern take we'd have is Branch Cabell's *Jurgen*, in 1919. (Brought up for Obscenity charges!) There's a few directions to take a comic fantasy. A pisstake of existing fantasy, or using the fantastic to satirise and mock things that need it. *Discworld* started, for example, as a mildly witty joke on the fresh genre, but quickly focused on real world targets.

Other examples are... well, comedy's a subjective thing, innit? But for completion's sake, the sad

misogynist jokes of Xanth are there. Robert Asprin's *MythAdventures*. Do you like puns? If you don't, keep walking.

A different take on comic fantasy is *Fafhrd and the Grey Mouser* by Fritz Leiber. They're not comedies, per se, these linked tales. It's just that they're both funny dudes. It doesn't have to be stupid to get some laughs, as the absurdly black comedy, *Mary Gentle's Grunts*, demonstrates.

And if you're looking for the arch satire, go find *Guide to Fantasyland* by Dianne Wynn Jones. Ouch.



Portal Fantasy

Games in the Genre: *Myst*,
Brutal Legend

You live in the real world, and go to a fantasy realm, you're in a portal fantasy. Obviously, C.S Lewis' bizarre, death-loving books are the most famous but you also get Thomas Covenant, Barbara Hambly's Darwath books and most shamelessly, Joel Rosenberg's Guardians of the Flame, who are sucked into their own pen and paper RPG. A bit out of favour these days, and perhaps still associated with kids books.



Dark Fantasy

Games in the Genre: *Bloodborne*, *The Secret World*

To prove most of these subgenres are pretty nonsensical, there's two distinct and even competitive definitions of dark fantasy. The first is, well, it's horror fiction. So you'll see a lot of crossover between Dark and Contemporary fantasy. Clive Barker is a great example here. In a book like *Imajica*, a man is targeted by otherworldly assassins, crosses over into another world, learns of his past and his destiny, takes a... wife... and learns sorcery before dealing with two distinct lords of evil. But it's absolutely a horror book. It's scary and gross and intense.

King's *Dark Tower* books, also a kind of contemporary fantasy, bleeds into Dark, appropriately. A great deal of time in this big series is spent on our world.

But the other definition is simply fantasy that deals with Dark themes. Sometimes parodied as 'grimdark', again, what's dark and disturbing and what's just silly over-the-topness and what's gross are going to shift from reader to reader.

Clark Ashton's *Smith Zothique* stories are called things like *Island of the Torturers* and *Empire of the Necromancers*. You could argue Joe

Abercrombie's *First Law* books, with its bastard characters and dismal opinion on everything are dark. Mark Lawrence's *Prince of Thorns* books star a vicious rapist bandit, who is ok because there's worse than him... and people like it.

Then again, the emotional realism, the sorcery haunted world and the caught between bad and worse attitude of Glen Cook's *The Black Company* is also dark. Though never cruel. *Song of Ice and Fire* can be put here too.

Then, fantasies that are simply in the gothic tradition are also called Dark. Tanith Lee's eerily sexy and monstrous works fit here. So do the works of Anne Bishop's *Black Jewels* series. And they have, and I'm not making this up, magic cock rings.

If you ask for dark fantasy, you'll get a lot of different answers but what they share is that you won't have good vs evil and you probably won't have a nice person protagonist and the baddies are gonna be really, really bad. Get ready for torture, blood all over the shop and everyone's got a headache.





Contemporary Fantasy

Games in the Genre: *Devil May Cry, Persona*

Sometimes further subdivided into paranormal romance, if it's mainly focused on the relationships of the characters. Urban fantasy, if action is the winner, or sometimes dark fantasy. This also used to include 'horror' but that stopped selling so they rebranded it.

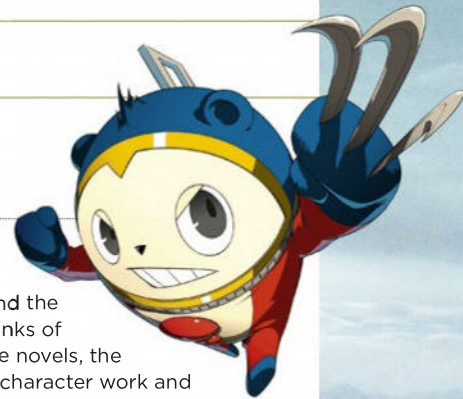
Basically, this is our world, in which supernatural stuff happens. Not science, not superheroes. Demons and mythology and magic. Maybe everyone knows, maybe it's a secret. Don't matter. This is a genre gone massively popular in recent years, backed up by a great number of television shows walking the same beat.

Contemporary fantasy likes to pinch from other genres too. You'll find private detectives and cops and bounty hunters.

You'll find the sexy hijinks of romance novels, the serious character work and literary intent of contemporary drama in the sub-sub genre, Magical Realism.

Some popular works include *The Dresden Files*, Charles De Lint and Tim Powers. Kelley Armstrong and the increasingly hilariously terrible but started off badass Anita Blake, *Vampire Hunter*. Neil Gaiman, Clive Barker and the little known cult books *Harry Potter*. (Editor's Note: Christian Read himself has written two Contemporary/Urban fantasy novels: *Black City* and *Devil City*)

But also be on the lookout for the clever, funny works of Jonathan Carroll or even the remarkable work of Borges or the spectacularly unique *Unquenchable Fire* by Rachel Pollack.



Gaslamp

Games in the Genre: *Fallen London, Dishonoured*

In recent years, this oddly niche subgenre has thrived. Gaslamp fantasy is mainly fantasy set in the Victorian era. Consider it a fantasy version of steampunk but with all the goggles thrown out and, er, an elf put in their place.

While not super historically accurate as a term, gaslamp covers a whole range of historical time periods. If you like foggy London streets, men with amazing facial hair, tea and the phrase "I said good day, sir!", this will be up your alley. It can also be a fantasy world influenced by the atmosphere of this setting.

It tends to use a lot of horror tropes. Jack the Ripper looms

large. But it can also be part alternative history, like Naomi Novik's "What if Napoleon had a dragon?" books, the *Temeraire* series. Any of a few hundred books with *Dracula* in it, though none better than Kim Newman's *Anno Dracula*, are here. Neil Gaiman likes this place quite a bit and one of his better works, *A Study in Emerald*, is a Lovecraftian work of note. And of course, the magnificent *Jonathan Strange and Mr. Norrell*.

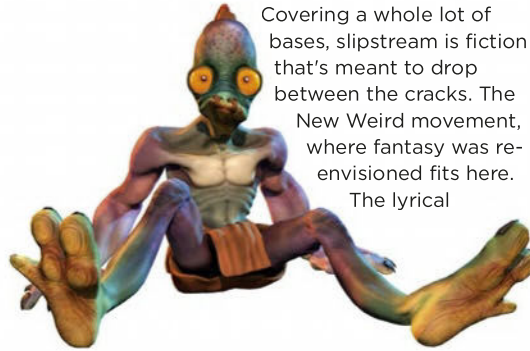
There are, obviously, many other fantasies in different time periods but they're not a subgenre yet. Call it historical fantasy but that's too broad a category.





Slipstream/Weird

Games in the Genre: *Oddworld, Earthbound*



Covering a whole lot of bases, slipstream is fiction that's meant to drop between the cracks. The New Weird movement, where fantasy was re-envisioned fits here. The lyrical

weirdness of Steve Aylett. The ruthless comedies of Carlton Mellick III (author of *Zombies and Shit*, *Cuddly Holocaust*, *The Baby Jesus Buttplug*, *The Haunted Vagina* and much, much worse.) Violet LeVoit's crazed erotic fantasies and Christa Faust's Luchador fantasy *Hoodtown*. If you want golden-eyed elves... you won't find it here.

Wuxia

Games in the Genre: *Dynasty Warriors, Jade Empire*

Not many of these novels have been translated to English, but we've all seen Wuxia films, if only *Crouching Tiger and Hero*. Wuxia means 'martial hero' and is about the subculture of fighters blessed with amazing abilities. Some of these books are serious discussions of the role of the martial artist in

China, duty, honour and love. Some are serious literary works. Some are batshit crazy stories of superheroes with magic swords battling demons and wizards! Many famous martial arts movies, like *Bride with White Hair* and *Seven Swords* are based off novels. Technically, many of these are historical novels gussied up.



Heroic/High Fantasy

Games in the Genre: *Skyrim, Fable*

Hit the triple threat, it's also sometimes called epic fantasy!

Most fantasy books actually neatly fit here. This is the place of high adventure and amazing other worlds and epic characters and fierce stakes and world-shattering wizardry! (Or, you know, just another vaguely 14th century place where everyone wears hose...)

This is the skeleton of fantasy, old reliable, and it has never gone out of style. Everything from *The Malazan Book of the Fallen* to Robert Jordan's endless braid-tugging festival of sniffing, *The Wheel of Time*, David Gemmell's various series, Mercedes Lackey's works, Cat Valente and many, many, many more. These are mainly written just for fun but some have more serious concerns and themes and ambitions.





Stormspike – The cruellest place on Osten Ard

CHRISTIAN READ



Normally my tastes run to the more gothic and weird areas of fantasy. I like weirdos in black velvet taking strange drugs and knives in the dark and eerie, pallid women. You can keep your Pug's and urine-gargling Kvothe's. Give me Gwyn of Ashamoil and Gerald Tarrant and Maldoror, laughing as sharks eats sailors, shooting the only survivor in the head.

So it's odd I genuinely love *Memory, Sorrow and Thorn*. Written in the 90s, these aren't revolutionary or mould-breaking. They're a simple quest fantasy. Find the three titular swords, kill the undead elf baddie. The main character is even a scullion turned hero but he's also a genuine, likeable young man we want to win. Rare in these days of rapey incest bastard heroes.

But originality aside, it's all in the execution.

One of the reasons I love these books are the Norns. Honestly, they're just evil elves. But that execution is exemplary. What would a creature that's faster than you, that can never die, who hates you, who lives in a hellish underground world act like? They're creepy as hell, man. They're never, ever Stormtroopers our heroes cut down. The Red Hand, the Nazgul-like undead servants, were once Norns and a chilling scene stays with me, of two Norns accompanying the cerement-wrapped bastard on a cart pulled by huge white goats.

And the terrible fate of one character, taken alive by Norns so fast and graceful they almost hover. When we next see him, *he can't stop smiling*, although the look in his eyes...

So yeah, Norns are badass.

And they live in a place called Stormspike, a vast mountain in the frozen north. Again, that's not a new idea. Starkahd in *The Fionavar Tapestry*, Angband, Utumno, wherever the stupid Warlock Lord lives in Shannara. No, it's all in the delivery.

Stormspike, home of the oldest creature on the planet, the Norn Queen, is riddled with caverns, chambers, tunnels, halls, living spaces. All for the Sithi. We barely see it all through the books and we're told of it through inference and snapshots. If you ever did WoW's Icecrown Citadel raid, well, I think it was clearly influenced by this book.

The Breathing Harp that hangs over an enormous abyss. The Norn Queen walks out on a spar and watches the monstrous undead intelligence, the Storm King, inhabit it and play sounds that can destroy mortals. The Halls of the Lightless Ones. The hellish blue lights. The awful songs. The ruined city of Nakkiga. The surgeries where the mad huntsman Ingen Jegger is remade into someone capable of committing a truly awful crime.

It's an alien place, Stormspike. It's cold and cruel and strange. No one besieges it, it never falls, is never... redeemed. Even after the book is over, it's still there, remote, forbidding. Waiting.

There's loads of baddie lairs. This is one of the best. It stays with you and makes you fear for the characters that have to deal with it. That's writing.



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Heroic Dreaming

ALEX MANN COULD BE YOUR HERO (OF TIME), BABY.



It's hard to find a richer setting than fantasy. Considering it builds itself around the realms of dreams and imagination, it has the power to be all at once whimsical, brutal and otherworldly. It exists on a plane of pure experimentation: where Nordic warriors battle dragons, Night Elves ride griffons across purple skylines, and mages perform forbidden experiments in the deep recesses of Tevinter. Yet these foreign tales in no way

distance their audience, but call out to them, as they rise from our subconscious desires. One such element that remains a constant is the tale of the hero, a trope that has been around from the dawn of storytelling, seen in religion, mythos, fairy tales and parables. Yet it wasn't until 1949 that mythologist Joseph Campbell identified a universal structure in his seminal work *The Hero with a Thousand Faces*.



ONE MYTH TO RULE THEM

ALL >> This structure is called the Monomyth – known more fondly today as the Hero's Journey – and basically outlines the three stages of the hero's adventure: The Departure, The Initiation, and The Return. It's a simple plot structure, and the subheadings within each can be moulded to fit almost any story of legend. The trouble is, despite a vast array of examples, cool guy Campbell managed to leave out one extremely popular medium; one that, if you're reading this magazine, will no doubt sit very close to your heart. SPOILER: it's videogames. To be fair, in the late 1940s gaming wasn't technically invented yet – but understanding the Monomyth's influence on our digital fantasies is important. In the real world, we are the heroes of our own stories, so the use of the hero acts as a guide for us to learn from, being an extension of ourselves. In videogames, we are often in control of the hero, making the relatable bond far more literal than that of a cautionary parable. Nowadays, some of our favourite folk heroes come from the world of videogames, and whether it's a conscious or unconscious decision, Joseph Campbell's Monomyth can be seen as the driving force beneath almost all their tales.

RISE AND SHINE >> Fantasy RPGs are the perfect place to find a legendary gaming hero, drawing upon a "chosen one" storyline more often than not. The older ones also have a tendency toward dusty old tropes like, say, beginning a story with the main character waking up. Dragon Quest, Pokémon and Chrono Trigger are all guilty of this – just name a longstanding fantasy series and it probably happened at some stage. But



as annoying and formulaic as this may be, it highlights an important point. The mythic hero's life isn't significant before this moment. No folk tale about Crono the naughty little scamp will ever be as interesting as Crono the time travelling samurai. Everything about the traditional hero is unspectacular until adventure knocks at the door, drawing them out of their comfort zone and into a new world. It's here the first phase of the Hero's Journey – The Departure – begins with The Call to Adventure. In the Legend of Zelda: Ocarina of Time, Link is pulled from his sleep by an intrusive fairy. "Wake up" she says, to no avail; "Hey, get up." she pushes. With her insistence, this

interaction quickly spills over to the second stage: Refusal of the Call. Sometimes the hero straight up neglects his summons, or at the very least hesitates, seen here through Link's refusal to wake up. It's not necessarily a failure on his part, rather a way of making the character seem relatable, playing upon the subconscious preference we all have for the comfortable and familiar. But Link doesn't get off that easy, as Navi quickly gets forceful. "Hey! C'mon!" she cries, "Can Hyrule's destiny really depend on such a lazy boy?"

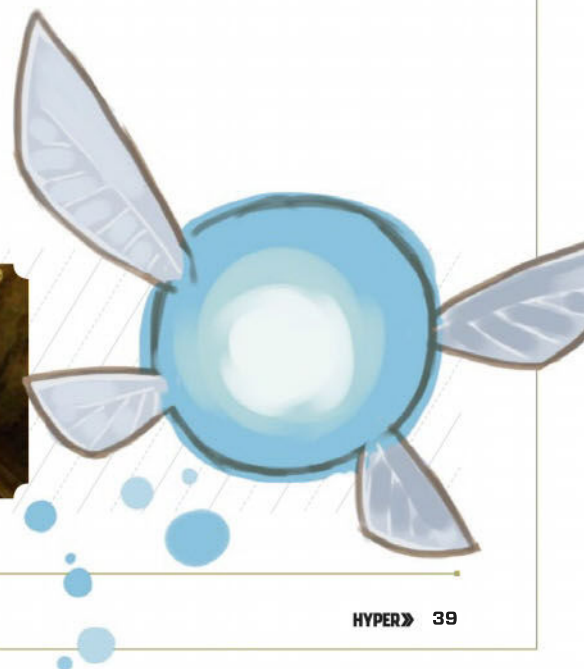
HEY! LISTEN! >>

Navi comes as the third stage of The Departure, in the

NO FOLK TALE ABOUT CRONO THE NAUGHTY LITTLE SCAMP WILL EVER BE AS INTERESTING AS CRONO THE TIME TRAVELLING SAMURAI

THE DANGERS OF SLEEPING IN

Unlike Link's moment of hesitation, sometimes a hero can refuse the call altogether. Here "we encounter the dull case of the call unanswered" Campbell notes, leading to a slow and unforgiving existence. One can never go back to their old life after this, as it now becomes "walled in boredom" transforming the would be hero into a "victim to be saved".





BIG OLD BELLY

The final section of The Departure signifies a point of no return, but it also symbolises the hero re-entering the womb to prepare for a second birth. "Instead of passing outward, beyond the confines of the visible world, the hero goes inward, to be born again" writes Campbell. This portrays the hero's dramatic change in the face of their adventure, as the person they once were has symbolically died, leaving a new, more capable entity in its place.

the form of Supernatural Aid, wherein a helper appears to guide the hero on their way. At it's most basic, this is the Old Man who spouts "It's dangerous to go alone! Take this." in the original Legend of Zelda. Their main task is to kick the hero into gear and get them on their way, but they also may provide the tools needed to make this possible. Navi not only gets Link out and off on his quest, she also accompanies him all the way through, giving our hero the information he needs to progress through any challenge... even if she is annoyingly insistent.

Furthermore, from a gameplay perspective she is the sole reason that Link gains the ability to Z target focal points, a crucial feature in our little green hero's success. Link's world has now opened

up. He is no longer the layabout without a fairy, content to dream the day away; he is the chosen, who quickly accumulates a shield and sword — much to the dissatisfaction of a certain Kokiri boss. The "great" Mido has only bullied Link up to this point, dishing out the line "without a fairy, you're not even a real man!" Now, seeing Link fully equipped - fairy, sword, shield and all - he has no choice but to let Link pass, physically and metaphorically, as even Mido himself lacks the right tools. By dominating his current landscape, confronting his superior and crossing into the hallowed grove of the Great Deku Tree, Link ticks the next monomythical box, The Crossing the First Threshold, leaving his common life behind and stepping into a world of adventure. The final point, known as The Belly of the Whale, comes shortly after (and is pretty damn literal as far as these categories go) where Link descends into the belly of the Great Deku Tree in order to confront the source of evil inside. It is here that Link reaches the point of no return. He lets the adventure consume his being and thus gives himself to the journey he must take. He can't go back

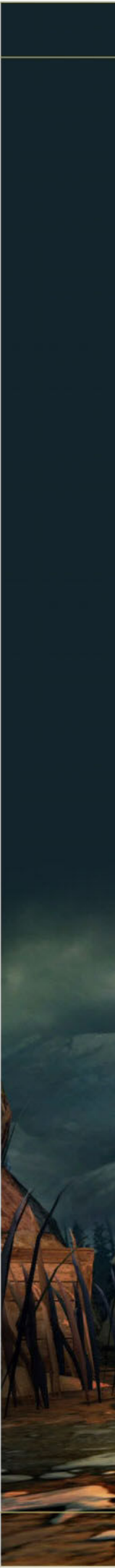
to his life among the Kokiri, and shortly after leaves his childhood haunt behind as he ventures out into the greater world of Hyrule.

J "MALLEABLE" CAMPBELL

>> The thing about applying the Hero's Journey to a videogame is that it has a tendency to repeat certain stages many times over. As with Campbell's structure, videogame narratives need to be malleable in their own way to ensure a well-weighted adventure. For games aren't solely about telling a great story, they're also about providing an exciting and fulfilling gameplay experience. The Departure may fit beautifully within this first segment of the game, but the same sequence can be stretched over Young Link's entire quest to adulthood, with plot points being pushed further along until The Belly of the Whale moves all the way to Link's time in the Sacred Realm. When done well, this balance leads to a richer and deeper understanding of our character and the world he occupies - evident through the wider gaming world's deep affection for Link as a character. When done poorly this can often alter, and even ruin, a sound tale, with poor pacing crushing any attempt at deeper narrative meaning.

SOUL OF THE HERO >>

With The Departure well and truly out of the way, the hero is now fully committed to their role and ready for the next step. But it's one thing to embrace the role of the hero, and another to actually be the hero — which is why the next phase, The Initiation, begins with The Road of Trials. A hero must be tested, sharpened, and honed in order to create change, and what better game to test us, the chosen player, than the brutally hard Dark Souls? When black wings first leave us in the middle of Lordran we're tasked with ringing two bells: one above and one below. Easy, right? Um, no. The unworthy are quickly filtered out after the Taurus Demon gets his groove on, and those of stouter souls can still find despair waiting for them in Blighttown. If you manage





to overcome those? Sen's fortress is waiting, a gauntlet of deadly traps, ambushes and general hard times. It's here that another common trope falls in our laps, that of the failed hero. This is one supposedly called by destiny who cannot live up to the trials, for they are not worthy. In the world of Dark Souls, we see these literally everywhere in the form of bloodstains, which when touched show us another hero's deadly failure. But a true hero cannot fail, and when they make it through Sen's, as well as the following trials of Anor Londo - bloody, grizzled and angry as hell that the last boss happened to be two on one and that's in no way fair - they reach the next section, The Meeting with the Goddess. This is divine proof that you, the chosen one, are worthy of the hero mantle. The moment that puts you aside from other undead who have tried and failed. You meet Gwynevere, Princess of Sunlight, in all her radiant glory. "Thou hast journey'd far, and overcome much, Chosen Undead" she says, and with actual reverence to boot. After so long in the dark, it seems this vision is the only nurturing being in the whole bleak

goddamn universe. What's more, she gives you purpose. She tells you that you can actually save this world from the darkness that currently consumes it. A relief, to be sure.

GO YOUR OWN WAY >>

But Dark Souls is a cheeky devil, and here splits the journey in twain - for there is another side of Gwynevere that you might not see. For some, she fills the role of goddess perfectly. These heroes find themselves heading straight toward the Atonement With The Father stage, which requires the hero to confront and make peace with the being that holds the most power. Lord Gwyn, Gwynevere's father and king of the realm, has attempted to keep the flame of the world ablaze by giving himself to it, yet the flame is now fading. The encounter with the goddess sets the player on this path, confronting the father of the realm and taking his place to prolong the age of fire.





DADDY ISSUES

When the hero goes to face the authority of the father, they go to understand the current state of the world and ultimately, themselves. They go to understand why sick and insane things happen, and thus to make amends. As Campbell puts it, "The hero transcends life with its peculiar blind spot and for a moment rises to a glimpse of the source. He beholds the face of the father, understands - and the two are atoned."



But in this version of events, there is a significant point missing, namely Woman as the Temptress, which sees a wayward power try to convince the hero to stray from their destined goal or path. It is rumoured that the Chosen Undead is in fact the descendant of the first Pigmy, and to be free man needs the first flame to go out, as an Age of Darkness will break the cycle and help man exist as man. Here, the hero sees Gwynevere for what she is, and by attacking her, changes the goal from the journey's outset completely. Her perfect form, speech and bosom - even the sun that casts a golden glow over the city - dissipate, leaving the hero standing in darkness. It was all an illusion, conjured to achieve another's

gains. On this path, the hero has resisted the temptation to do the will of another; instead moving toward their own goals. Both paths still lead to a confrontation with the father and thus allow the hero to achieve a state of Apotheosis, in which the hero moves past their current being and becomes something greater, something beyond the polarities of life and death. In Apotheosis, the hero becomes a god. By doing so, they have achieved their goal, and thus receive The Ultimate Boon, the sought after prize of control, heralding a new age and completing the final stage of The Initiation.

THE ALPHA AND THE OMEGA

>> The sways of gender play strong roles in The Initiation's

subheadings, yet these are in title only. The goddess symbolises a nurturing entity, while the father encompasses the one that holds the ultimate power. Born of Freudian insecurities, the names represent an incompleteness on either side more than particular genders. The 'father' can never successfully cross the nurturing barrier nor can the 'mother' forcefully enter into the realm of power, it is counter to their nature. Dark Souls is acutely aware of this, seen through the true state of the city of Anor Londo. In reality, the nurturer has secretly fled the city, failing in her task as protector. The powerful father attempting to counter this deserts to create change, trying to become a nurturer by extending the life of the flame but instead, losing his mind and becoming hostile. The only one left in the city is the forgotten son, Gwyndolin, hiding in the shadows to maintain the illusion of his sister. Gwyndolin was raised as a female, giving him both male and female ties to the world. He thus has a clearer vantage of events, and is more capable, than either the 'mother' or the 'father' figures. Campbell relates the supreme power of the androgynous god down to the Bodhisattva mythos in which gender is "two halves of a split pea", yet Gwyndolin is still weighed down by his ties to the world - and thus instead of becoming the hero - is made into another trial for the hero to overcome.



THE ROAD'S END >> The third section of the Hero's Journey, The Return, comes in a flurry of realisations, achievements and successes aimed to conclude the narrative. It's rare that any story will have all six subheadings, usually focusing on one or two depending on the message – so to avoid spoiling six games you may never have played, I'm going to keep this brief. After the hero has found The Ultimate Boon, they have a few options. Some heroes may choose to stay inside their new enlightenment, forgoing humanity who they now deem to be separated from. This is known as the Refusal of the Return. Those who have made this decision, or have resigned to being trapped somewhere they would rather not be, can still be pulled back by the outside world in a Rescue from Without – as Ryu's friends and father manage in one of Breath of Fire II's many outcomes. The opposite of this refusal is The Crossing of the Return Threshold, in which the hero comes back retaining the wisdom they have gained from their adventure, applying it to regular life. Yet those heroes who gain The Ultimate Boon through trickery, or without ticking all the journey boxes, are forced to flee in a stage known as The Magic Flight; think Ganondorf's Castle in Ocarina of Time. And one that gaming uses far more than most, is where our hero gains a profound understanding of two polarising realms, the physical and the spiritual, becoming a Master of Two Worlds, as seen by Ark in one of the greatest RPG's to



date, Terranigma. The final point is the simplest: after all is said and done, the hero finds The Freedom to Live, experiencing life as life should be: to its fullest, without a fear of death.

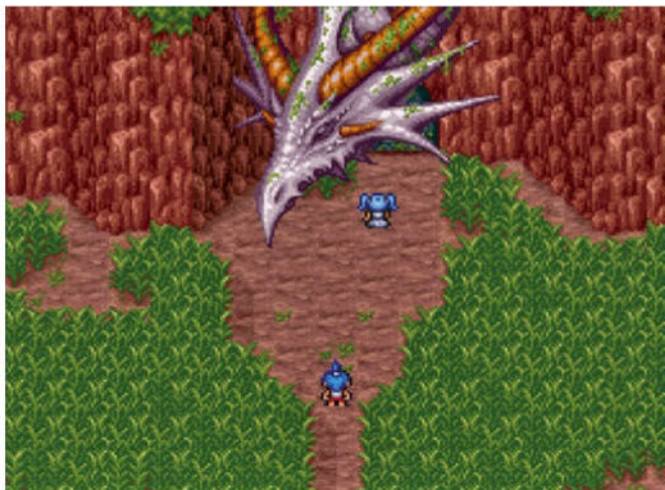
FINAL FANTASY >> A fantasy journey is both an escape and a reality. It takes us to places we can never go, but also reminds us enough of ourselves to make us give a damn – inspiring us to better ourselves and be better to others. The games we love become a physical manifestation of our dreams, as we as individuals can alter the path of this journey, even if it does still play to a structure as old as storytelling itself. But if there's one thing this structure shows, it's that our gaming heroes are simultaneously a nod

LIFE +1

The Ultimate Boon often finds manifest in eternal life, as according to Campbell "It is obvious that the infantile fantasies which we all cherish still in the unconscious play continually into myth, fairy tale, and the teachings of the church, as symbols of the indestructible being."



to what has been before us, a reflection of who we are now, and a fantastical (maybe unobtainable) goal of excellence for us to strive for. They are our ultimate versions, our final fantasies. They are our end games. And that's pretty darn fantastic. ☪





The Brothel of Slating Intellectual Lusts

DAN STAINES



Before you ask: yes, it's meant to be the Brothel of *Slating* Intellectual Lusts. Intellectual Lusts aren't laying slate: they're being satisfied, fulfilled - *slaked*. "One of the QA guys pointed this out one month before we shipped," said Torment writer Chris Avellone in an online Q&A. "Suffice it to say we are idiots - not to mention the fact we REALLY didn't want go back through reams of text to change it."

Given that Torment's script is 800,000 words long, you can understand their reticence. Thankfully (for pedants) there's a fan mod that fixes it.

In the words of its owner/proprietor and chief succubus, Fall-From-Grace, the brothel exists "to give those lustful fevers that strike the mind more avenues of expression rather than the simply carnal." So no: there's no sex involved. The only intercourse patrons can expect is of the social, verbal variety. "Exchanging ideas, not bodily fluids" is what the brothel's motto would be, if it had one.

Fall-From-Grace is a member of the Society of Sensation - the Sensates - who subscribe to the idea that new experiences enrich the soul. It doesn't matter if it's a good experience or not: the soul doesn't discriminate. By storing their sensations in magic stones and sharing them with others, the Sensates hope to accumulate enough raw "experience" to unlock reality's deepest secrets.

The women working at the brothel are aspiring sensates under Grace's tutelage. Their task is a simple one: develop a deeper appreciation for the power and subtlety of language. "One is only as limited as their command of the language," Grace says. "To employ language to evoke emotions in others is a tremendous skill" - a skill the brothel's madam uses frequently, not always unselfishly.

Viewed from above, the building is eyefike, consisting of three concentric rings: an inner-ring of lush garden encircled by marble arches, a circular hallway of polished timber in the middle, and an outer ring of rooms belonging to each of the brothel's students. Most patrons stick to the garden, mingling with the girls and each other under the shade of an enormous red oak. The students tend to stay in their rooms, but welcome (or at least tolerate) guests barging in unannounced.

There are nine students in all - ten, if you count Luis the Panty-Fondling Armoire (who isn't an armoire at all but a sensate pretending to be an armoire). Some you'll like more than others. Vivian is divisive: she's snobbish and treats her patrons like servants, but that's just how some of them like it. She's the opposite of Nenny Nine Eyes, whose nickname stems from her saucer-like eyes and uncanny knack for witnessing acts certain other students would prefer remain unwitnessed. And then there's the robot girl, Dolora, and Ecco, the mute whose voice was stolen by a god, and Kimasxi Adder-Tongue, whose command of profanity and putdowns is absolute and awe-inspiring.

You can see why the brothel does such brisk business. Fall-From-Grace's students are fascinating - to say nothing of the mistress herself. Who wouldn't want to spend time with them, talking to them, experiencing a little piece of their world? Doing so, it's hard to not believe that the Sensates might be onto something.

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Journey to the West

A short story about the rise, fall, and resurrection of the JRPG

MIKOLAI REMEMBERS A TIME WHEN IT WAS HIP TO BE SQUARE(SOFT)

▶ The history of Japanese Role-Playing Games is as colourful as the spiky haired protagonist they star. It's a story that's been shared, embellished, and analysed in countless articles, and it usually starts a little something like this...

Dragon Quest is released for the Nintendo Famicom in 1986, it's kinda rough, but it pretty much invents the genre. Final Fantasy follows one year later, refining the original blueprint. The Japanese public lose their collective mind over random encounters and turn based combat. The games sell millions, and the genre eventually makes its leap to the West with Dragon Quest (renamed Dragon Warrior) given away free to subscribers of Nintendo Power Magazine.

While that's the accepted narrative, Japanese RPGs didn't just emerge from the ether one spring morning in the mid 80s. The real story is actually much stranger, full of plot twists, and has its fair share of real life heroes and villains.

We set out to discover the truth. But first we broke into some homes, smashed up all the vases, and robbed the locals blind to fund our new +1 sword with the matching shield.

THE LAND BEFORE TIME >> Before Nintendo entered the home console market, Japan had microcomputers - lots and lots of them. So many different computers that Lode Runner was released across 34 different formats.

That Lode Runner story is just a quick aside. The real point here is that Japan's unique take on the role playing genre first started to take shape on these early home computers, several years before Square (Final Fantasy) and Enix (Dragon Quest) released their landmark titles. And the first company out the gate was Koei, which released The Dragon and Princess in 1982.

Japan's first locally developed RPG was a text-based adventure featuring a pre-created party, minimal graphics, and a simple storyline about, you guessed it - a



dragon and a princess. But what really made it interesting was the combat, which adopted an overhead strategy perspective, one of the very first games to do so.

No one ever mentions Koei's landmark RPG title these days, but it obviously did okay in Japan, because a bunch of text based adventure games soon followed; most of them involving some sort of vaguely Tolkien-esque party stumbling around a fantasy setting. This was just the tip of the iceberg, and Japanese developers spent the next couple of years experimenting and innovating.

Secrets of Khufu, also developed by Koei, created the dungeon crawler template in 1983, Bokosuka Wars introduced the strategy RPG template we now associate with Fire Emblem that same year, and Nohon Falcom released Dragon Slayer, one of the first games to combine real-time combat with RPG mechanics.

All these early titles were the precursor to what is generally considered year zero for the Japanese RPG industry, and one of the strangest tales ever told in videogames - Henk Rogers and his debut game, Black Onyx.

THE TRAVELLING DUTCHMAN >> Henk Rogers was a Dutch national



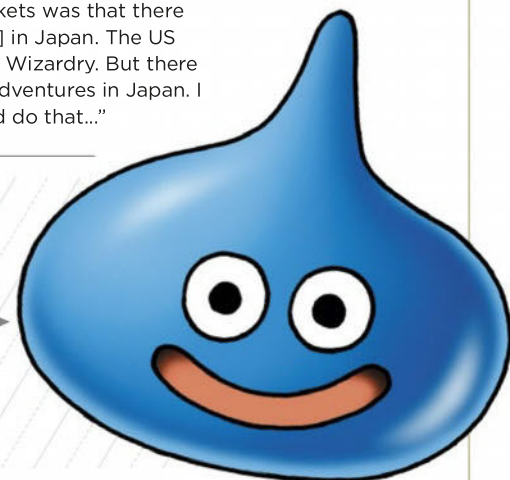
who found his way to Hawaii in the mid '70s, where he spent the bulk of his university degree playing the original pen and paper Dungeons and Dragons. In the early 80s he "chased a girl to Japan," found work, bought a \$10,000 NEC-8801 in Akihabra, and resolved to make a game based on his D&D experiences. The fact that he had no Japanese language skills and limited computer experience didn't really factor into any of this.

As he tells it in an article on Medium.com, "It was immediately obvious to me that the core difference between the [US and Japanese] markets was that there were no [RPGs] in Japan. The US had Ultima and Wizardry. But there were no such adventures in Japan. I thought, I could do that..."



WHEN TWO WORLDS COLLIDE: THE SQUARE ENIX MERGER

Square Enix was formed in 2003, when two of Japan's largest RPG publishers merged. Enix had the money (courtesy of Dragon Quest), while Square had the international distribution and recognition (thanks to Final Fantasy). It was basically marriage of convenience, fast-tracked when Square blew all their cash on the ill-fated Final Fantasy: Spirits Within CGI film in 2001.





RETRO JRPG ON THE GO

The Nintendo DS remains the best system to experience classic JRPGs. Its blockbuster success (150 million + units sold) provided developers with both the audience and the platform to bring previously unreleased Japanese titles to western audiences. If you're after early Dragon Quest and Final Fantasy titles this is the platform.

Released in 1984, Black Onyx was deeply 'inspired' by the Wizardry games that Henk was familiar with. It was also the first Western style RPG to appear on Japanese store shelves - where it confused the hell out of the locals, and sold approximately zero copies.

Undeterred, Henk hired a translator and organised meetings with Japanese computer game magazines to explain both his game and D&D. As he recalls, "I sat down with each editor and asked them for their name. I typed this in and then asked them to choose the head that looked most like them. In this way I taught them how to roll a D&D character. Then I left them to play."

His plan worked, and favourable coverage in the media saw the game take on a life of its own, selling over 150,000 copies and winning Game of Year in Japan's highest selling computer magazine. In the process, it took a niche genre and showcased it to a much larger audience, sowing the seeds for what was just around the corner.

JOURNEY TO THE WEST >>

Founded in 1975, Enix began life as a real-estate company. That venture didn't really pan out, so in 1982 the company decided to change tack and try their luck with videogames. Since the early 80s games industry was basically the Wild West, management decided to hold a programming contest in order to find coders who could actually, you know, 'make the games'.

As luck would have it, the finalists included Yuji Horii and Koichi Nakamura, a pair of young bedroom coders who would go on to develop Dragon Quest. They were still a few years away from that landmark title, but Horii was announced the winner and flown

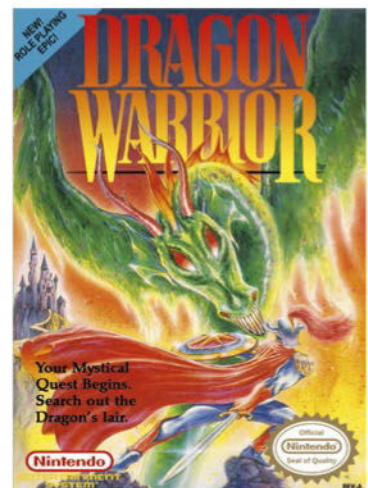
to AppleFest '83 in San Francisco, where he discovered the Wizardry series.

Whatever else transpired on that faithful trip to the West, Yuji Horii and Koichi Nakamura began work on the original Dragon Quest sometime in 1985. The plan was to create a more user friendly take on the Western RPG, one that combined the first person battles in Wizardry with the overhead perspective found in Ultima.

As Horii later explained in Nintendo Power magazine, "At the time I first made Dragon Quest, computer and video game RPGs were still very much in the realm of hardcore fans and not very accessible to other players. So I decided to create a system that was easy to understand and emotionally involving, and then placed my story within that framework."

Although the resulting game is simple by modern standards, it proved a huge hit when it was released in 1986, creating the template for much of what we associate with JRPGs. Fusing a pseudo medieval scenario with the artwork of renowned Japanese artist (and Dragon Ball creator) Akira Toriyama, the game offered a huge open world to explore, various side-quests, and a level-up system that fast-tracked early progress.

If Dragon Quest distilled the JRPG formula, the Final Fantasy series would become the Western face of the genre. Released one year later, Final Fantasy built on the



template, introducing a multi-party system, different character classes, turn based combat, and airships for getting around a large world-map.

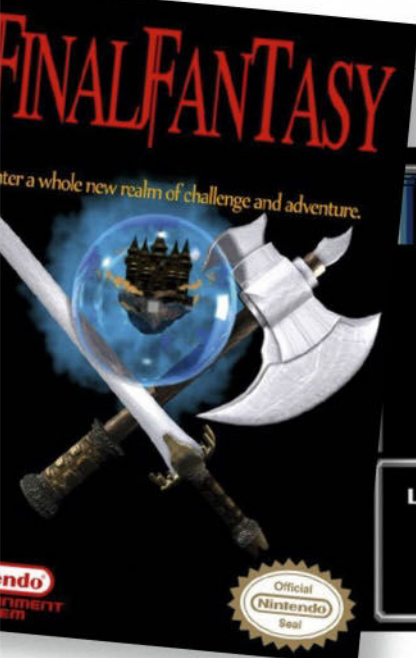
At the time of its release Square was a struggling publisher on the verge of bankruptcy and, according to urban legend, the game's title is a reference to the fact this was a make-or-break project, a 'final fantasy' before they packed it in and got desk jobs. Riding the breakout success of Dragon Quest and the public's new found interest in all things RPG related, the game sold through its entire initial run of 400,000 units within months.

Between them, Dragon Quest and Final Fantasy had birthed a genre and created rival empires.

|| DRAGON QUEST AND FINAL FANTASY HAD BIRTHED A GENRE AND CREATED RIVAL EMPIRES ||

THE GREAT DIVIDE >> While the Japanese game industry was buoyed by the rise of Nintendo and RPGs, the Western games industry was tumbling down a very different rabbit hole. Burnt by the Atari led videogame crash of the early 80s,





GOTTA CATCH 'EM ALL

Final Fantasy VII is considered a catalyst for the widespread popularity of the JRPGs in the west, but the influence of the Pokémon series can't be underestimated. While university students were 'punching cones' and sobbing about the death of Aerith in 1997, their younger siblings were discovering turn based combat, and levelling up characters on their Game Boys just one year later.



retailers and consumers had retreated to home computers, where RPG titles continued to evolve along traditional D&D routes.

Titles like Dungeon Master and Eye of the Beholder adopted a first person perspective and melded it with real time combat. Pxoool Of Radiance by SSI was the first computer RPG to feature official D&D licensing, and the Might and Magic series expanded the size and scope of Western titles, offering a first person perspective on a vast open world.

Japan's alternative take on the genre didn't make its way to Western shores until 1989, when the original Dragon Quest was localised for the US market as Dragon Warrior, and given away free to subscribers of Nintendo Power Magazine.

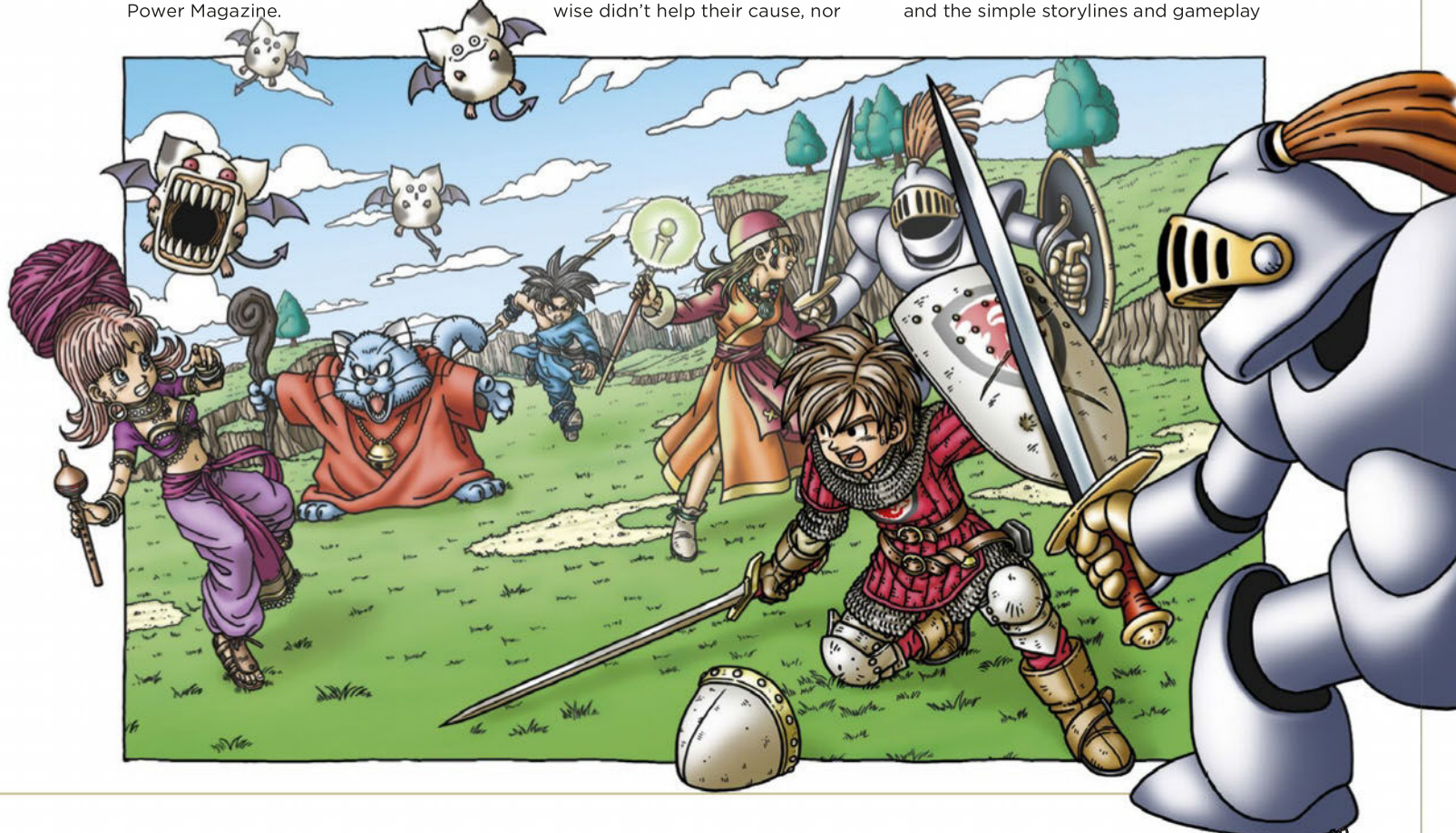
While that giveaway is the stuff of gaming legend, and helped kick-off international interest in JRPGs, it wasn't as altruistic or farsighted as has been made out in the intervening decades. Despite the game's massive success in Japan, US gamers who had grown up on Mario inspired platform titles didn't know what to make of the ageing, slow paced adventure, and mostly ignored the retail release. Faced with a warehouse full of unsold stock, Nintendo decided to simply give the games away.

Final Fantasy on the NES was released in 1990 and sold respectably, but nothing like its Japanese counterpart. The fact both games were now three-years old and had been superseded graphically and gameplay-wise didn't help their cause, nor

did the long delays caused by retailer skittishness and localisation, which - for text-heavy games like these - was a long process.

Oh, and if you grew up in Australia, the local dominance of Sega meant you were much more like to encounter Phantasy Star on the Master System (which, coincidentally, was also one of the first titles to ditch fantasy in favour of a sci-fi setting), then either of those NES titles, But that's a whole separate article.

GOLDEN YEARS >> While the initial 8-bit JRPGs attracted a small following, the arrival of the Mega Drive and Super Nintendo helped popularise the genre. The extra processing power allowed developers to bring their worlds to life, and the simple storylines and gameplay



NO DRAGON QUEST ON SCHOOL DAYS

The Japanese release of Dragon Quest III in 1988 saw mass truancy and a record number of 'sick days' as kids and salary men alike stayed home to play the title (which sold 1 million units on release day). In response the Japanese government asked that all future titles be released on a weekend - or so the story goes.



that characterised the first generation were superseded by far greater ambitions.

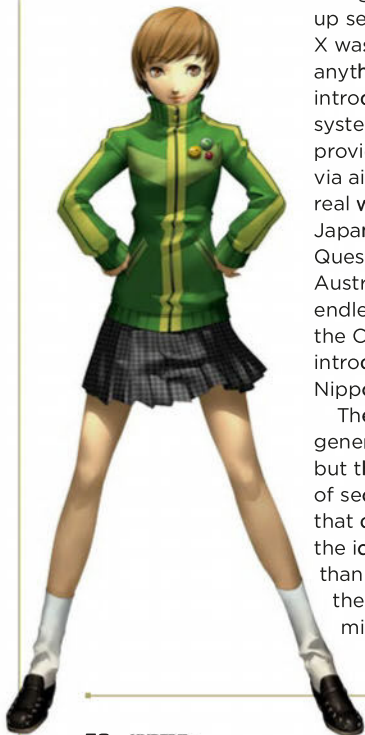
Phantasy Star 3 on the Mega Drive spanned three generations, the story changing depending on who you married at the end of each epoch. Chrono Trigger had players traveling through time, Secret of Mana introduced co-operative three-player RPG action, Shining Force fused strategy with RPG, Final Fantasy IV introduced the Active Time Battle system, and the arrival of CD technology meant developers had room to add full orchestral score, anime cut-scenes, and the sort of epic (if linear) narratives that Japanese developers favoured.

While these titles earned plenty of respect and decent sales, mass-market acceptance didn't arrive until the 1997 release of Final Fantasy VII on the PlayStation. Plenty has been written about Squire's seminal title over the intervening years, and we don't need to revisit that here, suffice to say, it was the game that finally convinced mainstream Western audiences to take a punt on Japanese RPGs.

The breakout success of FF VII saw a sudden influx of Japanese RPGs hit Western shores. Whereas 12 months earlier titles like Suikoden, Vagrant Story, Grandia, and their ilk couldn't get themselves arrested, they suddenly found a new and hungry market on the PlayStation.

MISTER ME TOO >> If the PlayStation brought JRPGs to the masses, the arrival of the PS2 generation cranked things up several notches. Final Fantasy X was bigger and brighter than anything before it, Grandia 2 introduced one of the best battle systems to date, Skies of Arcadia provided a 3D world to navigate via airship, the Xenosaga series got real weird, Persona 4 reimaged Japanese high school life, Dragon Quest finally made its way to Australia and Europe with the endlessly charming Journey of the Cursed King, and Disgaea introduced the Western world to Nippon Ichi's strategy RPGs.

These titles helped define a generation and pushed boundaries, but they were followed by a glut of second and third string RPGs that didn't have the budgets or the ideas to do anything more than flood the market. Beyond their limited sales success, these mister-me-too titles reinforced





the notion that JRPGs followed a cut-and-paste formula propped up by simple storylines and dated gameplay.

Running parallel to all this was the Western PC market, which had slowly clawed its way back into contention. Titles like System Shock 2 and Dues Ex offered the sort of dark narrative and emergent gameplay that flew in the face of JRPG conventions. Broadband Internet saw MMOs start to flourish. And the success of the Xbox meant console gamers now had a steady supply of Western RPGs, including genre classics like Star Wars: Knights of the Old Republic.

In other words, a line had been drawn in the sand. And the classic JRPG formula, with its anime influences, turn based combat, and character driven narrative, provided a stark contrast to the avatars and open world's emerging from the West.

THE CURRENTS FLOW WEST >>

The original Dragon Quest was designed, coded, and launched by a handful of staff in under 12 months. By the time the PS3, Xbox 360, and Wii appeared on the horizon, the amount of time and money required to produce a game had skyrocketed, forcing many middle tier companies out of business.

This difficult transition period gave rise to unlikely partnerships, and in 2004 Microsoft announced it was throwing money at Japanese

RPG developers in exchange for 360 exclusives. The games that followed – including Blue Dragon, Eternal Sonata, and Lost Odyssey – generated plenty of media attention, but they failed to convince the Japanese market they should invest in a 360, and enjoyed only modest success internationally.

If the viability of JRPGs was starting to look dicey, Final Fantasy's commercial and critical failings highlighted this new reality. FF XIII's linear gameplay was widely panned, and Final Fantasy XIV Online was so broken when it went live in 2010 it had to be pulled from servers and relaunched three years later as A Realm Reborn.

The genre's slide into niche territory was further compounded by the breakout success of Western-based counterparts. Titles like Mass Effect, Fallout 3, The Elder Scrolls series, and the early Fable titles were exploring new territory and selling serious units. As the sun began to set on the PS3 and 360 the accepted consensus was the Golden Age of JRPGs had passed.

THE EPILOGUE >> Potions, churches, a good priest and a little

rest – if there's one thing we've learned from JRPGs it's that death is temporary. Dramatic plot twists aside, characters can be revived with the minimum of fuss, and everyone just ploughs ahead like nothing happened.

You could say the same about the genre. Despite endless media reports lamenting its death, the JRPG has marched on. Sure, it's a little bruised, a little battered, but its retreat from the mainstream has allowed Japan and its development community time to rest-up, re-group, and re-equip themselves for the next battle.

Scan that long horizon, and future looks more inspired, creative, and robust than it has in a decade. A quick look at 2016 reveals Persona 5, World of Final Fantasy, Star Ocean: Integrity and Faithlessness, Ikenie to Yuki no Setsuna, Dragon Quest Builders, and Dragon Quest XI waiting in the wings.

Back in 2008, Street Fighter IV showed us it only takes one breakout title to resurrect a genre. And no one knows more about resurrections than your typical JRPG. 🗡️

FFVII, THE MOST RETURNED GAME IN HISTORY

Final Fantasy VII is "the most returned game ever." That's because the marketing campaign focused heavily on the game's Full Motion Video cut scenes, and pretty much ignored the actual gameplay. Seems that when people got it home from the shops a significant number had no idea what was going on, having never played any RPG before.

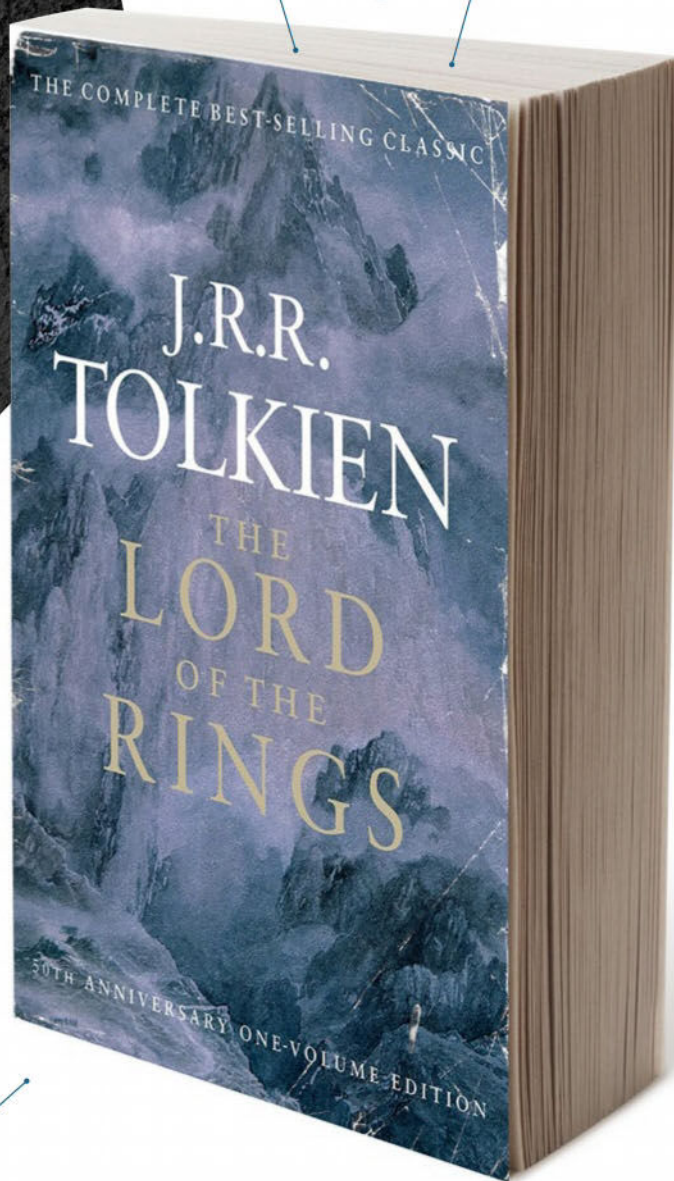


The Books that made Fantasy

CHRISTIAN READ has read more fantasy novels than you've had hot dinners

» Games are now canonical sources of fantasy. One person's Riftwar is another person's Witcher 2. But games have always, and still do, draw on novels more than any other source. Literature was the place swords and sorcery, high and low fantasy, slipstream and other genres first appear, merrily sharing their ideas with the other mediums. But it's games that make the best use of them.

Here's a few of the most significant novels that inform games.



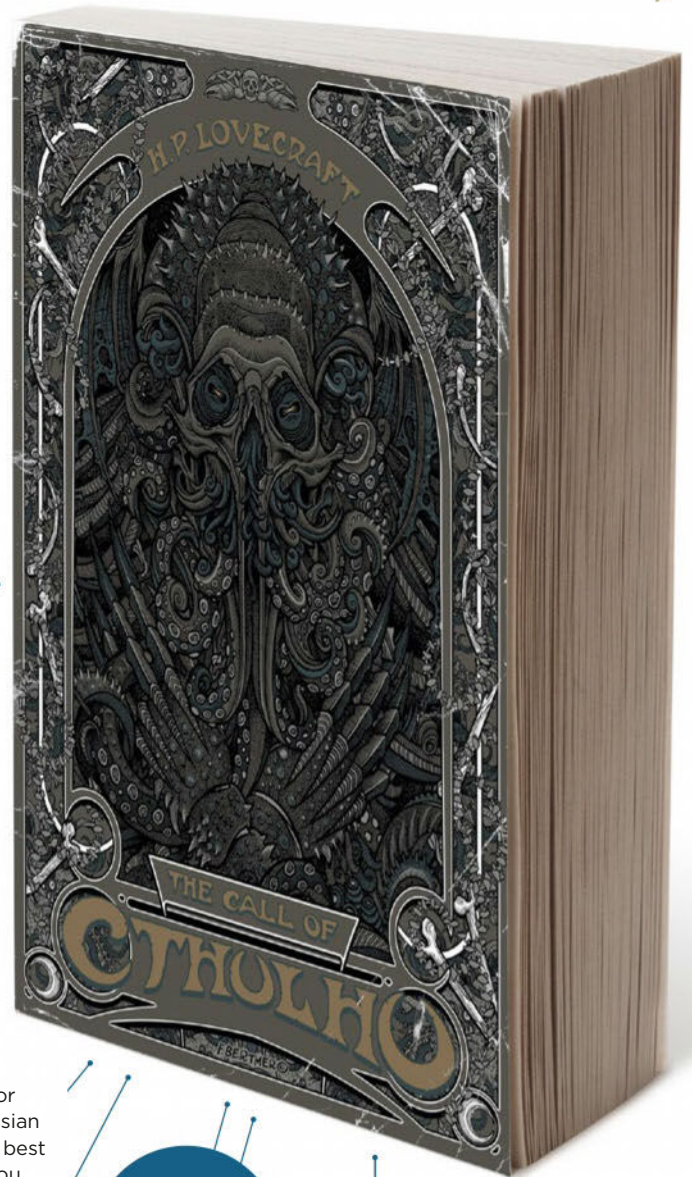
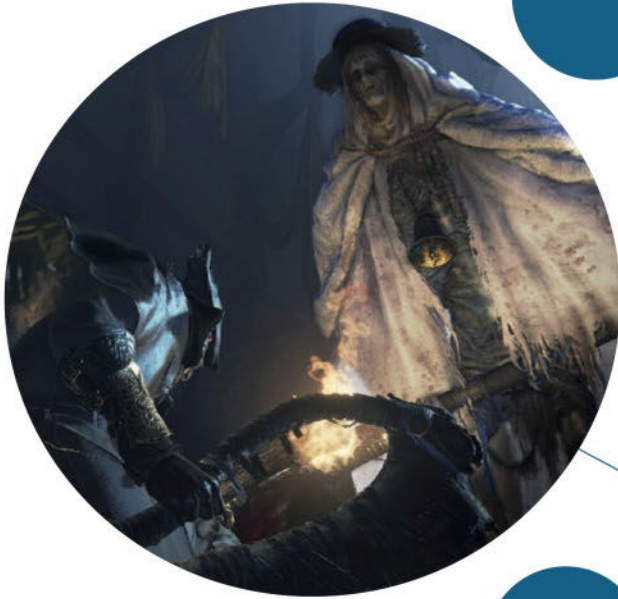
Lord of the Rings - J.R.R Tolkien

♦ Let's just get this out of the way. Lord of the Rings has spent the last 80 years being fantasy. The rolling fields of The Shire, the brave Gondor dudes, mangled English, noble goodies and ugly baddies, plundering 14th.C English history and Norse myth, is the best of the genre. It was beloved by hippies and heads in the 60s, referenced by knowing bands and stoners. Perhaps it could have been forgotten, a strange relic of the sixties but then fantasy started getting mainstream appeal in the late 70s, early 80s.

The game changed when the first mass market fantasy was Sword of Shannara, a blatant LotR rip-off. (A powerful wizard takes them through a shortcut under a mountain where he dies from monsterbastards.) Then D&D pen and paper came along, elves, dwarves and rangers and Tolkien reigns supreme.

Games predictably followed along and Middle-Earth became the default. From Might and Magic to Warcraft to Final Fantasy and the various D&D games - all Tolkien all the time.





Call of Cthulhu - H.P. Lovecraft

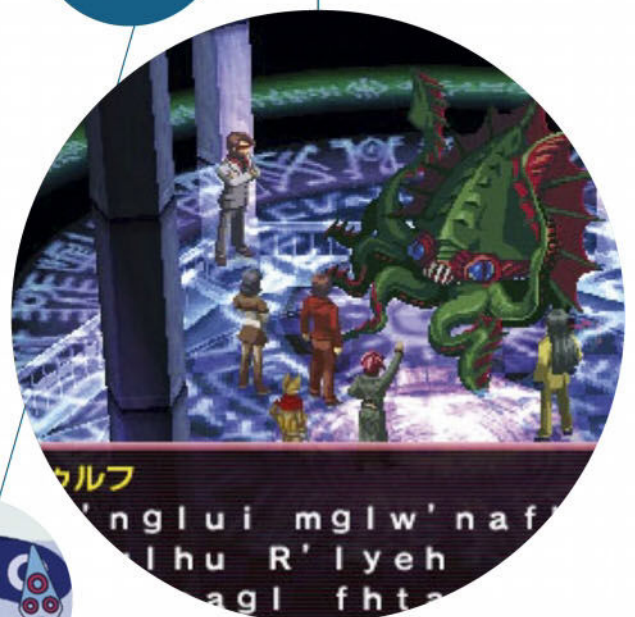
◆ Rarely read, often imitated. Lovecraft wrote philosophical horror that purposefully blurred SF, fantasy and horror and was pessimistic about human endeavour in the extreme. But everyone just remembers the tentacles.

Every time there's a monstrous, alien entity with claws, often sealed beyond time, awaiting resurrection by mad cultists, that's Lovecraft.

From Wario Land 3 to Arc the Lad, from Xenoblade to Bard's Tale, you've got ancient evils sealed away. The amount of games where tentacles are a locus of horror is uncountable. Magicka, Bloodborne, Eldritch, Crisis, Quake, Earthbound, and Persona are just a half dozen. Not even accounting for just straight up lifts of names. Shub-Niggurath, Nyarlathotep, Tsathoggua.

That's not all Special Sauce kicked off. Keen amateur scientist, he was well-aware of certain kinds of geometry that are difficult for humans to perceive. 'Non-Euclidean' became a kind of shorthand for twisted, inhuman terrains. Russian indie Pathologic might be the best use of mad architecture but you can see it from Descent to Majora's Mask and of course, the monstrous Super Paper Mario.

Lovecraft's influence on pop culture is everywhere now. A state he would have deplored. But when you're running around Silent Hill, piloting a boat over the Unterzee, or... anything you're letting Lovecraft in. Your stars are right.



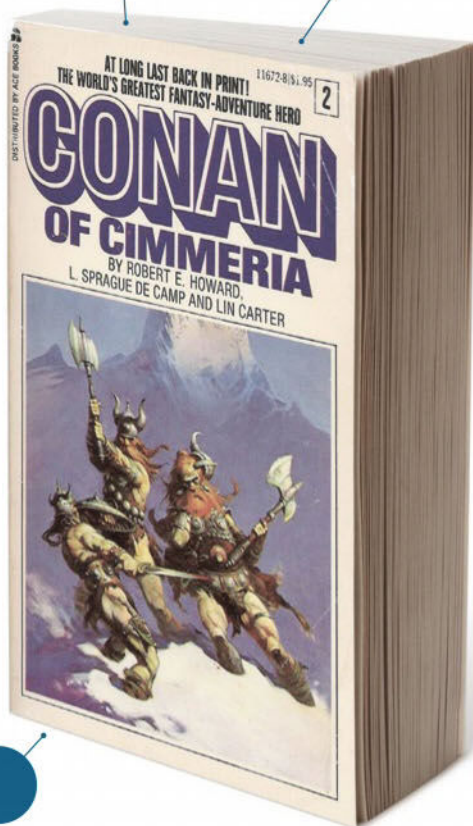
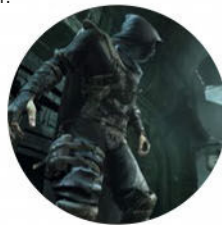
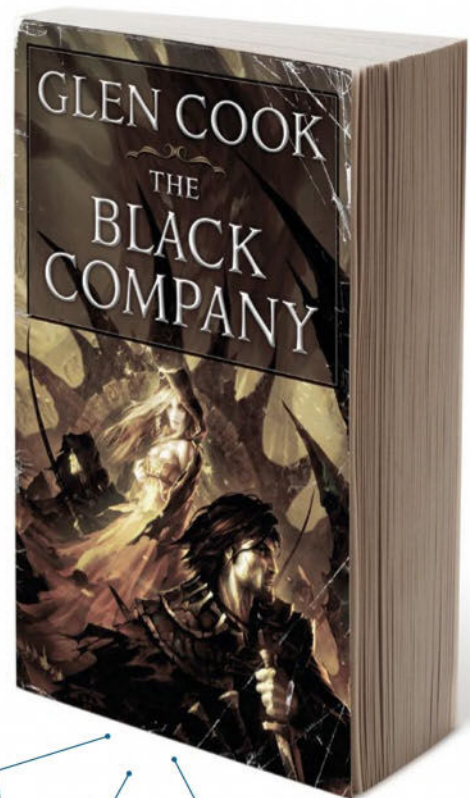
The Black Company - Glenn Cook

◆ Now, the Black Company books were indie fare for fantasy. When David Eddings and Raymond Feist were doing tales of mighty heroes with magic swords felling monsters, gods and travelling to other dimensions, the Black Company were staggering through mud. They bickered and fought for monstrous dark lords because they paid the best. When sorcery and evils walked the land, Black Company had no idea what was going on.

It was a radical new way to look at fantasy. These people never got near radiant princesses and didn't go on quests. They just tried to get the job done in dark times. They didn't jest and quaff ale, they told jokes and got hammered. Sometimes heroes lost their nerve and lost a fight and people died, not

on the Bridge of Khazad-Dum but in street fights and friendly fire. They didn't say 'by the bones of Jupiter!' they just said 'what the fuck' The Black Company is perhaps the finest of a new school of fantasy that backed away from kings and queens entirely. Steven Brust's Vlad Taltos books started the same way.

Now aside from a few games that nicked ideas from them, (Myth the Fallen Lords famously plundered from both these books) it's not a direct influence. But the Low Fi worlds the Black Company and others clearly influenced the likes of Darklands, where magic is distant and dangerous. The humour and unpretentious dialogue of Baldur's Gate. Thief's relaxed language and lower class hero owe a lot to these books, as does The Witcher.



Conan - Robert E. Howard

◆ Before he put a bullet through his brain at 30, Bob Howard had written hundreds of short stories, from sports to horror to fantasy. Between him, Lovecraft and the underrated Clark Ashton Smith, they redefined fantasy and horror for the 20th century.

But perhaps none of them created a pop icon as recognisable as Conan. With his Betty Page haircut and rippling muscles, he was a gift to artists. But it's his savage temper, his low-cunning and his hatred of authority that really stand out.

Plus that and he hacks bastards and monsters to death on the reg.

Conan existed in a kind of imagined Bronze-Age prehistory where strength and skill won the day and morality was fast and loose. These stories have some very dodgy subtext on race but... it was the 30s. Conan's still beloved because of his uncompromising attitude, awesome fight scenes and homoerotic brolove.

Now, there's been eight Conan videogames, none of them particularly noteworthy. But Conan

himself is in the earliest DNA of gaming. Rastan Saga from '87. Golden Axe, which even nicked a scream from the film for the soundtrack. Lesser known rip-offs include Xyphoe's Fantasy and Legend of Blacksilver and the C64's imaginatively titled Barbarian.

But it wasn't all shameless rip-offs. For starters, the Barbarian entered D&D early with unique mechanics that fed into the leaps and spins of Diablo, to Minsc and that weird bloke from Jade Empire, to MMO classes and modern games like Pillars of the Earth.

More importantly, the dusty, spare, harsh conditions of Conan's world, from frozen Hyperborea to desert Stygia, influenced everything from Dark Sun to Overlord, Riven, early Final Fantasy, Breath of Fire and non-fantasies like Borderlands and Fallout.

The kind of morally simplistic world of barbarians isn't cool at the moment. But that's OK. Conan's sandalled feet have already stomped across fantasy for good.



Perdido Street Station - China Mieville

◆ And it was books like this that killed them for good.

In the early 00s, fantasy was undergoing what looked like a small revolution. Books like *Perdido Street Station*, K.J Bishop's *The Etched City* and Steph Swainston's *Castle* books and Jeff VanderMeer's *Ambergris* were radically new. So New Weird they became.

Books that mixed horror elements, SF too, and did so in a conscious, measured way. It didn't last long because people wanted more elves and grim and gritty middle-class killer protagonists but for a while, the genre almost looked ready for total reinvention.

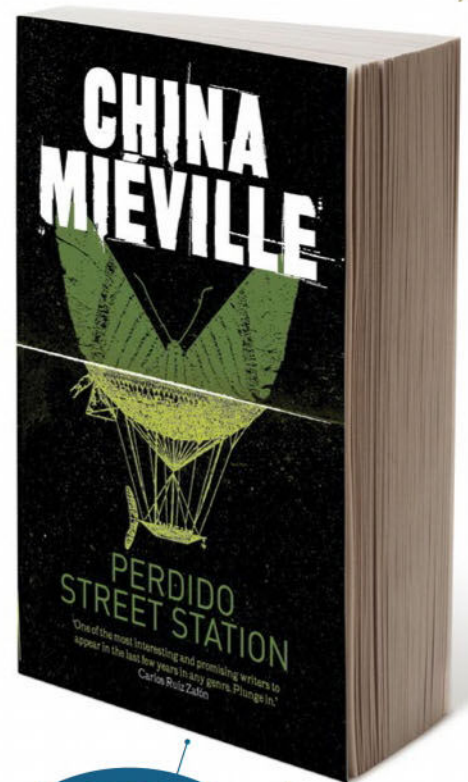
Perdido is the story of a scientist who studies flight, who gets a commission to reattach wings on a birdman. While his girlfriend, who has an insect for a head, not an insect's head, is doing sculpture for a crime lord who's two dozen men, women and animals are welded together. Then what's basically telepathic Giger xenomorphs, but with butterfly wings, attack. A weird mix of maths and literary criticism saves the day.

Beautifully written, endlessly

imaginative, romantic and yet also totally invested in grotesquery, this novel and sequels opened the door for the truly strange to come through.

Weird videogames existed before, especially in Japan. And eccentric games like *Planescape: Torment* sometimes broke elf ranks. But after 2000 we see stranger monsters, staples of the New Weird, stranger characters, stranger worlds. *The Elder Scrolls* kicks up its oddness with *Morrowind* and certainly with *Oblivion*. New Weird was popular in Japan and we can see the likes of *Chrono Trigger* going from a He-Man mess to more cohesive world where tech technology and magic are one and the Siren games specifically overlap with Weird themes. Indie games like the *Fallen London* series continue to hold tight to the gothic aesthetic of the subgenre. More recently, *Dishonoured* and the new *Thief*.

Basically, if there's a modern fantasy world that seems to be consciously breaking away from Tolkien fantasy, and making an effort at sinister, luscious atmosphere, it looks here for inspiration.



Romance of the Three Kingdoms - Luo Guanzhong (attributed)

◆ *RotK* and games that spin-off from it are an Asian institution. 11 interlinked stories, it deals with war, politics, history, love, death, all that business. Because of it, *Wu Xia*, the literary form, is created. And that's crazy flying kung fu. *RotTK* is an institution in Chinese culture, repeated over and over again. If you're watching a Chinese historical epic, chances are it's based on the book.

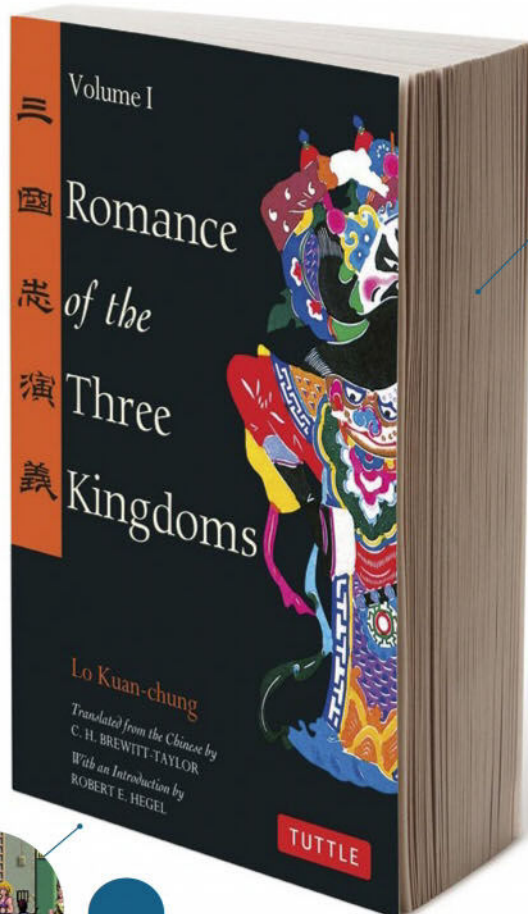
Here's a quick list of games inspired by it. Some you might not be familiar with.

Three Kingdoms: *Fate of a Dragon*, *Dynasty Warriors*, *Dynasty War*, *Atlantica Online*, *Kessen II*, *Heroes of Three Kingdoms*, *Sango*, *Dynasty Tactics*, *Warriors of Fate*, *Ninja Commando (!)* *Destiny of an Emperor*.

Many of those games go on to be hugely influential. All the side-scrollers go on to influence the likes of *Double Dragon*. *Heroes* goes on as an early JRPG. *Destiny* is an important Nintendo strategy game that's critically adored.

Then there's all the cheap-ass MMOs you experiment with on patch night...

Not to mention an entire field of games owe their aesthetics to this book. Kung fu movies hit Western culture in the 1960s and a lot of that first generation of designers were geeky teens watching this stuff in run-down cinemas. Here were noble heroes, monstrous courtiers, tests of courage and morals and most of all, superheroes with powers fighting the forces of darkness, chaos and disloyalty.





Elric of Melniboné & The Chronicles of Corum - Michael Moorcock

◆ OK, so, Michael Moorcock. Where to even start with this chap?

Real quick, in the 60s/70s, you had Conan stories. Those were the books. Elsewhere, fantasy was a few dedicated writers knocking out short 'sword and sorcery' stories. You had Jiriel in the 50s. Fafhrd and the Grey Mouser. Rollicking adventures.

Then young Moorcock, political, sharp, well-read, draws on the energy of the sexy, brainy stories of New Wave SF and starts cranking out, often in a week, radically different new kinds of stories. The decadent Dancers at the End of Time, the humanist Von Bek books. The Erekoose books, actually commentaries on his other books, with his vampiric Cold Sword. The Hawkmoon stories, influences on all the Warhammer franchises, Blood Omen and many, many more.

Two in particular we need to focus in on.

The Corum books are set in mythical sorta Europe and what's clearly a reimagining of Celtic Daoine Sidhe. Elf. Invaded by savage humans, he's tortured, his eye and hand replaced by monstrous god-appendages, and told to seek vengeance. But that spins out into a quest across a multiverse fighting the Gods of Chaos, even taking on what in game-terms you'd call side-quests to literally power up mission winning weapons.

Corum looked at Celtic myths from a very different point of view, reimagining them to serve the needs of gaming. Omikron the Nomad Soul and Final Fantasy games plunder the mythos. Nethergame, Castlevania, Bard's Tale, Fire Emblem and Kingdoms of Amalur do too. It wasn't just stealing from fairy stories that make Corum such an influence on adventure gaming, no, it was the scope of them. Other Moorcock books has Satan making on-screen appearances and universes end and all sorts of things but it's Corum you see crossing time and space to battle gods and heroes and evil versions of yourself.

It's not the best of his books, but it's certainly what epic games like Oblivion and Torment and even the vast fights of odd games like Shadow of the Colossus looks like. Never forgetting the emphasis on morality Ultima picked up on.

Then, of course, there's Elric.

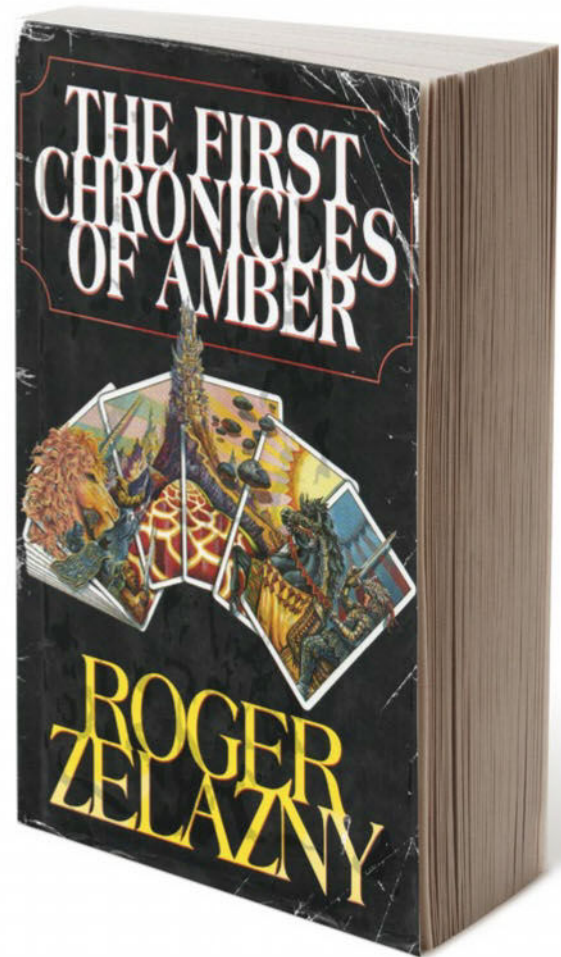
Ah, Elric, beloved of shy schoolboys and weird girls in black everywhere. Born prince and the only man with a conscience in a decadent empire of sorcerers, drug-addicts and sadists, Elric is an albino who needs drugs to keep his wasted body alive. Then it all goes tits up as his cousin nicks his girlfriend and Elric has to make a deal with the Chaos Gods to get her back. On that adventure, he grabs Stormbringer, the black runesword that eats souls (the first one in

fiction!). Elric then sets about on a series of ill-advised adventures that... backfire.

His girlfriend gets killed, he destroys his own empire, gets all his mates iced, his new girl gets turned into a worm thing and then blowing up the world. (Spoiler for a 40 year old book, I guess.)

Now, there was an emphasis on blades in especially Japanese games but those guys liked Stormbringer too. The Black Blade is a potent symbol of masculinity in these stories and sets up the image of sword = power. Frostmourne, the Buster Sword, Soul Edge, any version of the Masamune sword, Link's Master Sword keep the tradition. Stormbringer's moans of pleasure as it killed, it's urge for bloodlust, and the shocking final action it takes makes it the most significant magic sword in fantasy.

Then, of course, there's man himself. Elric is a Byronic hero, which means he's literally dark and brooding, like an articulate Batman. Elric's life is one tragedy after another. He greets it both with bitterness but also with irony and a certain black sense of humour. Game developers might not read the poet Byron but they did read Elric. Followers include Vergil from Devil May Cry, certain Belmonts, loads of Final Fantasy characters, Dragon Age's Anders, Max Payne, Solid Snake and of course, the best known of the Elric imitations, Sephiroth.



Amber - Roger Zelazny

◆ This is an odd one. Amber is one of those books that is the definition of cult. If you love it, you love it more than you love your siblings and pets. It becomes a massive text in your life. And those people who don't like it, or worse, just like it, are mental. And it's certainly loved by game designers.

Amber is the story of Corwin, who wakes up with amnesia but very quickly discovers he's part of a family of immortals who have the power to walk in, even create parallel universes called 'shadows'. With their dad vanished, there's a war going on for who gets to be the new king of Amber, the one real place in creation.

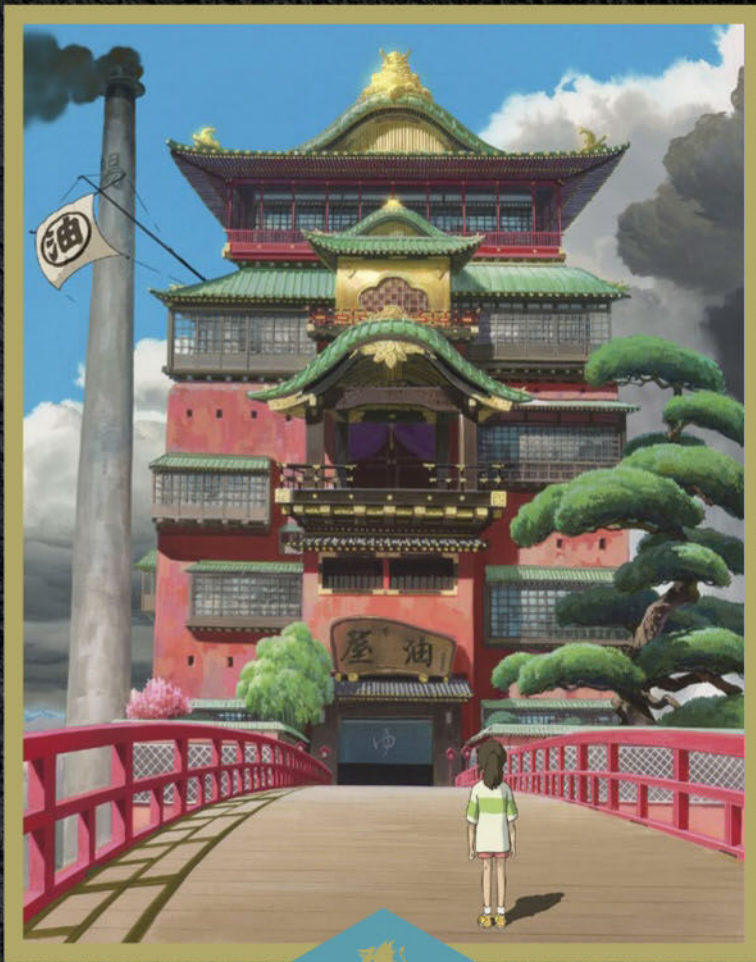
Amber's like Black Company and Taltos in that it's normal people talking normally, but it predates those books and is much more ambitious, literarily and in scope. Corwin is soon

driving a Caddy through alternate dimensions, ends up in undersea cities, raising armies of monsters, hanging out with King Arthur types, all the while trying to figure out who is trying to kill him to become King of the Universe.

There's a scene in Amber that's perhaps the most gameable moment in fantasy. And if you've played the likes of Dynasty Warriors, or even Mount and Blade, you'll agree. Corwin and a brother attack a vast mountain with hundreds of thousands of warriors. It's a tense battle and if they can make it to the top, they'll win. By the end of the scene, Corwin and his brother are alone against their ultimate enemy, exhausted. Then it goes wrong. We zoom in on a massive battle to the good bits where the PCs are doing the important work. How videogamey is that?

Kingkiller Chronicles - Patrick Rothfuss

◆ No. These books are slop.



The Bathhouse from Spirited Away

JAMES O'CONNOR



I have an overactive imagination, which means that whenever I get up in the middle of the night to go to the bathroom or get a glass of water, my brain starts running through impossible worst-case scenarios for what perils could befall me. Perhaps the most abstract sleep-addled thought I regularly have is: "what if you open this door and there's a completely different world on the other side, a hellscape where awful things will start happening to me immediately with no explanation or justification?"

Spirited Away is like a beautiful movie adaptation of this abstract fear. The protagonist, Chihiro, stumbles into the Spirit World after following her parents through a strange doorway – there's no more context in the film than that, things just happen – and soon finds herself working in the bathhouse that facilitates most of the film's action. Chihiro, who is renamed Sen and forced into work (lest she disappear entirely) by Yubaba, the witch who owns the establishment, very much makes the best out of a bad situation. The bathhouse turns into a site of extraordinary personal development for the film's hero, who is, like most protagonists in Hayao Miyazaki's films, a young girl with a great deal of depth and a strong sense of curiosity.

The Bathhouse is used to impressive effect in the film, as Chihiro's navigation of and confidence within it further her development as a character, while also affording the viewer some wonderful imagery. Navigation challenges can be a surprisingly effective way of building character in a film. Chihiro struggles with a steep set of stairs when she first arrives at the Bathhouse, for instance, but is later able to run across a pipe as it comes separated from the wall, because she's found a person worth being brave for. Chihiro is initially kept hidden from everyone, unsure of her place in the bathhouse or who she can trust. Later in the film, when No-Face starts to wreak havoc, she is actively called upon to save the bathhouse and its customers from his rampage. Although the space remains difficult to navigate throughout, Chihiro gains a level of confidence and competence just from being there.

The script spends enough time emphasizing different rules and power structures within the Bathhouse to make it clear that this is a fairly complex work environment. The spirits that inhabit it range from little frog fellows to humanoid monsters, giant babies and water deities disguised as stink spirits. There are clearly laws governing all of this that keep bad spirits out, even if they don't always work. When Chihiro leaves the bathhouse late in the film to save her dragon friend, it seems like a dangerous decision... but in fact, it turns out to be the right thing to do. Chihiro starts the film worried about her family moving to a different city, but by the end she has a greater sense of how big and exciting the world outside her comfort zone is.

Spirited Away presents some very clear analogies for growing up, but the film is no less meaningful for adult viewers. It's also a film that manages to eke a tremendous amount of value out of a simple bathhouse.

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Worlds Painted by a Different Hand

TIM HENDERSON TREADS FANTASTICAL PATHS LESS TRAVELLED

» We've all met our share of bogans. In packs they are bothersome, but get them alone and not every one is bad. Take, for example, an American friend who met his first bogan some years ago at a youth hostel. While said bogan's mates went out to buy cases of a beer that doesn't deserve to exist, he got to talking about how he was working on a fantasy novel.

Also, he was annoyed because those Lord of The Rings films that had just come out had apparently taken all of his ideas.

Clearly he hadn't read the bit in *On Writing* where Stephen King suggests that you read a lot of material from the genre you intend to write. But the larger point here is that, to the developed West, the world that J.R.R. Tolkien built has become what fantasy is. It's hard to think of fantasy and get your head outside of Middle Earth-style landscapes and things like elves and orcs, wizards and halflings, griffins and dragons.

This bleeds into games. Companies like BioWare have constructed small empires from worlds that, for all their depth and breadth, are still somewhat safe within the genre. There are some exceptions, however. They're often flawed in some conventional ways, but the games that follow nonetheless present fantasy worlds and landscapes that stray to the left.





Brütal Legend

◆ As polarising as the mesh of gameplay styles that is present in what remains Tim Schafer's latest AAA endeavour may be, it's hard to look past the unnamed world that it is set in.

The reason for this is simply the inspiration behind Brütal Legend: heavy metal – the music, the culture, the art. This is a fantasy world, but the fantasy is really just the base source for an amazingly cohesive and unified vision with consistently incredible hair.

Visually, Double Fine's art director, Lee Petty, was called upon to design a world that drew its inspiration from a mix of head-banging album covers and the work of American fantasy and sci-fi artist Frank Frazetta (who is believed to have done the artwork for Wolfmother's debut album, among others, so it all comes full-circle). The end result is a brooding, painterly colour scheme punctuated by flashes of gaudy pinks, trees and peaks that shoot up angular from the ground, cave mouths that

are actually the ancient remains of monolithic beasts, rivers that flow with lava and black tears, and absolutely stunning skies that look like they might crack open and rain down calamity at any given moment.

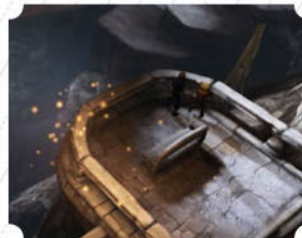
What really makes the world of Brütal Legend special, though, is Schafer's penchant for making all the pieces of his game and world fit together. Metal – both material and, it seems, music – is an organic substance here, beer grows on trees, stone dragons choke on red gag balls and panthers shoot purple lasers from their eyes.

Character animation also gets its due. There's a cartoonish sort of power to it that gives the impression that even an eyebrow twitch could strike a power chord. but what is most impressive of all is that everything just fits. This is a world that represents various styles of rock and the characters to go with it, local wildlife and multiple climates and Double Fine got it to gel together perfectly.



DRINKING IT IN

Want to soak these worlds in? The games have you covered! Brutal Legend is littered with periscopes. Brothers and Ico allow players to relax on benches (but it's Ico's design that really highlights the world), and Nier... well, Nier's an odd duck. It can't even do this right.



Brothers: A Tale of Two Sons

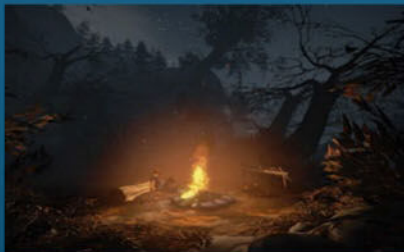
◆ More than the other games mentioned here, Brothers feels familiar. There is a basic European sensibility to the small town in which the game opens, as well as many of the locations that follow (and it fits a lot of diversity into its modest play-time), that kind of walks the path that our wider cultural history has paved.

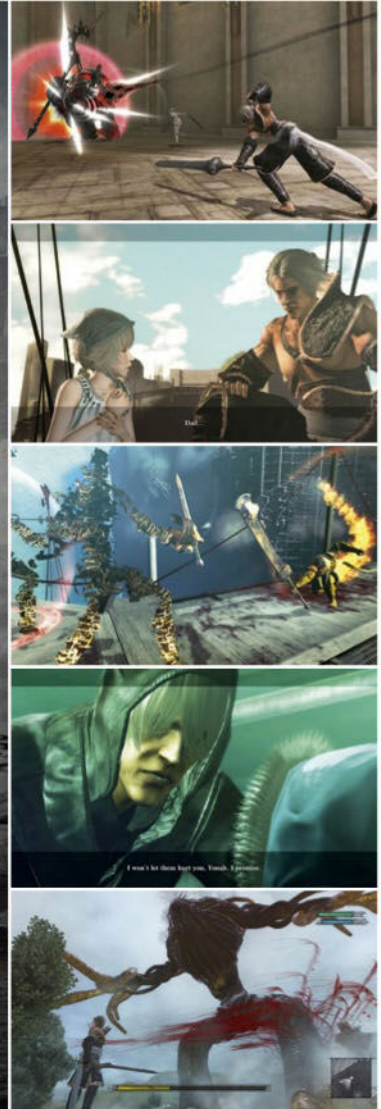
While the nuts and bolts don't seem radically different, there is also a strangeness to the world that Starbreeze crafted back in 2013. Like visiting your own home in a dream-state, almost everything is recognisable, just not quite how you remember it. Brothers' art direction seems to leave a palpable chill in the air at all times, perhaps a signature of its developers Nordic origins.

In fact, it's likely that much of what makes Brother's such an otherworldly experience is indebted to it's developers being based in Sweden. Buildings are frequently just a little off-kilter, and simple patterns can seem ever-so-slightly unfamiliar. In many ways,

this world is set apart by colour palates and animations that are personality mirrors of those found in Brütal Legend. Brothers keeps its colours muted and painterly, but they're far softer and almost pastel-like. Its animation is smooth and gentle, rather than jagged and powerful.

A sense of gentleness pervades this world – majestic giants and fearsome beasts will aid the two brothers on their journey, and even if they didn't the game provides no weaponised means of attacking its inhabitants. Actions are entirely contextual and, outside of immediate quest advancement, are often used to simply let the boys exist in their country by stroking a cat, splashing in shallow water or simply resting and admiring the scenery.





HONORABLE MENTIONS

Aside from the strange way that almost every JRPG in existence interprets Western fantasy, there are a few more games and franchises worthy of mention: Panzer Dragoon (wonderful sense of Ghibli influence), Ni No Kuni (it actually is Ghibli!), Zeno Clash (weird), A Story About My Uncle (also weird), and Sword and Sworcery are also worth a look.



Nier

◆ Nier throws its share of curveballs, and the first one comes the moment after the player has entered their name. The first hour of this game doesn't take place in a fantastical world of rolling mountains and talking trees, but rather in what appears to be a modern city lost to a nuclear winter. Specifically, it is the outcome to one of the endings to the first Drakengard game, which would indicate that the city is actually the remains of Tokyo.

Eventually, it brings about its fantasy setting. By skipping forward by more than a thousand years.

If nothing else, this strange timeline twist helps explain away how the world is so steeped in (often quite bizarre) literature. Nier himself receives the game's first quest from a very impressively-stocked library – a building that is something of a hub for the town

where he and his sickly young daughter reside. Never mind that said daughter asks him to borrow a book while he's out. We will have none of that medieval illiteracy here!

Even the characters in Nier can be books, one of them Nier's main companion (and conceptually cool but clumsily-designed menu system). And he may not be the oddest of the bunch. The greater cast also includes a scantily-clad hermaphrodite and a young boy who may be stranger still, but those details are best left discovered.

Exploring the land outside of the town reveals rusted signs of former civilisation – large, crumbling metal structures that jut up from (and below) the barren, sunny fields. Animated flourishes are sparse, often evoking that sense of post-apocalypse found in the game's intro; that one of the main reused gameplay tropes is that of the bullet

hell shooter, that the main enemies look not unlike how computer viruses might be visualised in cyberspace, only adds to the strange way that the setting seems multi-layered, folded in upon itself

These gameplay mechanics can go about evoking different settings, frequently hearkening to the weird social mish-mash that is at play. The aforementioned bullet-hell has genre associations with typically modern or futuristic settings, and when Nier mounts a boar to ride around the plains, it controls more-or-less like a motorcycle.

Although criticised upon release for looking like it was developed for an overclocked PS2, Nier has aged with more grace than many other titles of its time, which goes some way in allowing its stark landscapes to feel thematically considered rather than the result of budget limitations.



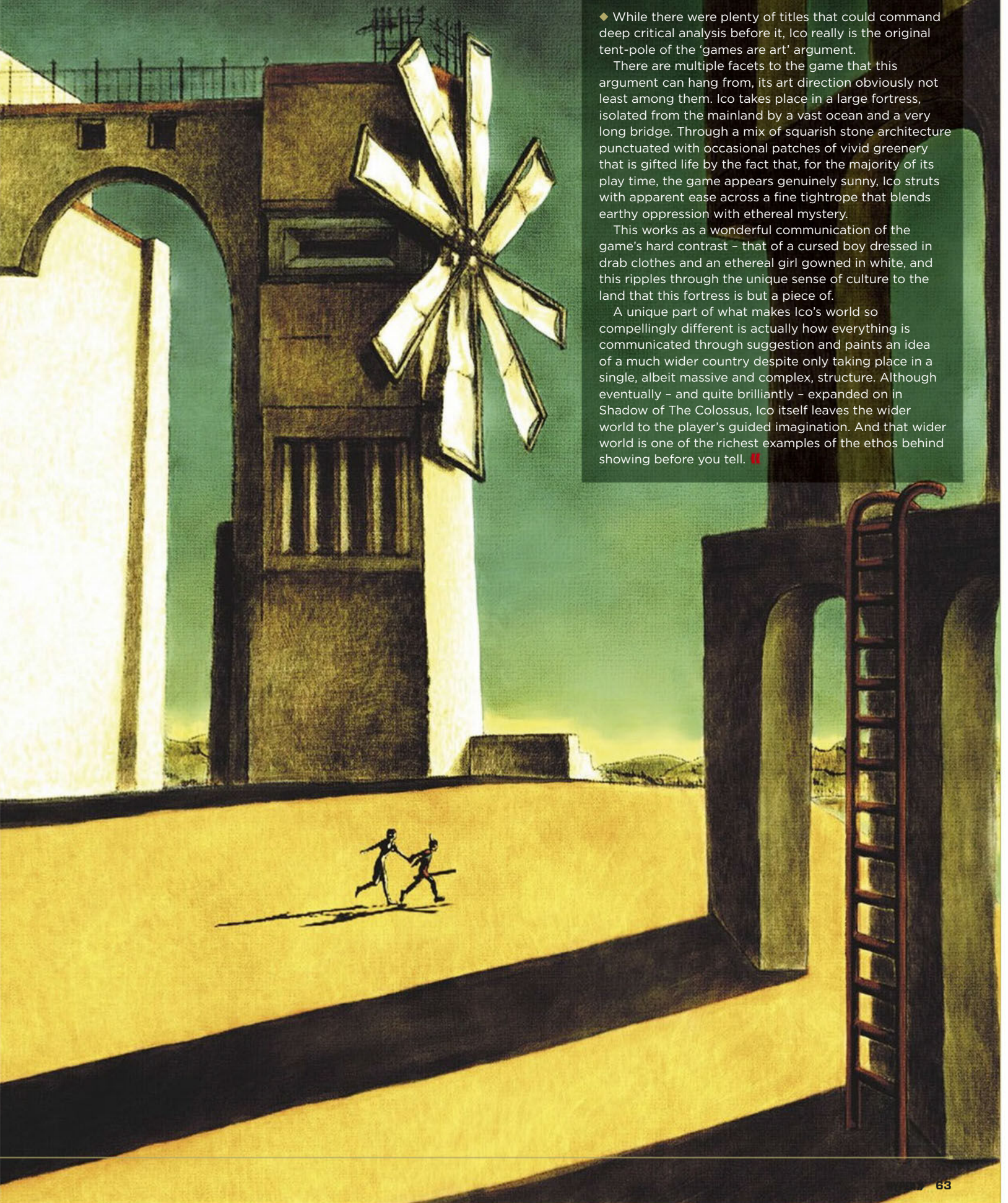
Ico

◆ While there were plenty of titles that could command deep critical analysis before it, *Ico* really is the original tent-pole of the 'games are art' argument.

There are multiple facets to the game that this argument can hang from, its art direction obviously not least among them. *Ico* takes place in a large fortress, isolated from the mainland by a vast ocean and a very long bridge. Through a mix of squarish stone architecture punctuated with occasional patches of vivid greenery that is gifted life by the fact that, for the majority of its play time, the game appears genuinely sunny, *Ico* struts with apparent ease across a fine tightrope that blends earthy oppression with ethereal mystery.

This works as a wonderful communication of the game's hard contrast – that of a cursed boy dressed in drab clothes and an ethereal girl gowned in white, and this ripples through the unique sense of culture to the land that this fortress is but a piece of.

A unique part of what makes *Ico*'s world so compellingly different is actually how everything is communicated through suggestion and paints an idea of a much wider country despite only taking place in a single, albeit massive and complex, structure. Although eventually – and quite brilliantly – expanded on in *Shadow of The Colossus*, *Ico* itself leaves the wider world to the player's guided imagination. And that wider world is one of the richest examples of the ethos behind showing before you tell. ■



Final Fantasy First

1st (fin)ale Seventh
<365//52 Days>

SEVEN DAYS WITH FINAL FANTASY VII
BY JAMES O'CONNOR.





DAY ONE

I've never played Final Fantasy VII beyond the opening five minutes. When I was nine years old, I played through the first cutscene and battle at my mum's friend's place. I couldn't figure out how to reach the second screen, because I was young and unfamiliar with the controller. The next week I sat down and wrote out scores for all the games I had played recently: FF7 was awarded 32%.

In 2015 I've returned to the game, intending to play it every night for a week, to see what all the fuss is about and whether it holds up. My first session - which only lasted about an hour before I get a headache (my eyes lived through 1997, but have a hard time adjusting to it) - indicated two things to me: that nine-year-old James didn't give the game a fair shot, but also that he probably wasn't ready for it.

It had never really occurred to me that part of Final Fantasy VII's

appeal was that it was a game for adults. While I was playing through all of the Nintendo 64's most colourful games, PlayStation owners were playing a game that opens with the protagonist orchestrating a terrorist attack. You blow up a reactor without really knowing why, or what all the terminology being thrown around - SOLDIER, AVALANCHE, Shinra - actually means. It's a pretty damn interesting way to open a game - JRPGs typically situate you as a grand hero of destiny, so how do we account for what Cloud is doing here?

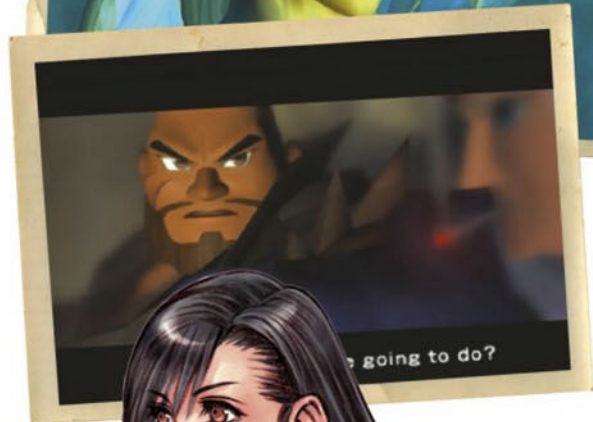
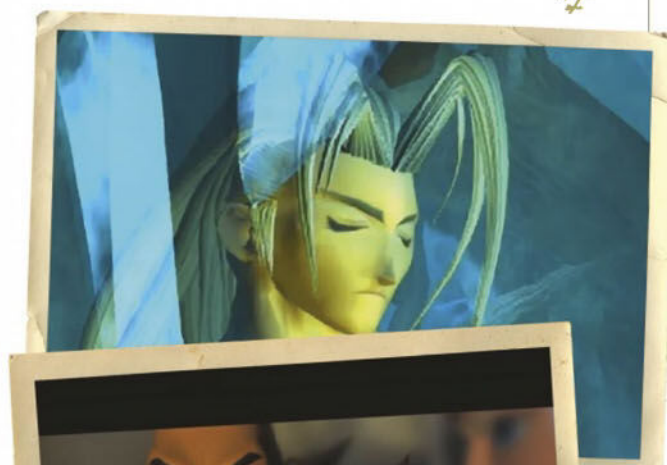
I'm also surprised by all the dialog options the game is giving me, and I love the way all tutorials are framed as Cloud explaining mechanics to other characters, not the other way around. The first boss does a great job of explaining the Active Time Battle system, and aside from the horribly outdated graphics and controls, I'm having a good time.



DAY TWO

Cloud and Aerith (or Aeris, or whatever) properly met today. I look forward to spending the entirety of the game getting to know her. I bet she's super useful against the final boss. The whole meeting-in-the-church thing after Cloud falls through the roof reminds me faintly of Cowboy Bebop, although demure flower-girl Aerith is no Faye Valentine. It's a nice scene, although the agreement between the two characters that he will be her bodyguard in exchange for a date is a tad laboured.

On my second day with the game, I start to get genuinely annoyed by the controls. The game shows its age when you're trying to move between train carriages with a time limit imposed. There's also a truly terrible and pointless sequence where Cloud tries to save Aerith from bad guys by pushing barrels down from the rafters of the church. I immediately get the sense that this game isn't going to offer any particularly strong puzzles, but I'm still enjoying it, and I'm keen to really get to know Cloud.



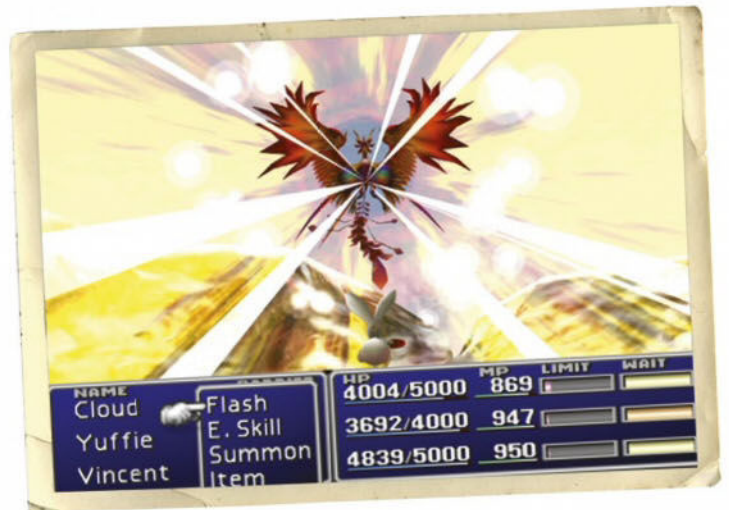
DAY THREE

Today, Cloud was announced as a playable character in Super Smash Bros. That same day, I put him in a dress to try and seduce the perverted Don Corneo in Wall Market.

Final Fantasy VII is way weirder than I was prepared for. Early in today's session, I get attacked by a sentient house. It dropped a nuke on me with its 'Hell Bomber' attack, which apparently missed. Later on, I find myself at the Honey Bee Inn, which is some kind of brothel. I enter the &\$\$% Room - the Fuck Room, obviously - where I saw a ghost of myself, passed out, and

woke up in the middle of a massage (I think?) from Mukki, a bulky pastiche of Freddie Mercury.

So yeah, the game is odd. But there's also something oddly sweet about this whole section: Cloud reinvigorates a dressmaker's career by giving him an interesting challenge. The dressmaker declares that he will stop drinking so much, and a little while later Cloud, Tifa and Aerith gather by Don Corneo's bed and threaten to chop off, rip off, and smash up his balls. Again, I wonder if I would have appreciated this game as a kid.



FFAQ7

If you want good examples of how dedicated GameFAQs walkthrough writers can be, have a look at this game's page. I occasionally referred to a guide by one 'Absolute Steve', to get my bearings and see if I was missing anything, and the amount of detail - every enemy HP, every single hidden item, a comprehensive listing of every criteria for a 'perfect game' - is staggering.



DAY FOUR

By the fourth day Cloud and company return to Sector 7, where the shit has well and truly hit the fan. There's all kinds of crummy 32-bit explosions, plenty of enemy blathering (I fight Reno, but I'm still not entirely clear how Reno fits into everything) and I realise that Cloud has started to actually develop as a character.

Despite looking horrifyingly blurry on my 46 inch LCD, Final Fantasy VII still manages to hit me with some neat environmental storytelling. At one point I accidentally run out to the outer gate surrounding

Midgar, and stare out at the scorched earth beyond. It tells me a lot about the world I'm inhabiting, which the game has been pretty quiet about otherwise. There was a dog running around the slum village earlier in the game; after the explosion, the dog is gone. Did the dog just run off, or is it dead? In any case, it's all the motivation I need (also three of the main characters introduced earlier died, which is also a shame). I also have to admit that I'm somewhat shocked by how moving the story of Aerith's adoption is... I sure hope she survives the game. She does, right?



DAY FIVE

Today I tackled Shinra HQ, which is riddled with fundamentally bad pieces of design. Getting there was a bit of a nightmare - I had to climb up some blurry pre-rendered areas where what was and wasn't ground was rarely discernible - and once inside I faced awful stealth sections, irritating random encounters with dumb enemies, and what has to be the worst (thankfully optional) puzzle design I've ever seen. If you've never played or simply forgotten, there's a library in Shinra HQ, and you need to guess the librarian's password to get to the next floor. You can either guess every option presented, but if you want to solve it and get a better

reward, you need to examine every book case, figure out which book's subject matter doesn't belong, take the number next to the book and figure out which letter in the alphabet it corresponds to, and spell out the word from all the letters. It's baffling if you don't check a guide.

There's still a lot to like though! Some of the enemy designs are fucking terrifying (like those robot centipedes), and the end of this section is pretty dark: Jenova escapes, the halls are smeared with blood, and for some reason you end up inviting a dog-man to join your party after evil scientists try to breed him with Aerith. Like I said before, this game is weird.



DAY SIX

Today's session opens with a motorbike chase along a highway. I slash at bad dudes from my rad hog, and I wonder how this scene would have been received when the game was released. In 2015, it's a bit kitsch, but interesting and not unenjoyable. In 1997, did it blow minds? I'd like to imagine that the little sparks that Cloud's sword throws up as it scrapes across the road did, at least.

After these shenanigans I end up on the overworld map for the first time. It's here that the actual scale of Final Fantasy VII comes into

focus - I'd racked up about twelve hours on the in-game timer at this point, which is probably a bit longer than it took me to finish Rise of the Tomb Raider the week prior. And suddenly, the game has expanded exponentially, both in the world and in its storytelling - in the next village I'm treated to a solid half hour flashback as Cloud explains his relationship with Sephiroth, the game's big baddie. It's a pretty interesting tale, too. This game has a great sense of forward momentum.

DAY SEVEN

It's the last day of my proposed week playing Final Fantasy VII. I catch a Chocobo, engage in what must be the worst RTS minigame ever inserted into the middle of an RPG (if you're playing, avoid Fort Condor unless you want to spend all of your money on bullshit) and come to grips with just how deep the battle system has become. I've gained an enemy skill (called 'Suicide', for some reason), earned the ability to summon a Chocobo in battle, augmented Barrett's weapon to give it wind materia strength, and learned the power of the Bio poison magic. There's a lot running through my mind now whenever I'm attacked.

I'm surprised by a lot of things in Final Fantasy VII. I end my session after playing through the most bafflingly misguided and out of place CPR tutorial of all time, which is one kind of surprise. I've been impressed by the story and battle



system, which is a much better kind of surprise. And above all else, I've realised that, yes, this is a game that needed to be remade. There's so much abstraction and irritation in the existing game, so much wonderful weirdness that absolutely needs to be left in and shared with new players, and so much depth that I'd love to enjoy without needing to suffer through the eye pain that comes from playing a PlayStation game on a modern TV. Final Fantasy VII, you're alright. 🗨️



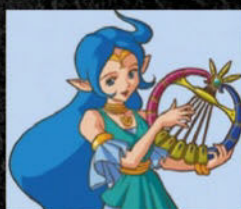
BTW I KNOW AERITH DIES

I'm not sure why, exactly, but I assumed I'd come away from Final Fantasy VII bemused as to why people get some upset about Aerith's death. But no - I didn't actually get up to that bit, but I totally get it. She's got an interesting backstory and seems to be primed as a driving force in the plot. It must have been pretty shocking.



The Master Sword Shrine

ALEX MANN



In a glade somewhere not far from here rests the Master Sword. Golden light works its way between oaken trunks as small critters scurry through the underbrush – free from the fear of predators thanks to the warm, comforting aura of the forgotten blade. It rests hilt skyward, blade thrust into stone, shining brilliantly in the morning light despite years of solitude. Symmetrical in design, brilliant to behold, the Blade of Evil's Bane waits patiently for the moment it is once again called upon.

Governed by threes, the blade was crafted by a long forgotten goddess and her ancient sages. It was then tempered and honed by the flames of Farore, Din and Nayru – the three Golden Goddesses – imbuing it with the strength to reflect any power driven by malicious intent. Its strength was such that it could seal great evil inside it, over time gradually transforming even the deepest dark into pure light. With this very task in mind, the blade was originally sealed away in the Temple of Time, becoming the key to guard the entrance to the Sacred Realm; a gatekeeper to bar the way of the unworthy.

Years, decades, eons rolled by, throughout which the blade was called upon multiple times to face many great evils, but it was always returned to its peacetime sheath. So fine was its craftsmanship that even when the rock and mortar temple built by man crumbled around it, the sword remained stalwart in its position. Forests rose to devour the ancient structure, held at bay only when they reached the base of the sword's podium; for nature is a neutral entity, and even its earthly touch was not worthy of the Sword of Time.

The great Temple of Time was no more, becoming the hallowed Sacred Grove. And again the sword was called upon. The knights worthy of wielding the blade have always been of the same ilk, rumoured to be of the same bloodline, clothed in green and blessed by the Gods. If such a hero had need of an alteration, the sword complied, transforming its form from silver to red to gold. Sometimes it would shoot great gusts of wind, others beams of light, changing itself to suit the hero, becoming the perfect tool to defeat whatever rising evil threatened to devour the land. But again, the blade would return – and once re-sheathed, it always reverted to its purest form.

And there it sits. The cornerstone of Hyrule, the true reason that man is free and not made the slave of savage beasts. The Sword of the Goddess. The Sword of the Hero. The fabled Master Sword. It waits and bides its time, for the spirit that resides inside can sense that its next adventure draws nigh.

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This is how we Roll

AN INTRO TO
DUNGEONS & DRAGONS,
WITH DUNGEON MASTER
DAN STAINES



» Dungeons & Dragons (D&D) can be an intimidating prospect for a newcomer. It's a complicated game governed by esoteric rules that can take even the most dedicated players weeks, if not months, to master. For a budding Dungeon Master (DM) it's an even bigger ask: as well as understanding the rules, you're also in charge of their judicious application while trying to deliver a memorable campaign for your players.

So you can appreciate why a feature like this might be useful. What follows is an introduction to D&D as delivered by a new DM with next to no experience with pen-and-paper roleplaying. How much effort does it take for a bunch of noobs to get a game running? Which books do you need to buy and what resources are available to make the process easier? What are some common pitfalls and how do you avoid them? The answers to these questions and more await in the following pages...

WHAT THE HECK EVEN IS D&D? >> Designed by Gary Gygax and Dave Arneson, Dungeons & Dragons is a fantasy tabletop roleplaying game first published in 1974 by the ominously named Tactical Studies Rules Inc. Inspired by wargames like Chainmail and Ironclad, D&D's chief innovation was to augment dice-based combat simulation with roleplaying and storytelling. Instead of controlling faceless platoons of soldiers locked in perpetual combat, players would instead take charge of named characters with unique personalities and skillsets as they embarked on epic adventures to slay dragons, save the world, and score tonnes of sweet loot.

There have been something like twelve permutations of D&D since its inception, with the latest being the recently released 5th Edition. In contrast to some of its more rule-intensive predecessors, D&D 5e emphasises improvisation and flexibility - it's more about roleplaying and collaborative storytelling than debating rules and manipulating numbers. That said, there's still scope for some serious rules-lawyering

and stat-juggling if that's your thing.

As you're probably aware, D&D has a reputation for being incredibly nerdy, which is of course totally accurate. On the continuum of nerdiness, it sits comfortably between LARPing and videogames, meaning you probably won't want to discuss it in mixed company at Friday night drinks. But who cares, right? If you weren't already comfortable with being a nerd, I seriously doubt you'd even be reading this article. Don't let D&D's perceived dorkiness dissuade you from playing: it doesn't have to be cool to be fun.

GETTING STARTED: WHAT'S IN THE BOX? >>

There are two ways for a beginner to get a game of D&D going. The first is to buy the core books - i.e. the Dungeon Master's Guide, Player's Handbook, and Monster Manual - and either run a readymade campaign or write your own. This is an expensive and time-consuming proposition: all together the core books will set you back more than \$150, and then you've gotta factor in a campaign book as well as dice and other miscellany... you could end up paying as much as \$250 before you've even run your first game. On top of that, the core books are weighty tomes dense with information, much of which is irrelevant for a beginner. Knowing where and how to start can be challenging to say the least.

Your other option - which is the one we decided to go with - is to buy the D&D Starter Set for around \$25. Containing a 64-page adventure, a heavily abridged rulebook, five pre-generated characters, and six dice, it has pretty much everything you need to get a game going with minimal fuss and expenditure. With its lack of maps, figurines, and DM's screen, D&D veterans would probably regard it as fairly rudimentary, but that is of course exactly the point, and for what you pay it's not a bad deal at all.

GETTING STARTED: THE DL ON BEING DM >>

According to the Dungeon Master's Guide, the DM is the "creative force" behind a game of

D&D. It is the DM's job to drive the story, apply the rules, manage non-player characters in and outside of combat, and basically act as the engine that keeps a game moving forward and interesting for players. A good DM is a combination of storyteller, actor, and referee, and is comfortable thinking on their feet, adjudicating disputes, and putting on silly voices for the amusement of others.

It sounds like a lot of work because it kind of is. Nevertheless, it's not as difficult as it first appears, particularly if you're willing to embrace the improvisational freedom that characterises P&P roleplaying. Just remember two things:

1) This is YOUR game and it's up to YOU to decide how to run it. The rules provide structure and consistency, but you're under no obligation to enforce them perfectly. This doesn't mean it's a good idea to ignore the rules all the time - but if it makes for a better story or a more memorable encounter, then go for it. Sticklers be damned.

2) The players are not your enemy. Ultimately, D&D is a framework for collaborative storytelling - it's you and your friends working together to tell a cool story and have fun. Help them when they need it and let them do the same for you.



» IT IS THE DM'S JOB TO DRIVE THE STORY, APPLY THE RULES, MANAGE NPCs, AND BASICALLY ACT AS THE ENGINE THAT KEEPS A GAME MOVING FORWARD





The Mines of Phandelver

What follows is an abridged account of our first game of D&D using the Starter Set. The game was DMed by me (Dan) and played by four people: Wilks, Alex, Rachel, and Craig. Of the five of us, only Wilks and Craig have any significant experience with D&D and tabletop roleplaying. We've all played computer roleplaying games, though, meaning we all had a base level of familiarity with D&D's structure and core concepts. You'd be surprised how much this helps.

The Mines of Phandelver is a shortish adventure designed for a party of four. Set in the Forgotten Realms, the story takes place in and around a medium-sized mining town by the name of Phandalin, a few days travel southeast of Neverwinter. To begin the adventure, the player characters are charged with escorting a cartload of goods to

Phandalin from Neverwinter at the request of a wealthy dwarf named Gundren, who has ridden ahead with an escort and will meet the party at the assigned drop point. The pay is 10 gold pieces per head.

MEET THE GANG >> Once the DM has explained the premise, the second thing the adventure booklet suggests is to get the party members to introduce themselves. For the sake of convenience, our party elected to use the pre-generated characters that come with the Starter Set. First up: Rachel as **Gregton Rockseeker**, a deferential dwarven cleric who apparently has more faith in his warhammer than he does in the gods. Then comes Wilks as **Finbar the Procurer**: a halfling thief who flies by the seat of his (tiny) pants and whose only loyalties are to his friends

and treasure, not necessarily in that order. Next is Alex and his single-minded, supernaturally unlucky human fighter, **Valkor the Handshmeat**. Finally, bringing up the rear we've got Craig in the role of **Timbosan**, the high-elf wizard with a boner for sleep spells.

As DM, it pays to take a moment to learn the names of all the player characters and familiarise yourself with their various traits and abilities. This'll help you when it comes to improvising interesting challenges during the adventure: people like to feel useful, and the best the way to make them feel useful is to give them challenges they can overcome with the skills at their disposal. Also, it makes for better roleplay if you refer to everyone by their character names and not their real ones. Or so I imagine - I didn't do it and now I regret it.



PLAYER REFLECTIONS: *Valkor the Handshmeat*

◆ Something that really stood out to me in hindsight is that a strong commitment to role-playing is highly important. I was meant to be a folk hero of legend but (thanks to my extremely poor dice rolling game) I turned out to be more of a pretender, stumbling into traps and punching myself in the face... yes that happened. I tried to form my character around this but I approached it all wrong, with most of what I was saying becoming lost between the confusion of what Alex (me) was saying and what Valkor (my character) was saying. At

one point, Wilks and I were having an in-game argument that the DM easily mistook for a real-world argument, only realising what was going on towards the end, and alerting the enemy to our presence as a result. Which is awesome. What's more, when DM Staines was rocking different accents in a tavern, it not only helped differentiate characters, but helped add some life & humour to the world. So as weird as it might seem, putting on a voice for your character is probably a good idea, even if it is a little embarrassing at first.



ADVENTURE LOG:

AMBUSH!

Accepting Gundren's proposal, the party sets out from Neverwinter, taking the High Road south and then veering east along the Triboar Trail. The journey has been blessedly incident free, but the Triboar is a dangerous trail, poorly patrolled and frequented by bandits and outlaws. Driving the wagon containing Gundren's supplies, Finbar muses aloud that the party stands to make a lot more money selling the supplies on the black market than delivering them as promised. "I'd like to remind you those are my cousin's supplies you're talking about," grumbles Gregton.

Finbar goes to reply but stops mid-sentence and pulls the wagon to a sudden stop. Ahead, two dead horses are sprawled across the trail, blocking the way forward. Black feathered arrows puncture their flanks, and dried blood stains the earth. Suspicious, Gregton and Valkor peer into the surrounding woods, but fail their perception checks and notice nothing untoward. However, from his perch atop the wagon, Finbar has a better view and spies a goblin crouching in the underbrush ahead, drawing its shortbow...



ADVENTURE LOG:

PHANDALIN HO!

The fight was quick and brutal. Valkor received a scimitar to the neck and was almost killed. Emerging from his hiding place in the back of the wagon, Timbosan came face-to-face with a snarling goblin and almost lost an ear. But a couple of well-placed arrows and a devastatingly deployed sleep spell quickly saw our intrepid adventurers gain the upper hand. With the ambushers defeated, it was time to heal (courtesy Gregton), rest, and consider the next move. Where to next? After a brief debate, the decision was unanimous: the party would continue along the Triboar and deliver the supplies to Phandalin.



ROLL FOR INITIATIVE

Combat in D&D is not as complex as it used to be, but still takes some getting used to. In the old days, encounters would take place on gridded maps with figurines representing players and monsters alike, but these days it's all in the theatre of the mind. This can be challenging for the DM because it implies keeping in mind the relative positions of everyone on the battlefield alongside all the various abilities and stats of all the non-player characters. For this reason you'll want to keep a pen and pad handy.

Another thing for DMs to keep in mind during combat is that you typically don't want to kill all your players, especially if it's their first fight. The ambush is designed to be an easy encounter, but a few unlucky rolls saw the goblins quickly gain the upper hand in our game, and so I had to make a few tactically dubious decisions to compensate. In this case, it made sense - goblins are stupid - but you wanna be careful not to make it too obvious to your party that you're playing for their benefit.



ADVENTURE LOG:

BARTHEN THE DUBIOUSLY IRISH SHOPKEEP

ELMAR BARTHEN: Welcome to Barthen's Provisions, what can I do for ye?

GREGTON: We're here to drop off Gundren's supplies.

FINBAR: And collect our money.

BARTHEN: Supplies? Money? What're ye talkin about? I've not seen Gundren in weeks.

GREGTON: He hired us to escort his supply wagon to Phandalin. We're supposed to meet him here and collect our pay.

FINBAR: Which we'll do right now, if you don't mind. I don't survive ambushes pro bono.

BARTHEN: Attacked were ye? By who?

VALKOR: Goblins. Four of them. Blocked the road with dead horses and attacked us from the forest.

BARTHEN: Dead horses, ye say? Not Gundren's?

TIMBOSAN: They... could have been...

BARTHEN: Did ye check?

GREGTON: N-no...

BARTHEN: Well, seems like you've got a new errand to run then, don't ye?

FINBAR: Right, sure, but about our pay...

THE BEST LAID PLANS OF DICE AND MEN

In the adventure book, the players are not meant to reach Phandalin until after they've investigated the scene of the attack and found the trail to the goblin hideout. The fact that our party decided to press on and deliver Gundren's supplies as soon as possible meant that I had to adapt the story on the fly and try to redirect the party to where they were "supposed" to be. This sort of thing is gonna happen sometimes: players are gonna do something you didn't expect, and - as a DM - you'll need to react to it. Keep in mind that it's your job to empower players, not hinder them. Unless you've got a good, in-fiction reason, it's generally bad form to tell them they can't go somewhere or do something. There are no invisible walls in D&D.



ADVENTURE LOG:

ON THE GOBLIN TRAIL

After an eventful night at the local inn in which Gregton got a little boy drunk and Valkor passed out in a pool of his own vomit, the party sets off to investigate the ambush site, arriving just after midday. Finbar, Valkor, and Gregton do their best CSI impressions and search the area for clues, but fail their perception checks and find nothing of interest. Timbosan, however, succeeds and after a cursory examination discovers what looks to be a trail into the woods. The party elects to follow it, the by-now habitually unlucky Valkor in the lead... who proceeds to walk right into a snare trap and is hoisted into the air by his feet. Spying a nearby pulley, Gregton tries to lower his hapless comrade to the ground but fails a strength check and instead drops him painfully on his head. Valkor is not having a good day.





ADVENTURE LOG:

YEEMIK-AY-YAY, MOTHERBLEEPER

Having found and successfully infiltrated the network of caves that function as the goblins' base, the party finds itself in a large, fire-lit chamber at the centre of which a circle of goblins mutter darkly. Following his *modus operandi*, Finbar rolls a natural 20 on his dexterity check and melds noiselessly into the dancing shadows at chamber's edge. Valkor follows, and – following *his* *modus operandi* – rolls a 5, noisily tripping over a rock and cursing aloud and alerting the goblins. Their leader – larger than the rest and wearing better armour – holds a cruel looking dagger in his right hand, and in his left, held aloft by a fistful of bloody hair, is Gundren's escort, Sildar Hallwinter.

"Me Yeemik!" the goblin screeches. "You put away weapons! You try to hit, me knifey fancy man quick quick! Put away!"

"What do you want?" asks Valkor, dusting himself off.

"Me want trade. You killdead Klarg. Make me goblin leader. Then we–"

"Nah," cuts-in Timbosan as he proceeds to cast yet another sleep spell, knocking out two goblins and – collaterally – the hostage.

"Well I'm glad we took the time to talk," mutters Finbar, drawing his shortbow.

YOU KNOW THEY CAN HEAR YOU, RIGHT?

>> The Cragmoore Caves are the setting for Chapter One's "boss fight" and were both really fun and kind of a pain to DM. The caves are all interconnected: stuff that happens in one chamber is often audible in others, raising some interesting possibilities for the DM. For example, in one of the earlier chambers, Finbar and Valkor got into a loud argument about... something and accidentally alerted the goblins in the next chamber to the party's presence, resulting in a fight. Later on, Finbar noticed a dam and found a way to flood the entire complex, killing just about everything inside. These were not events that I expected to happen: they arose organically out of the player's actions. Again: this is the beauty of D&D – and part of what makes it so challenging for a new DM.

ADVENTURE LOG:

VALKOR COMES OUT SWINGIN'

VALKOR: Can I punch Timbosan?

DM: Why do you want to punch Timbosan?

TIMBOSAN: Yes, why DO you want to punch Timbosan?

VALKOR: Because he put me to sleep with those goblins.

TIMBOSAN: Is that a problem? You got to have a rest! You should be thanking me!

DM: Okay, well, I guess you can punch Timbosan if that's what you want. Roll a to-hit.

VALKOR: 2.

DM: Rising groggily from the ground, you stumble over to Timbosan and throw a sloppy uppercut, missing completely and instead clocking yourself on the chin. Roll 1D4 for damage.

TIMBOSAN: Haaa!



RESOURCES

So that's about it: hopefully you've got a decent idea what it's like to play a game of D&D, and know for sure whether or not it's something you'd like to try. If you're interested, here're a few resources that can make the whole thing a bit easier:

dnd.wizards.com/products/tabletop-games/trpg-resources - This is WoTC's official resource page for D&D. Has character sheets, basic rules, and a locator for local D&D stockists.

roll20.net/ - An web-based suite of tools that you can use to either play D&D online or help manage a tabletop game.

donjon.bin.sh/ - A bunch of great free tools for doing stuff like generating dungeon maps and NPCs.

www.gozzys.com/ - Map builders and generators.

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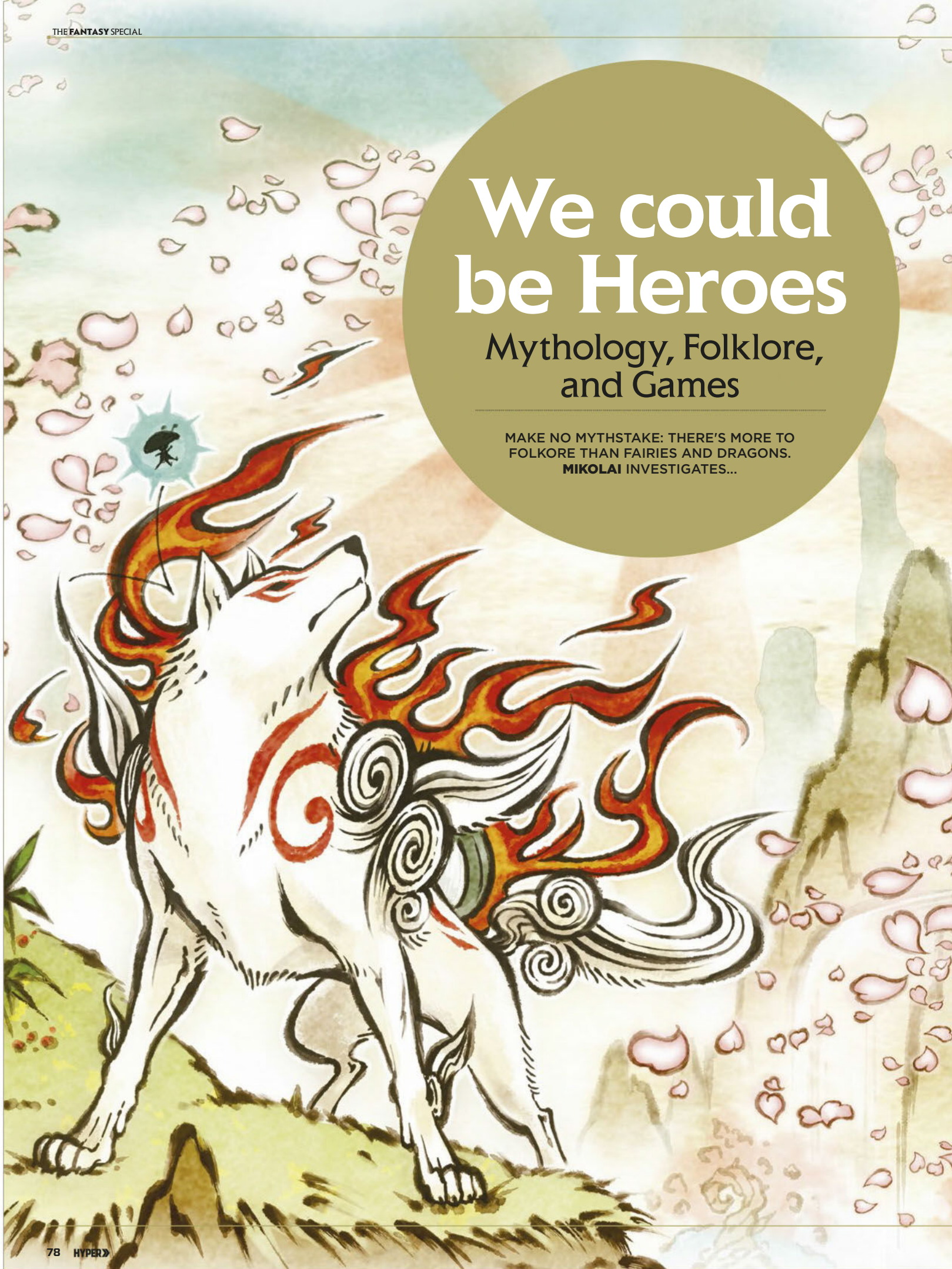
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We could be Heroes

Mythology, Folklore, and Games

MAKE NO MYTHSTAKE: THERE'S MORE TO FOLKLORE THAN FAIRIES AND DRAGONS.
MIKOLAI INVESTIGATES...





» When Year Walk was released in 2013 it turned a lot of heads. Cloaked in Scandinavian mythology and macabre themes, it was a weird and wonderful journey into an unknown land.

The stories that inspired it dated back hundreds of years, and its casts of ghostly apparitions and doomed townsfolk had lain dormant in dusty libraries and forgotten books. Year Walk snatched them out of their slumber, and dragged them to the top of the iOS sales charts.

In the process, it highlighted the power of folklore and mythology. Reminding us that there's a treasure trove of monsters, heroes, and villains beyond Mt Olympus and the Shinto spirits of Japanese titles. And some of them have a story to tell...

ONCE UPON A TIME IN THE NORTH

» According to Swedish legend, a person can gain a glimpse of the future if they undertake a Year Walk. The ritual usually takes place at Christmas or New Years Eve, and involves a period of solitude and fasting before the 'Year Walker' makes their way to the local cemetery at midnight. While en route they may encounter and be challenged by mythological creatures.

Talking about the game's genesis, Simon Flesser, one half of the Year Walk development team and co-founder at Simogo Studios, explained that he first came across the old folk tale via a friend's film script. One thing led to another, and his two-man studio suddenly found themselves abandoning their bright and cheery iOS games for something considerably darker and more abstract.

"We wanted to connect the past and the present," Flesser explained in an interview with Thunderboltgames.com. "We also thought that Swedish folklore was a strange and unfamiliar concept to a lot of people and this would be a good way to get a grasp on some of the traditions."

Those instincts proved correct, and the game would win a bunch of awards, sell over 100,000 copies, and turn his two-man development studio into media darlings. In the process, it wrapped a Swedish folktale in a modern coat and a touchscreen interface.

BEEN AROUND THE WORLD

AND I, I, I... » According to Denis Dyack, head of Silicon Knights, the development team behind Blood Omen: Legacy of Kain, "All literature and all entertainment are influenced



by myth. Whether people think so or not, basically, we are immersed in the mythologies in our culture. In some sense, mythology defines culture. It's unavoidable. Any typical storyline almost always falls back to some mythology."

It's a view shared by Mike Verdu, executive producer at EALA, who worked on Lord of the Rings: Battle for Middle-Earth II. Speaking with IGN, he said that, "Many elements of the most popular games have classic roots, and when we play these games we are interacting with worlds that are timeless. I believe that classic literature, myths, and legends endure because they are a reflection of something deeply embedded in our collective consciousness."

Because these stories are so deeply ingrained in our collective subconscious, they're often taken as a given when they bubble up in popular culture via characters like Kratos and his Greek mythology shtick, or Prince of Persia doing an Arabian Nights impression. However skewed these adaptations might be, they're still 'in the ballpark' when it comes to our cultural understanding.

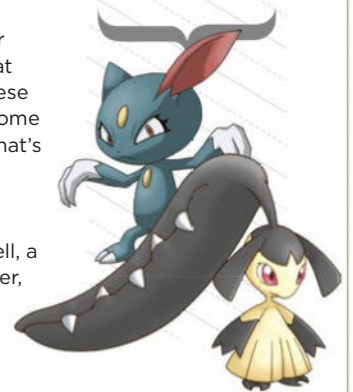
It's only when we're confronted with new and foreign mythology, such as the Shinto origins of Okami's Sun Goddess, or Year Walk's Scandinavian tales, that we have to stop and place these characters and storylines in some sort of mental context. And that's when things get interesting.

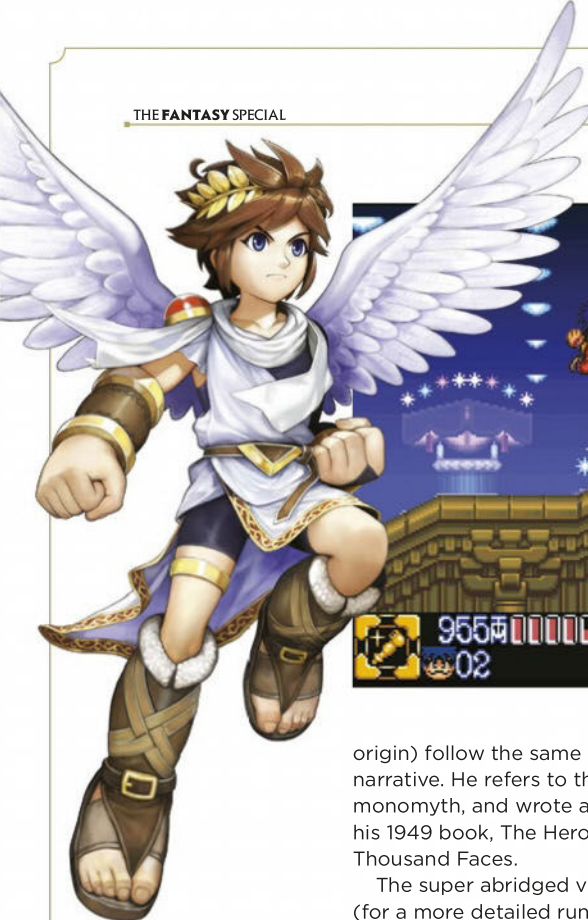
THE HERO'S QUEST »

According to Joseph Campbell, a renowned American researcher, writer and lecturer, virtually all myths (regardless of

POKÉMON ARE JAPANESE SPIRITS

How many Pokémon are there these days? Honestly, we lost count a while back, but we do know that a significant number are based on Japanese mythology. Real quick then; Sneasel is actually a Kamaitachi, a sneaky weasel type character, Mawile is actually a Futakuchi-onna, a woman with a second mouth hidden under her hair, Shiftry is a Tengu, a forest guardian type bro, and so on, and so on...





THE VIKINGS THOUGH

Norse mythology has long been a popular source of inspiration in videogames, from *The Lost Vikings* (Blizzard, 1992, SNES) to more contemporary titles like *Jotun*, *Eitri*, *The Banner Saga* and *Hellblade*, these guys get all the attention. According to Will Dubé, creative director behind *Jotun*, it's because the stories are bat shit crazy. As he explained to *Vice*, "You have Thor dressing up as a bridesmaid to smash a giant's skull in, a cow with poison rivers coming out of her udders, and many more stories."



origin) follow the same basic narrative. He refers to this as monomyth, and wrote about it in his 1949 book, *The Hero With A Thousand Faces*.

The super abridged version (for a more detailed rundown, see Alex's feature on p.38) is that all religious and cultural myths follow a three-part story arc, in which the protagonist is tasked with a great undertaking, overcomes challenges along the way, and triumphantly returns.

Point is, it's a narrative structure that's laid the groundwork for countless books and films over the years: *Star Wars*, *The Lord of the Rings*, *Die Hard*... you name it. And when videogames started to move beyond *Pong* and *Space Invaders* in the early 80s, mythology and its story arcs provided a ready-made source of inspiration, narrative, and cultural touchstones for developers to draw on.

Some of these early examples were obvious. *Kid Icarus*, released for the Nintendo Entertainment

System back in 1986 wears its mythological inspiration on its sleeve. And while it plays fast and loose with its depiction of Greek mythology, the source material is right there in the title.

Things get more complicated when folklore transcends its native origins and is exported overseas. Whilst *Kid Icarus* and its pastiche on Greek mythology is something we're all vaguely familiar with, Japan's games industry has been retelling and reinterpreting its own cultural and religious mythologies since the rise of Nintendo in the mid 80s. For the most part, this has been hidden from, or overlooked by Western audiences, but that's starting to change.

“ MYTHOLOGY AND ITS STORY ARCS PROVIDED A READY-MADE SOURCE OF INSPIRATION ”



SHINTO SUN GODS AND MYSTICAL NINJAS >>

Videogames re-emerged from Japan in the mid '80s, and spread around the world with the Nintendo Entertainment System. That story is old news, but what's rarely touched upon is the narrative and aesthetic otherness of Japanese games, and how this was shaped by their home grown mythologies, religions, and folklore.

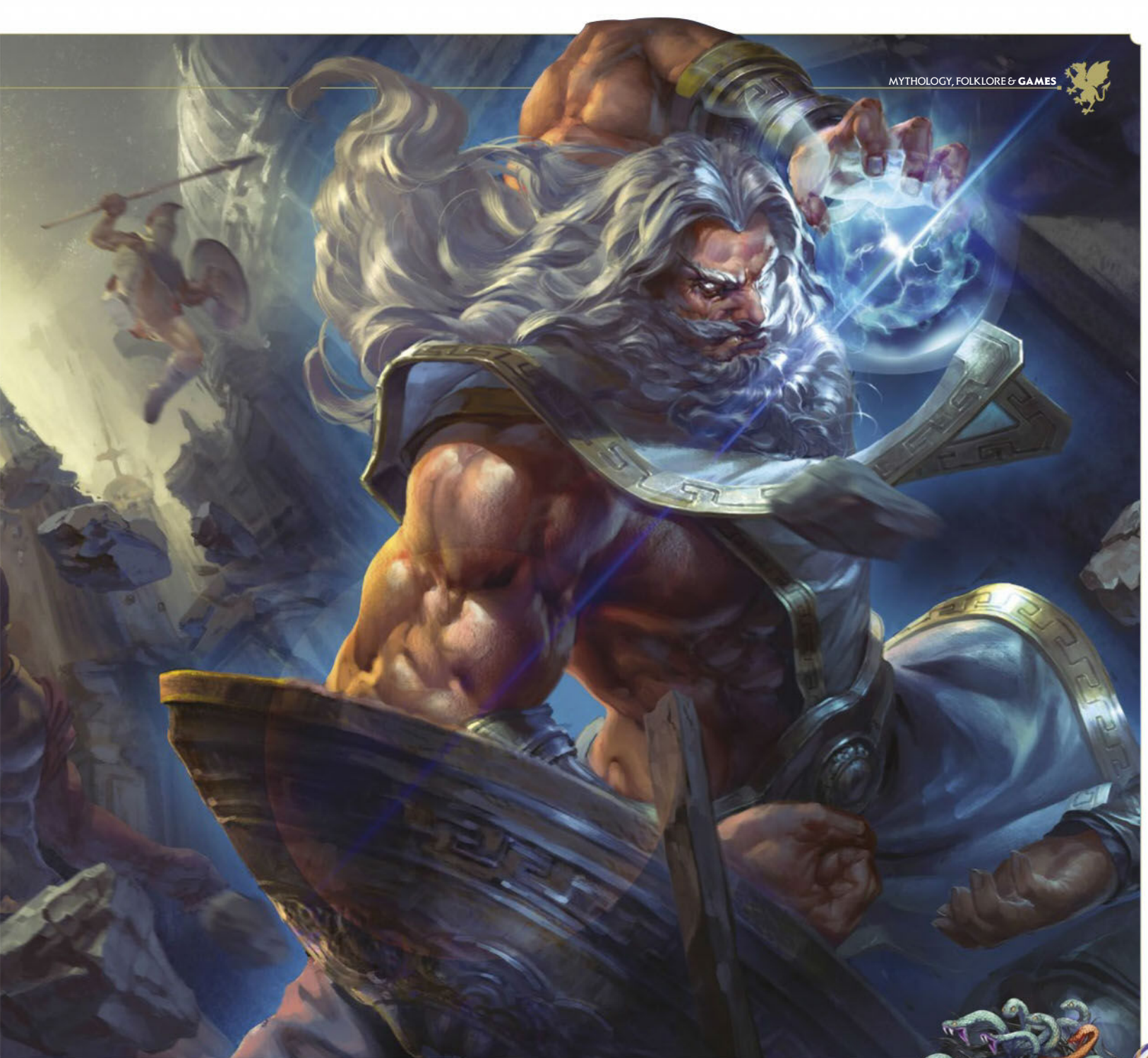
Released for the Super Nintendo in 1993, *Legend of Mystical Ninja* by Konami was a crowd favourite with its charming mix of side scrolling violence, traditional Japanese setting, and random weirdness. What most people didn't realise was that protagonist 'Kid Ying' was known as Goemon in Japan, and was based on Ishikawa Goemon, a legendary 16th century Japanese outlaw.

This was a common and recurring theme during the 16-bit era, with many Japanese titles whitewashed for small town America. Religious themes were scrubbed, mythologies were watered down, and names were wholesale changed.

When *Pocky and Rocky* was released for the Super Nintendo in Japan it was a cutesy shooter about a Shinto shrine maiden and her Tanuki sidekick battling mythical creatures with throwing talismans. The western adaptation was just a girl and a raccoon throwing cards at monsters.

And even where the mythology wasn't actively deleted, it was often obscured. Numerous *Pokémon* derive their origins from Japanese myths, and the various god-like creatures the player can summon in *Final Fantasy VII* are based on Hindu deities and Arabian mythology.

It wasn't until *Okami* came along in 2007 that Japanese mythology



really wore its heart on its sleeve for international audiences. Clover's much celebrated Zelda-like told the story of a Shinto sun goddess named Amaterasu, who took the form of a white wolf in order to move among humans and save them from the Orochi demon. The storyline drew on several Japanese myths, legends, and folk tales, going beyond aesthetics to showcase its source material.

FROM ATHENS TO MIDDLE EARTH

>> If Japan has Shinto spiritualism and Orochi demons, the West has the collected works of J.R.R. Tolkien to draw on. Melbourne House published a text-based adventure based on the Hobbit all the way back in 1982, and since

then we've seen countless licensed properties across formats.

But as Douglass C. Perry noted in an article for IGN, "The real story isn't in the direct licensed games, [it's] developers such as BioWare, Black Isle, Blizzard, and Obsidian [who] created entirely original games grown from the culture put forth from Tolkien's works. Baldur's Gate, Everquest, The Elder Scrolls, Neverwinter Nights, World of Warcraft - they're all ground in Tolkien's fantasy."

And if it's not Tolkien and his forests full of elves, there's always Greek mythology and its rich, well-worn tapestry of heroes or villains. As David Jaffe explained to Eurogamer, his God of War games came about thanks to a childhood

spent with cheesy action films based on Olympus.

"I've loved Greek mythology since I was a little kid. I loved Clash of the Titans and all the Ray Harryhausen films. With Greek Mythology you get monsters and giant set pieces and the fantasy... I played Onimusha and said, 'let's do that with Greek Mythology!'"

According to Jaffe, these old stories hold all the ingredients you need for a game. And whether its Kid Icarus on the NES, Zeus making a cameo in Altered Beast for the Mega Drive ("wise from your gwave"), God of War on PS3, or the countless other titles that have drawn inspiration from these ancient tales, the character and stories



ALL YOUR OROCHI ARE BELONG TO US

'Orochi' have been popping up in Japanese videogames almost as long as the Japanese have been making games. The lazy and broad translation is 'demon', but the original story dates back to the 7th century and concerns an 8-headed, 8-tailed dragon that was slain by the Shinto storm-god Susanoo.



offer cultural touchstones that everyone gets.

AND THEN THERE'S RELIGION...

>> Not all mythologies, folk tales, and origin stories are considered equal. And one area that's been consistently ignored by Western developers is religion.

As Drew Dixon writes on the Patheos website, "Back in the days of the Nintendo Entertainment System, religious folk with an affinity toward the pedantic would make bad Bible-themed re-skins of existing games and sell them in Christian book stores without the Nintendo Seal of Approval. The result produced neither a fun videogame nor insight into religious truth."

Since then, any kind of overt western references to religion has been limited to RPG churches - and the strangely necromancer like tendencies of the priests that run them. But that's a whole other article...

One game that subtly (and successfully) challenged that stigma was *El Shaddai: Ascension of the Metatron* for the PS3. Based on the Book of Enoch and released in 2011, the game drew as much attention for its psychedelic art design as its religious underpinnings.

Ostensibly a third person action game, it has you assuming the role of Enoch, a scribe sent by God to kick ass and take names in order to stop a flood - or something like that, it's all a bit confusing. You're assisted along the way by Lucifel, who's obviously the devil, but is always on his cell phone with God having a chat - because reasons...

According to director Takeyasu Sawaki, who was also design lead on *Devil May Cry* and *Okami*, religious undertones have never been an issue in Japan. As he explained to *Giantbomb.com*, "People in Japan typically describe themselves as following multiple belief systems and philosophies, whereas other regions of the





world more strictly adhere to one particular religion. I believe this causes sensitivities on the topic of religion that does not happen here in Japan. That may explain why it is more 'taboo' in Western cultures than in Japan."

In other words, Eastern developers see religion as just another tool in their narrative arsenal, one that doesn't have the same cultural sensitivities as its Western equivalent. This button-down approach to religion means Eastern mythology has had a smoother ride, mixing and matching folklore, spirituality, and history with reckless abandon.

Journey to the West, the classic Chinese text about a Buddhist monk's pilgrimage to India (otherwise known as 'Monkey' to Western audiences), has provided the foundation for numerous titles on both sides of the Atlantic. Team Ninja's 2011 release, *Enslaved: Odyssey to the West*, is perhaps the best known example, but the characters and stories have been referenced in countless games.

I'VE GOT A STORY TO TELL >> According to former Naughty Dog Creative Director Amy Hennig, this reliance on classic texts and well-known myths is changing and evolving. Speaking with IGN, she noted that, "The first text adventures and dungeon crawl games were heavily influenced by Tolkien, and early science fiction games owe much of their inspiration to writers like Heinlein, Niven and E.E. Smith.

"A lot of current games, though, seem to be influenced less by the literary originals than by their descendants. In other words, a contemporary game creator is more likely to be inspired by *Hellboy* than *Lovecraft*, or by *Star Wars* rather than *Joseph Campbell*."

Not everyone is a fan of this feedback loop, and Simon Flesser argues that it's actually counter-productive. "I think one of the biggest problems with games is that they are so inspired by each other, or Hollywood blockbusters. I'd love to see more games based on more unfamiliar concepts, and really push the art form in new exciting directions."

FOR MAH PEOPLE >> But the use of folklore and mythology is more than just a commercial choice, and it's worth remembering that these stories can have significant cultural resonance. Showcasing them via videogames can provide a valuable platform and, predictably, fuel for misappropriation fuelled outrage.

Released in 2014, *Never Alone* had the player solving puzzles based around Alaskan indigenous folklore. It was developed by Upper One Games (in conjunction with the Cook Inlet Tribal Council) and praised for its educational aspects.

Walking that fine line between education and objectification isn't always easy. India's first locally developed videogame, 2009's *Hanuman: Boy Warrior* on PS2, was criticised for being both a terrible game and portraying its protagonist, an important figure in Hinduism, in an unflattering light.

Meanwhile in Ghana, local developers have released *Africa's Legends*, a mobile game featuring superheroes and villains based on local mythology. The game seeks to instil cultural awareness in schoolkids, and

draws on the legacies of Ananse (also known as Anansi and Kweku Ananse), the West African god of wisdom, Shaka Zulu, South Africa's warrior king, and the Egyptian Pharaohs.

And there's the rub - as videogame development becomes

more international and decentralised, the opportunity to draw on a global culture of myths and legends is ready and waiting. As *Joseph Campbell* pointed out, most of these stories share commonalities, but how they're expressed is unique.

Or as *Year Walk's* Simon Flesser summarised in an interview with *The Verge*, "There is just something about playing a game that you know very little about. You rarely get that today in the Internet age." That may

"A CONTEMPORARY GAME CREATOR IS MORE LIKELY TO BE INSPIRED BY STAR WARS RATHER THAN JOSEPH CAMPBELL."





Top 25 Fantasy Characters

IF WE COULD PUT THEM IN AN ARENA AND MAKE
THEM FIGHT, WE WOULD - FOR NOW, THIS IS THE
NEXT BEST THING



THE NAMELESS ONE

FIRST APPEARANCE: PLANESCAPE: TORMENT (1999)

SUBSEQUENT APPEARANCES: N/A

◆ The Nameless One is an immortal with a centuries long identity crisis. His path through history is littered with corpses: mostly others, but many his own. He has been killed – stabbed, chopped, crushed, flayed, immolated, and disintegrated – countless times and has always returned, physically whole but bereft of memory and identity.

You can't rob death, not even on the planes, but you can, under circumstances, make a deal with it. In this case, a fairly simple transaction takes place: life for identity – immortality in exchange for the self.

Every death and rebirth is an opportunity for a new identity to emerge, a new story to be told. Respected sorcerer, feared general, reviled thief and murderer... aristocrat, pauper, warrior, merchant...

The Nameless One has been them all and many more besides. What remains of his past lives when he is reborn scared and memoryless on a cold slab is a matter of debate. Is identity simply the sum of a person's memories, or is there a substrate of essential selfness that persists independently of the mind? In what sense is The Nameless One who torched villages and enslaved thousands the same Nameless One who healed the sick and educated the young?

To borrow a shopworn phrase, the Nameless One is a riddle wrapped in an enigma wrapped in a loincloth. He's a protagonist you have to figure out, a big dreadlocked lock-box waiting for a player-shaped key. Be careful opening him up, though: you might not like what you find inside.



JARETH/THE GOBLIN KING

FIRST APPEARANCE: LABYRINTH (1986)

SUBSEQUENT APPEARANCES: RETURN TO LABYRINTH (2006)

◆ Once upon a time there was a melodramatic teenager named Sarah. One day while babysitting, Sarah thought it would be funny if she asked the Goblin King to come and steal her infant brother, Toby. What she didn't expect is that he totally did. But that's Jareth for you: he's a capricious, fanciful kinda guy – the kinda guy that spirits a baby off to the centre of a labyrinth just so he can watch the child's hapless sibling attempt a rescue.

Played with mincing relish by David Bowie, Jareth is a petulant, arrogant, and mischievous antagonist. Watching him flounce around, dueting catchy pop ditties with gamboling puppets and animatronic monsters, it can be difficult to take him seriously. But make no mistake: Jareth is one dangerous dude. When everything's going his way

he's mostly pleasant; but when the chips are down Jareth's dark side comes out and his behaviour turns vicious, as many a victimised goblin can attest.

"He is Sarah's inner fantasy," says Labyrinth's conceptual designer Brian Froud. "A character made up of her dreams and nightmares... He is seen, through her eyes, as part dangerous goblin, part glamorous rock star." And of course, it's not only Sarah who sees Jareth as an enticing admixture of danger and glamour. After all, there's a good reason that Labyrinth was exceptionally popular with teen girls, and it's not because of Jennifer Connelly's wooden acting or Jim Henson's beautifully made puppets. It's because Jareth – stalkerish behaviour notwithstanding – is totally, totally bangable.

GERALT OF RIVIA

FIRST APPEARANCE: THE LAST WISH (1993)

SUBSEQUENT APPEARANCES: MORE THAN A DOZEN BOOKS, VIDEOGAMES, AND MOVIES

◆ Geralt of Rivia is like the Clint Eastwood of fantasy medieval Poland. He's a man with no-name who happens to actually have a name: a loner and a drifter, blowing from town to town, looking for work – an honest day's pay for an honest day's monster-slaying. He insists he's not a hero but finds himself constantly defending the needy and oppressed, though less frequently since receiving a pitchfork in the guts during a race-riot in Rivia. Of him, his longtime companion Dandelion the Bard says:

"He has more scruples than beggaring bum has fleas. Doubts haunt him even when a band of ruffians, knives drawn, approaches him on the highway. Is he a good man? I do not think so. Does he try to maintain his humanity? I believe he does."

But humanity is notoriously difficult to maintain in the face of inhumanity, and as a "non-human" mutant living in suspicious, intolerant times, Geralt has seen his fair share of inhumanity. His job is to protect people who despise and fear him: who spit at him, swear at him, who think he's a freak and abomination and say so right to his face. Is it any wonder he sometimes loses his temper, knocks some loudmouth on his arse, maybe even kills him? As Dandelion says: Geralt is not a good man – but who could be, in his position?



PRINCESS BUBBLEGUM

FIRST APPEARANCE: ADVENTURE TIME ANIMATED SHORT (2008)

SUBSEQUENT APPEARANCES: ADVENTURE TIME (2008-)

◆ Princess Bubblegum was the ruler of the Candy Kingdom until she was usurped by King Ooo. Now she's just an awesomely smart scientist and inventor with a strong moral compass and dark sense of humour. You want to talk strong female role-models? Here's your alpha and omega. If you have kids, tell them to be more like Princess Bubblegum. The world would be a much better place if more people were.

She has her flaws. She's impetuous, impatient, and vicious when crossed. Her zeal for science can sometimes cloud her better judgement, like when she tried to revive an extinct race but instead summoned a small army of zombified candy people. But what distinguishes Bubblegum from your classic crazy scientist is her willingness to

own her mistakes and clean up the resulting mess.

This same sense of responsibility extends to her role as the (temporarily deposed) ruler of the Candy Kingdom. Princess Bubblegum is not a token royal, but a shrewd political operator heavily involved in the running of her kingdom. Bubblegum cares about her kingdom and she cares about her people. Think Parks and Rec's Leslie Knope if Leslie Knope was also a kickarse scientist who invented "the most perfect sandwich that has ever existed within the confines of space-time" and raised the dead one time. Again: we could do a lot worse than having more people like that around. Just sayin'.

(The sandwich was cheese, lettuce, and tomato on white, in case you're curious.)



PUG/MILAMBER

FIRST APPEARANCE: MAGICIAN (1982)

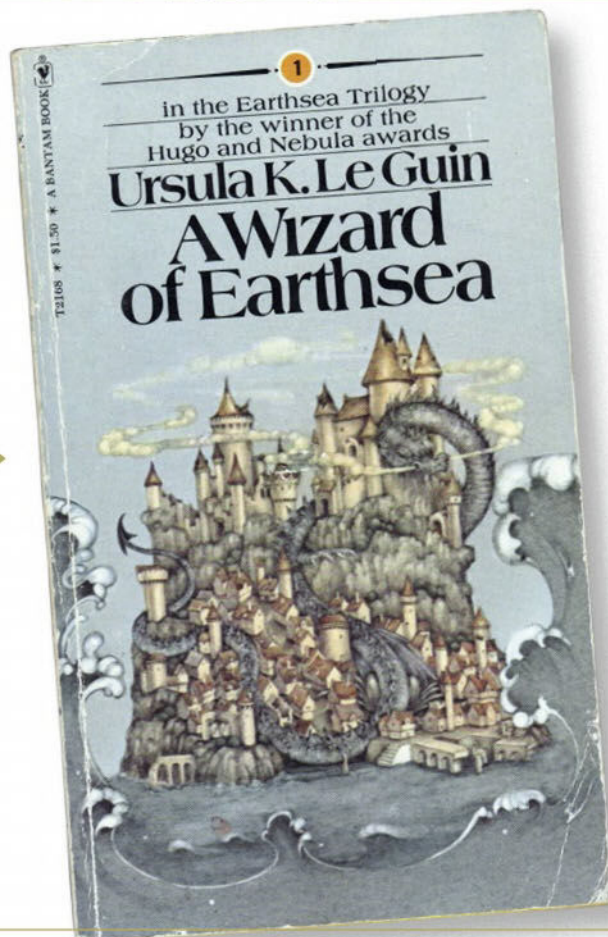
SUBSEQUENT APPEARANCES: DOZENS OF BOOKS + GAMES IN THE RIFTWAR CYCLE

◆ For a man with such a stupid name, Pug sure wields a shitload of power. If you were to ever make fun of his name – say by bringing up the fact that it’s shared by one of the uglier breeds of dog – he would deconstruct you on a molecular level, bending the laws of space-time to inflict supernatural, sanity-shattering pain on your frail mortal body. He would break reality and jam the jagged shards into your eye-sockets until you melted, Raiders of the Lost Ark-style.

Chosen as an apprentice to court magician Kulgan, Pug was not a naturally gifted magic user and struggled with spellcraft for much of his time at the Academy. Fortunately, as he has grown older and exponentially more powerful, he has become wiser and less impetuous. This is a man who obliterated an entire

planet by ripping a hole in reality and pulling most of a moon through it. This is a man you’d prefer remain calm and collected.

Pug is so absurdly powerful that even the godlike Valheru regard him as a threat. When a person’s command of magic is so absolute they can pop across dimensions the way most people pop across the street, even the immortal and omnipotent have a right to be concerned. So yeah: good thing Pug’s got his head on straight. You know... most of the time.



GED/SPARROWHAWK

FIRST APPEARANCE: A WIZARD OF EARTHSEA (1968)

SUBSEQUENT APPEARANCES: BUNCH OF EARTHSEA NOVELS AND SHORT STORIES

◆ Ged is a living parable on the pitfalls of excessive pride. For much of the first half of the Wizard of Earthsea, he’s “loud and proud and full of temper” – a typical self-important young man, in other words. But unlike most self-important young men, Ged also happens to be an enormously powerful, thoroughly undisciplined wizard. Everyone has youthful misadventures, sure, but only Ged’s involve pulling elemental evils through a glowing hole in the space-time continuum.

During his stay on Roke Island’s school for wizards, Ged develops a not-so-friendly rivalry with another student named Jasper. This culminates in a duel, which quickly escalates from a few fizzing cantrips to the aforementioned glowing hole in space-time. From this hole emerges a shadow – Ged’s shadow, the

material manifestation of his flaws and insecurities. It’s only by naming his shadow and facing his shortcomings that Ged matures and becomes a Proper Man. The Jungian symbolism, familiar to fans of the Persona games, seems overt, but is apparently unintentional. Author Ursula K. Le Guin hadn’t even heard of Jung when she created Ged.

It’s only after besting his shadow that Ged goes on to become “one of the wisest and most powerful magicians in the land” and then pretty much lives happily ever after. And so, boys and girls, what did we learn from Ged’s tale? We learnt that pride goeth before the fall, that being happy means being honest about your shortcomings, and that Ursula K Le Guin is a BOSS at writing young adult fiction.

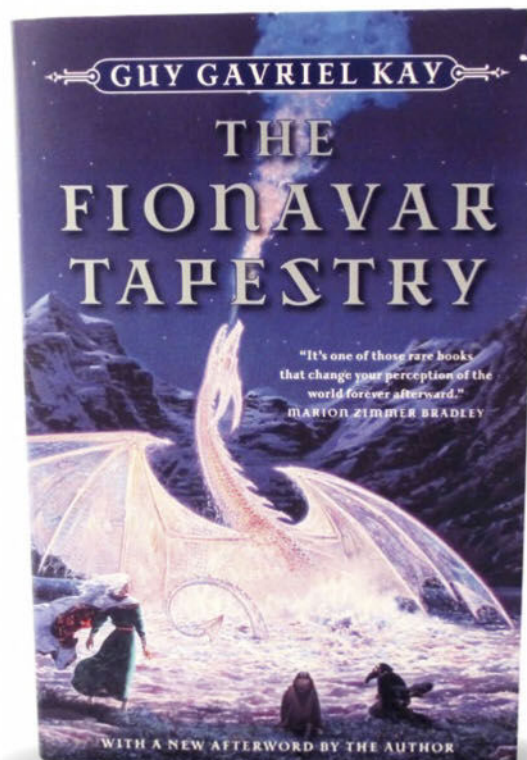
LADY EBOSHI

FIRST APPEARANCE: PRINCESS MONONOKE (1997)
SUBSEQUENT APPEARANCES: N/A

◆ Lady Eboshi is the leader of Irontown, a kind of Dickensian capitalist utopia so polluted that it literally sucks the life-force out of its surrounding environment. However, what Irontown lacks in concern for the environment it makes up for with its equitable, progressive civic institutions. Eboshi considers it her duty to house and feed everyone in Irontown, irrespective of their gender, race, age, or personal history. Everyone who asks for help receives it – Irontown does not discriminate.

Eboshi's love for her town and its people is genuine, but you get the sense that she's been fighting so long – against the environment, against poverty, against inequality – that it's all she knows how to do now. Each new day is a new opportunity to win. You can hear it in her voice: "Watch closely everyone, I'm going to show you how to kill a god."

When Eboshi eventually experiences a moment of clarity and confronts the consequences of her behaviour, her response is dignified and pragmatic. She promises to change and you believe her because, when it comes down to it, she's not a bad person. Like many of Miyazaki's other antagonists, she's simply someone whose responsibilities have eroded her sense of the bigger picture – an adult who's forgotten how to see the world with innocent eyes. Which is exactly why, for adults at least, she's the most relatable and memorable character in the film.



GALADAN THE WOLF LORD

FIRST APPEARANCE: THE FIONAVAR TAPESTRY, THE SUMMER TREE (1984)
SUBSEQUENT APPEARANCES: THE WANDERING FIRE, THE DARKEST ROAD

◆ Guy Gavriel Kay is fantasy literature's wise old man. He started off his career helping Tolkien's son redact *The Silmarillion*, launching a stellar career starting with 1984's *Fionavar Tapestry*.

In the true world beyond, richly influenced by a range of Celtic and Arthurian mythology, heroes are needed to deal with Rakoth Maugrim, the horrifying dark bastard from beyond reality. The Gods have chosen champions, alliances are made, bargains struck, war begins.

And amongst the worst baddies is Galadan. He is a demigod, lord of wolves, one of the most powerful beings in the world. Aristocratic and iron-willed and deadly, in love absolutely with the fairest woman in all the world. Until a human gets her killed.

And so he swears that if he can't have her, there will be no world.

He's evil, no doubt. He does some cold shit. But he's so absolutely wounded, hurt in ways humans can't understand. He's loved a woman so much it's become mythology, so desperate to pay back the Gods who wanted to control his revenge on mortals who robbed him of everything that you can't help but feel for him.

He's a chilling foe that no one can truly battle, the finest of all right hands to the big bad. Combine this with him turning into a beautiful black wolf, great hair, truly aristocratic bearing and gait, (no one makes a threat like this bloke) and you've got posh Darth Vader looking to annihilate everything, because it's the only way he can consider being healed.



SIMON

FIRST APPEARANCE: MEMORY, SORROW AND THORN, THE DRAGONBONE CHAIR (1988)

SUBSEQUENT APPEARANCES: STONE OF FAREWELL, TO GREEN ANGEL TOWER, UPCOMING SEQUEL TRILOGY

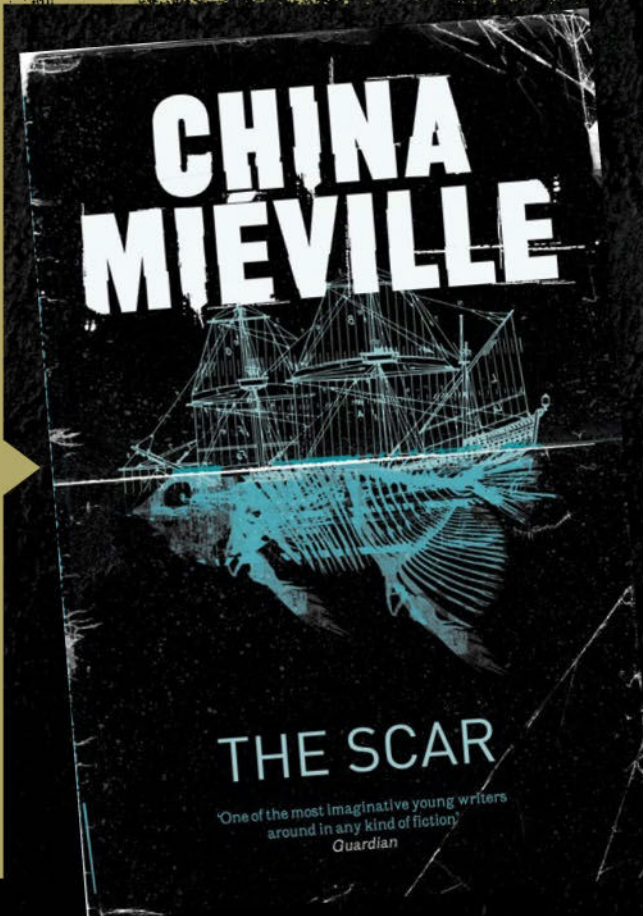
◆ Everyone loves a bloodthirsty badass, from Conan to Ninesingers, but sometimes a deeply sympathetic lead is arresting. These books are about clichés, giving them a fresh look. So don't be put off when I say Simon is an orphan scullion who dreams of being a Knight who winds up apprenticed to a wizard.

Suffice to say, Simon never gets what he wants as the undead Storm King kicks off a plot to get revenge on non-elf bastards and everything goes tits-up and it's monster and war everywhere.

But it's not Simon's, many and cool, adventures that make him worthwhile. He's a very believable teenager. His feelings are hurt, he gets a bit scared of girls, he gets frustrated with rules and sometimes feels the whole

world is down on him. But he's also just a really good guy. Anyone who went through even a remotely gawky adolescence will feel for him. His relationship with a woman who is, literally, too good for him is remarkably well told. You feel for the kid.

Mind you, though he learns to swing a sword and eventually has showdowns with the undead, dragons, witches, all the good stuff, what gets him through the day is his own sense of decency. He learns terrible lore and sees the worst of humanity. But by the end, he's a mature dude, still good, but not naive. Merciful, but not a pushover. When was the last time you read a fantasy book with a goodie you just wanted to win because you liked them?



BELIS COLDWINE

FIRST APPEARANCE: THE SCAR (2002), MENTIONED IN PERDIDO STREET STATION (2000)

SUBSEQUENT APPEARANCES: NONE

◆ There are dozens of China Miéville characters you could pick as some of the best in fantasy. Uther Doul, the absurdly skilled mercenary in his white armour with his quantum Possible Sword. Fat, ornery, clever, decent Issac Grimnebulin. The working class tentacle-man Tanner. But it's Belis who's one of his most challenging and interesting.

She's a linguist, booked a ticket on a slave ship, abducted by the floating city of Armada. There, her special skills are need for a top secret project - to raise a vast sea beast to drag Armada to its true destination: the scar in the world.

What makes Belis special is that, well, she's not nice. She doesn't want to be there. She had a career, she was publishing books, she was making a name for herself and

then she's off dealing with freakish creatures and people from all across the alien, bizarre world of Bas-Lag. But as she settles in, her loyalties are torn between warring factions of the city-ship. Should she betray Armada? Should she sacrifice herself for the mutant slaves from her city Armada has freed? Should she be loyal to new friends? Can she have her old life? Want it?

What also makes Belis noteworthy is, she's not emotional at all. It's funny how challenging a woman character is when she's all brains, no heart, slowly working to play factions and teams against one another. She's not... warm. But she's fascinating and smart and ruthless and sympathetic to anyone who's been unhappy and her showdown with the monstrous Grindyflow is the stuff of nightmares.

MARA OF THE ACOMA

FIRST APPEARANCE: DAUGHTER OF THE EMPIRE (1987)

SUBSEQUENT APPEARANCES: SERVANT OF THE EMPIRE, MISTRESS OF THE EMPIRE, SERPENT WAR MENTIONS

◆ So, you know about Pug and the Riftwar. Dungeons and Dragons character gets teleported to medieval Korea in a weird Gandalf meets Shogun dealio. This is a book about those fantasy Koreans.

Mara's a nice girl who wants to be a nun who gets dragged out of the convent when her dad and big brother wind up dead. Very quickly, she learns pops was ghosted by his political enemies. And they'll come for her next. She inherits a motley crew of soldiers, advisors, servants and slaves.

At first, she's just fighting to survive, looking to keep her ancestor's reputation. But she very quickly learns she's good at all this political manoeuvring, scamming, trickery. Part of what makes her so formidable and sympathetic is that the authors set up the rules and

culture of the world very well indeed. It's not just Honourable Asia-san seppuku katanas. It's a living and vibrant world of politics, economics and war. So when Mara does something unexpected, baby, you're not expecting it. And she does.

In these books, she's always one step ahead with how to vote, who to make alliances with. With no guarantee it's going to go right.

Mara's also notable for making terrible sacrifices. Her brutal husband. The lives of her soldiers. Her own personal happiness. Yet she never comes across as a ruthless warlord or Machiavellian schemer. She's just strong and clever and determined and stubborn.



XENA

FIRST APPEARANCE: HERCULES THE LEGENDARY JOURNEYS (SEASON 1 EP. 9 – “THE WARRIOR PRINCESS”)
SUBSEQUENT APPEARANCES: XENA: WARRIOR PRINCESS/SPIN-OFF MEDIA

◆ Let's get this out of the way: Xena is perhaps the hardest bastard there ever was. Keep your Conan's and Karsa Orlong's. None of them sacked a legendary city while dealing with a treacherous shaman woman, killing their baby-daddy, all while in labour.

Xena has a reputation as a feminist Hercules, a silly fantasy show. But it's so much more. Xena will have a Groundhog Day, end up being interviewed for her role in overthrowing the Norse Gods in a documentary, she'll defeat a warlord in battle rap, murder Satan, take his place, attempt to dethrone God.

She also kills a Lovecraftian horror, loses a fistfight with Joan of Arc, makes deals with Julius Caesar, hangs out with Christ and... look, just watch the show. It's mental.

But what anchors Xena as

character is... she's tough. She used to be a proper 'now kill the children anyway' baddie. Seriously, evil. But got over it. She says she's looking for redemption but hints many times she knows it's not possible. She's not keen on killing when she's a good guy but she's also not afraid to get her hands dirty.

Make the wrong move, do the wrong thing, Xena will kill you. She's heroic. But pragmatic.

Her relationship with Gabriel, her bard and companion is also interesting. Squint, and they're a couple. But you don't have to read it like that. They can be best friends. Not every woman's story must be a romance, after all.

No matter the situation, no matter the odds, Xena greets it with a snarl, a joke, confidence and enough secret martial arts to kill an army.



STEERPIKE

FIRST APPEARANCE: TITUS GROAN (1946)

SUBSEQUENT APPEARANCES: GORMENGHAST, TITUS ALONE, GORMENGHAST TV SHOW

◆ In every list of great fantasy books, you see it. Gormenghast. You think about it, then go read a Forgotten Realms novel instead. Time to level up.

Written by a madman, Gormenghast is the story of a vast, ancient castle and the moribund, morbid, insane aristocracy and servants who live there, unquestioningly bound by laws and traditions. Imagine supergothic Downton Abbey. Indeed, Peake, who wrote these novels, had nothing but contempt for the rich gentry of Edwardian and pre-War England, as well as the Crown, the foolish rich masters and the snivelling servants. He hated the likes of that show decades before your mum was born.

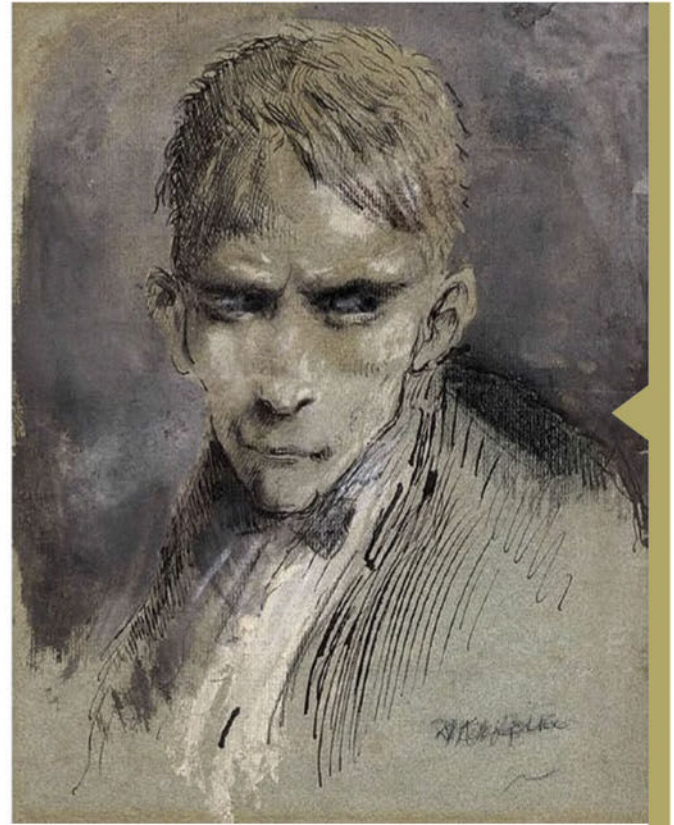
Enter, into this cobwebbed, creepy world, Steerpike. Roguish, rebellious as the devil, he craves authority,

power. He flirts and seduces and blackmails and flatters and betrays, leaping from spire to gable of the vast old house like a bat in the night. He engineers a remarkable battle between the monstrous cook Flay and Swelter the ancient butler – truly one of the greatest battles of fantasy literature. Just two old men in hate with one another, armed with cutlery.

And of course, Steerpike, despite all his smooth operator evil, is just as trapped as anyone else.

Perfect example of villainous protagonist and an influence on everyone from Mr. Ripley to Elric. There's no dragons here but an amazing, jet black world and eerie characters.

Avoid the BBC show. Steerpike is coolish but everything else is off by a mile.



CHILDERMASS

FIRST APPEARANCE: JONATHAN STRANGE AND MR NORRELL (2004)

SUBSEQUENT APPEARANCES: TV SHOW

◆ During Regency England, (Napoleonic times) magic comes back into the world. Immediately it falls into two schools. Mr Norrell's camp believes magic must be respectable, formal, a thing of philosophy and conjecture.

And Jonathan Strange's camp who are all, 'nah bro. Explodo.' And who do a great deal of magic indeed, including blowing up French armies.

The only problem is, both of them are wrong, otherworldly fairies are playing everyone for a fool.

As the posh magicians feud, Childermass, Norrell's servant, has his own ideas about magic and power.

A roguish handsome Northerner, seemingly unafraid of anything, respectful but not deferential of his social betters, no one ever knows quite what to make of the man

with the sinister name. So he unnerves everyone. Social class is everywhere in this book and Childermass is partly so effective a character simply because he never seems to think the rich are better than him.

He's great because he's an outsider in the upper class world of magic and on a close read, you'll discover he's carefully manipulating a great deal of the plot. The epitome of 'keep your mouth shut and your eyes open,' when everyone else is posturing, the saturnine Childermass is getting stuff done.

See also the remarkable performance of Enzo Cilenti in the brilliant BBC adaptation. This is a man who has few powers, no money, no influence, but who can stand with fey, princes and sorcerers, no matter how much they look down on him.

RAZIEL

FIRST APPEARANCE: LEGACY OF KAIN: SOUL REAVER (1996)

SUBSEQUENT APPEARANCES: NOSGOTH

◆ Ah, Raziel. One of the best realised characters in videogame fiction. Keep your demented Solid Snakes and Dan Hibikis. Tormented, furious, betrayed and then cursed Raziel is one of the few characters in gaming that was consciously a literary figure.

Raziel was the first of the vampire lieutenants the bloodsucking warlords Cain created to conquer the damned world of Nosgoth. But when he began to mutate into something more than his master, he was thrown into a destroying abyss and made an example of.

But down in the water, the tentacular Elder God. Raziel, now a wasted, monstrous eater of souls, is resurrected to destroy his old master with the ghost blade Soul Reaver.

Raziel is eloquent about his plight and, importantly, his

contradictions. He hates his old master but admires him. His old brothers, who let him die, have also transcended the vampire condition and he detests them. And in subsequent games, Raziel discovers Cain, with a black sense of irony, turned Raziel from a fearless vampire hunting paladin into the blood-feasting beast he became.

Raziel is interesting for a few reasons: in a medium where rapper 50 Cent can get his own game where he grunts 'bitch' at women, Raziel is well-spoken and contemplative. He's self-righteous and looks down on his enemies, even when they're clearly one step ahead of him. And he's a proper tragic hero, manipulated by fate, by his vampiric father. And most importantly, his own passions.



DEATH

FIRST APPEARANCE: 1983

SUBSEQUENT APPEARANCES: LOTS

◆ Of all the Deaths that have ever died, Discworld's Death is by far the best. Like the Death with jurisdiction over our world, Discworld's Death is a black-robed skeleton wielding a scythe - a Grim Reaper. But unlike our Grim Reaper, this incarnation of the eternal void is fascinated by humans and largely sympathetic to their suffering. This somewhat complicates his ability to do his job, as you'd expect.

As an eternal outsider, Death considers the majority of human customs and habits illogical and absurd. Coupled with his complete lack of social grace, this makes for some pretty hilarious encounters with the humans he wants to understand. "COWER, BRIEF MORTALS!" he once bellowed at a group of children, forgetting for

the moment that he was in costume as the Discworld equivalent of Santa Claus.

In his own words, if Death had a middle name, "duty" would be it. As Discworld's local representative of the endless nothing, he has a job to do and he does it, even when it's unpleasant. But it's those rare times when Death bends the rules - like when he lets humans play chess for their lives, or saves the little girl in Reaper Man - that he really shines as a character. Eventually, his small acts of mercy accumulate and he comes to realise that death and sympathy for humans are not necessarily incompatible. After all: "WHAT CAN THE HARVEST HOPE FOR, IF NOT THE CARE OF THE REAPER MAN?"



KEFKA PALAZZO

FIRST APPEARANCE: FINAL FANTASY VI (1994)

SUBSEQUENT APPEARANCES: FINAL FANTASY TACTICS S, DISSIDIA: FINAL FANTASY, VARIOUS OTHER FORGETTABLE SPIN-OFFS

◆ Kefka is a homicidal maniac who derives sadistic glee from murder and destruction. “Hee hee!” he cackles after poisoning the water supply of a besieged town. “Nothing can beat the sweet music of hundreds of voices screaming in unison!”

When we’re first introduced to him, his most prominent trait – aside from the obvious psychosis – is his childishness. He is rash, impulsive, petulant. He realises his destructive impulses unreflectively, delighting in mass murder in much the same way a schoolboy delights in burning ants with a magnifying glass. As he accrues ever greater power and influence, Kefka’s love of destruction begins to take on a deeper, more sinister meaning. This is when he becomes truly terrifying.

At the height of his powers, Kefka literally deconstructs the world, tearing it apart at the foundations, looking for purpose and meaning underneath. Finding nothing and unable to justify existence on its own terms, he decides existence is unjustified and vows to end it. The ultimate sceptic, he rejects the axioms others take as fundamental: that life is intrinsically meaningful, that something – anything – is intrinsically superior to nothing. In this sense, Kefka can be understood as a thoroughly postmodern villain: the cackling antithesis of the Enlightenment’s rational moral worldview. He doesn’t care about knowledge, or truth, or progress. He doesn’t even care if he’s right or not.



VLAD TALTO

FIRST APPEARANCE: JHEREG (1983)

SUBSEQUENT APPEARANCES: 13 SUBSEQUENT NOVELS

◆ Dead people seldom appreciate a witty comeback, so you don’t find a lot of smartarse assassins. Vlad Taltos is the exception that proves the rule. An official hitman for the very Cosa Nostra-ish House Jhereg, he is an extraordinarily skilled killer with a tendency to let his big mouth get him into dilemmas his sword ends up resolving. For this reason and others, he’s not an especially relatable or even likeable character, but he is an entertaining one.

Despite his best intentions to the contrary, Vlad has found himself playing an increasingly important role in the public life of the Dragaeran empire. As an Easterner, he is regarded as a second-class citizen, but as a prominent member of House Jhereg he is respected, even feared. Vlad plays with this duality whenever an opportunity arises and takes pleasure in subverting stereotypes. The significance of the fact that he has earned the right to talk as an equal with the Empress is not lost on him, nor his many enemies.

Vlad has a lot of enemies – powerful ones like counts, dukes, and fabled sorceresses. After he messes up a contract on a rival crime boss, he makes an enemy of his entire house. But you get the feeling that Vlad kinda likes it that way. What’s that saying – “Whatever doesn’t kill you makes you stronger”? Well Vlad is living proof of that. As you can imagine, having mortal enemies keeps you sharp, keeps you on top of your game, and an assassin like Vlad can’t afford to be anything but.



INIGO MONTOYA

FIRST APPEARANCE: THE PRINCESS BRIDE (1973)

SUBSEQUENT APPEARANCES: THE PRINCESS BRIDE (1987)

◆ Inigo Montoya's father was a swordsmith – perhaps one of the greatest that ever lived. When Inigo was a child, his father created a magnificent sword for a man named Rugen: a six-fingered count reputed for his swordsmanship. Rugen was unimpressed with Montoya senior's work and refused to pay the agreed upon price. A dispute broke out, culminating in the count stabbing Inigo's father to death.

From that point on, Inigo Montoya's life revolves around one thing: vengeance. He trains for more than a decade, learning the art and science of swordplay, becoming a "wizard" – a swordsman whose command of the blade is nothing short of magical. He is more than ready to face down his father's killer in mortal combat. The only problem is: his father's killer,

the count, cannot be found. Despondent, Inigo lapses into lethargy and alcoholism. It isn't until old mate Vizzini shows up with an opportunity to kidnap a soon-to-be princess that he snaps out of his funk and resumes his life's work. And before too long...

"Hello. My name is Inigo Montoya. You killed my father. Prepare to die."

The fight is long and bloody. As he delivers his hard won coup de grace, Montoya cries in a voice cracked with pathos: "I want my father back, you son of a bitch." And you can tell he's just realised that killing the count won't make that happen. That it's never going to happen. And so, in his moment of supreme victory, you almost feel sorry for him.



BRIENNE OF TARTH

FIRST APPEARANCE: A CLASH OF KINGS (1998)

SUBSEQUENT APPEARANCES: A STORM OF SWORDS (2000), A FEAST FOR CROWS (2005), A DANCE WITH DRAGONS (2011)

◆ Brienne of Tarth's greatest asset is that she thrives in adversity – learns from it, grows from it.

As a plain featured, coarse mannered, woman warrior in a world of fairly traditional gender roles, Brienne faces adversity on a daily basis. Her skill as a warrior is recognised but routinely dismissed: A woman warrior? You must be joking. Polite society regards her with undisguised contempt, responding to her earnest attempts at "ladylike" behaviour with derision and mockery. She fits in nowhere, craves the approval of others, and practically falls in love with anyone who shows her the least bit of courtesy or respect. This makes her easy to manipulate, a fact that has not gone unnoticed by the warring powers that be.

Only a few accord Brienne the respect her discipline, resilience, and talent merit, but among them are some of Westeros' most influential individuals: Jaime Lannister, Catelyn Stark, and Renly Baratheon. Having friends in high places bolsters her faith in the knightly ideals to which she is dedicated, giving her the fuel she needs to continue fighting – literally and metaphorically -- day in and day out.

"[In] all of her lack of convention and her uniqueness, all women can identify with her," said Gwendoline Christie, the actress who plays Brienne in the HBO show. "Because she wants to be loved in the way that as human beings all want to be loved. We see the pureness of her humanity, and that she's something that isn't so far away from all of us."



GRIFFITH

FIRST APPEARANCE: GUARDIANS OF DESIRE 5 (1991)

SUBSEQUENT APPEARANCES: A BAZILLION EPISODES OF THE BERSERK MANGA AND TV SHOW

◆ Like many extremely powerful individuals, Griffith is driven by deeply rooted insecurities. He focuses mono-maniacally on his goal of obtaining a kingdom to call his own, hoping - vainly, insanely - that it will validate him and calm his inner demons. It doesn't. As ruler of Falconia, as Femto the Godhand, Griffith finds himself at his lowest ebb: the emptiness remained, joined by directionlessness and profound guilt.

Outwardly, Griffith is a picture of confidence, poise, and raw talent. He is a cunning strategist, clever politician, and charming conversationalist; a master swordsman whose wit is as sharp as his cutlass. He is a Bishi - soft-featured, with flowing silver locks and Hiterlishly blue eyes. He pretty much has it all. So why is he still empty and afraid?

Griffith is not a scrupulous or morally sensitive man. He knows what he wants and will sacrifice basically anything to get it - including himself. It's admirable in a way, his commitment, but also deeply scary. The fact is that Griffith is the kind of guy the Nazis loved: ambitious, energetic, morally flexible, and smart enough to invent cogent rationalisations for his behaviour. If the Nazi comparison sounds laboured, consider this: when he became a Godhand, Griffith celebrated by raping a woman until she was literally insane.

Griffith is an entertaining character who does really horrible things, and so, as a reader and watcher, you have kind of a love/hate relationship with him. You don't want him to die, but still... he kind of deserves it.



MAGUS

FIRST APPEARANCE: CHRONO TRIGGER (1995)

SUBSEQUENT APPEARANCES: RADICAL DREAMERS (1996)

◆ In some ways, Magus is a fairly typical silver-haired badass of the Sephiroth/Griffith variety. He has a troubled past and is unshakably obsessed with realising goals that are, on the face of it, seemingly unachievable. But Magus is an indomitably willed and scarily powerful wizard, so you believe him when says he's going to do the impossible. If anyone can...

So far, so tropey. What distinguishes Magus from his silver hair brethren is his relationship with his sister, Schala. When Magus (then named Janus) was young, he and Schala lived in the Magical Kingdom of Zeal, ruled by their mother Queen Zeal. The queen, once wise and benevolent, had become enslaved to an insidious device known as the Mammon Machine - a conduit to the world-

destroying power of the great parasite, Lavos. Attempting to activate the machine, Zeal summoned Lavos, who promptly sucked Janus into a time vortex, dropping him in the distant future.

Ignorant of Schala's ultimate fate, Janus dedicates his life to finding her, becoming Magus: leader of the Mystic Army and terror of Guardia. From his secluded keep, he wages war on the human population, desperate to accrue the power necessary to summon and destroy Lavos once and for all. All for her. Everything else is just a means to an end, including his sanity and life. "If history is to change, let it change!" he proclaims. "If the world is to be destroyed, so be it! If my fate is to be destroyed... I must simply laugh!"

It would be touching if it weren't insane.

THRALL

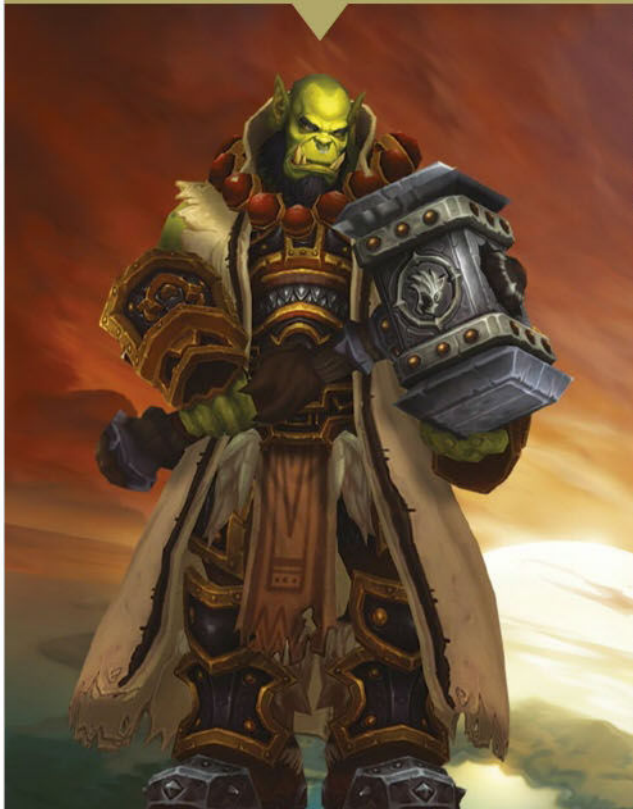
FIRST APPEARANCE: WARCRY: LORD OF THE CLANS (2001)

SUBSEQUENT APPEARANCES: WARCRY III (2002), WORLD OF WARCRY (2004)

◆ Thrall comes from a long line of leaders, but is not himself an especially adept leader. As former Warchief of the Horde, he embarks on a reformist crusade, casting out the horde's rigid traditions and turning it into a mixed-species alliance with an emphasis on democratic values: freedom, solidarity, and individuality. In this, his detractors claim, he fundamentally misunderstands the nature of the Horde, the strength of which is rooted in its insularity and enthusiasm for warfare.

As an infant, Thrall's parents were killed and he was subsequently raised in a slave camp for humans, who came to look after the orc and teach him their values and customs. This experience forms the bedrock of Thrall's democratic worldview: he may look like a regular orc, but his passion for human institutions and antipathy toward orcish custom marks him as an outsider, even as War Chief.

Thrall's chieftom is peaceful and directionless, but as the Horde begins to stagnate with inactivity, he realises that he is not cut out to be leader. And so he does the only honourable thing a leader can do in such a situation: he puts the needs of his kingdom first and hands his job over to a much more competent replacement, Orgrim Doomhammer. In a sense, this is Thrall's greatest accomplishment as War Chief – knowing when to step down, and who to give the reins to. Few politicians – Alliance or Horde, human or orc, real or fictional – can claim to be so wise.



APSALAR

FIRST APPEARANCE: GARDENS OF THE MOON (1999)

SUBSEQUENT APPEARANCES: THE MALAZAN BOOK OF THE FALLEN SERIES.

◆ Apsalar is a character from Steven Eriksson's epic ten volume Malazan Books of the Fallen. When we first meet the Apsalar, she is the innocent daughter of a poor fisherman, but is caught up in the dark events of the series when The Rope – Cotillion, the Patron God of Assassins – possesses her so he can meddle in mortal affairs.

Going by the name Sorry, she makes a name for herself as a soldier within The Bridgeburners, an elite unit in army of the Malazan Empire. But she is cold, and deadly, willing to do terrible things to learn secrets from her enemies. When the God Cotillion finally abandoned her, she could not recall her time as the God's plaything, though was aware that she had done bad things – and she also kept many of the Assassin-God's rather unique talents. She took the name of Apsalar – the Patron God of Thieves – and journeyed with the thief Crokus, who was infatuated with her. Aware that she was proving to be a bad influence on the young man, she joined another Malazan army – The Bonehunters – and was caught up in a fight against the Emperor's elite Claw assassin's.

Using the Shadow Dance that she inherited from Cotillion, she slaughter the Claw, and following her last adventure finally returns to her father's fishing village, leaving the games of the Gods behind. She reunites with Crokus, and from there... well, we know we hope she can settle down and live a relatively peaceful life. The woman deserves it!



THE ETERNAL CHAMPION

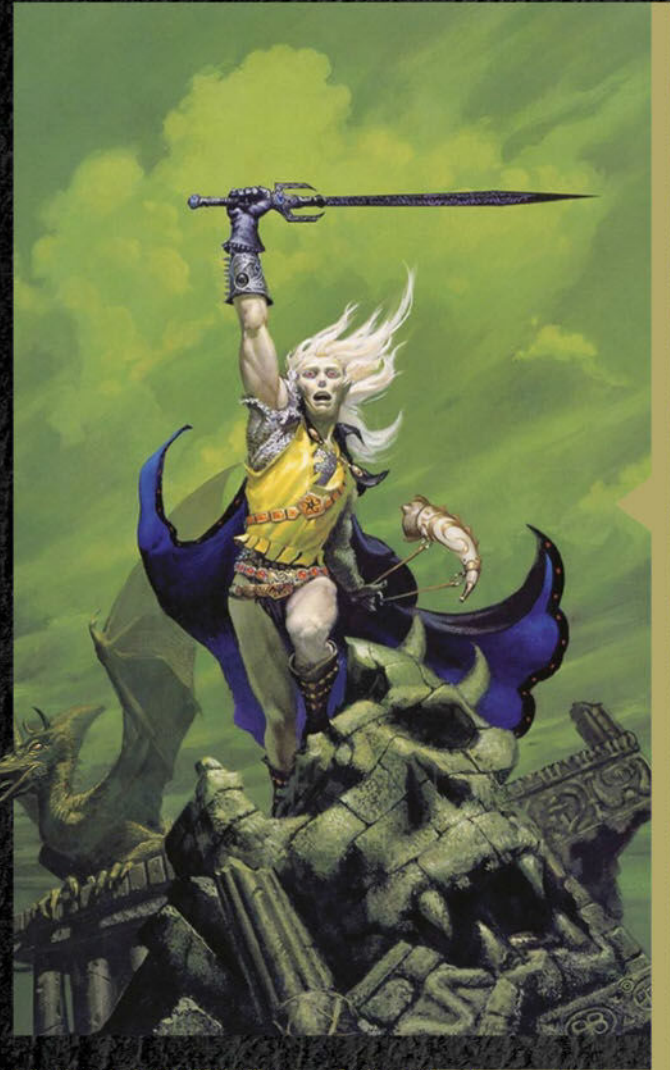
FIRST APPEARANCE: FLUX (1962)

SUBSEQUENT APPEARANCES: AT LEAST 65 OTHER NOVELS (INCLUDING ONE DOCTOR WHO NOVEL) AS WELL AS MULTIPLE SHORT STORIES AND MENTIONS IN OTHER WORKS, THE FINAL PROGRAMME (FILM, 1973), MULTIPLE REFERENCES IN SONGS BY HAWKWIND, BLIND GUARDIAN, DOMINE, AND OTHER 80S AND 90S METAL BANDS.

◆ The Eternal Champion is both a character (or more precisely, multiple characters), and an archetype of the doomed anti-hero. The character is the physical embodiment of author Michael Moorcock's multiverse – an overlapping, unending continuum of realities in which one being is endlessly reborn to fight against the forces of Law and Chaos to allow mankind to control its own destiny. Though it has never been explicitly stated, the popular theory both within the novels and without, is that the Eternal Champion is essentially a prisoner in his/her own unending life, condemned to be reborn infinitely to live and die in service of an ideal as punishment for an unremembered crime so heinous that only eternal punishment could possibly count as justice.

The Eternal Champion's most well-known incarnation is undoubtedly Elric of Melniboné, the albino emperor of a decadent and dying

race, fighting to free himself from the grip of the Lords of Chaos and the burden of his soul stealing, friend killing black sword, Stormbringer, but he has many more, equally fascinating, doomed characters. In one story, Behold the Man, the Eternal Champion is Karl Glogauer, a disenfranchised young student from mid 70s London who agrees to test a time machine if he can choose his destination. To believe in something, he travels to Bethlehem to witness the birth of Jesus, but upon discovering the truth of the Jesus' conception and birth decides to take the messiah's place so that the future has a defining spiritual mythology. It's not all so weighty – at times the Champion has been a pansexual assassin, a bored aristocrat at the end of time, a German zeppelin captain, a femme fatale scientist spy and more. The Eternal Champion is anyone fighting for a potentially futile cause larger than themselves.



GRIGNR THE BARBARIAN

FIRST APPEARANCE: THE EYE OF ARGON (1970)

SUBSEQUENT APPEARANCES: THANKFULLY NONE

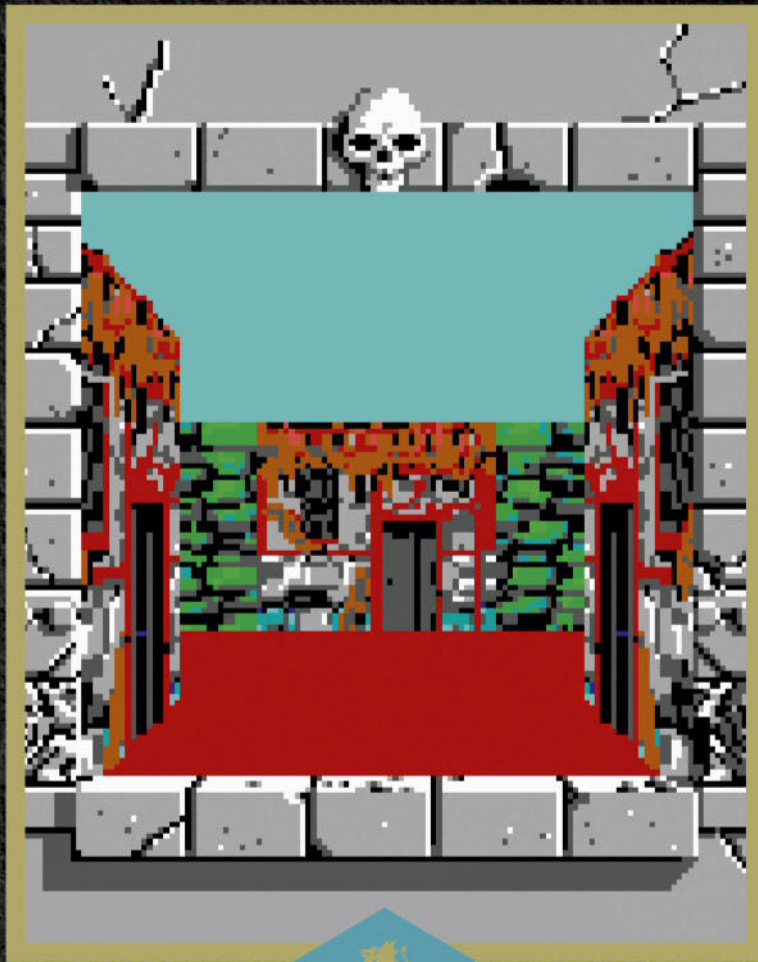
◆ *"I shall never understand the ways of your twisted civilization. I simply defend my honor and am condemned to life confinement by a pig who sits on his royal ass wooing whores, and knows nothing of the affairs of the land he imagines to rule!" lectures Grignr?*

The Eye of Argon is famous for all the wrong reasons. Written in 1970 by then 16-year-old Jim Theis, the novella has been both praised and mocked as one of the very worst books, fantasy or otherwise ever written. The main character, Grignr, an Ecordian Barbarian tries to make his way to the city of Gorzom for

wenches (one of whom has "stringy orchid twines of hair" and a "lithe, opaque nose") and plunder. Things go wrong, he is imprisoned, sits around moping for a while, makes a dagger out of a rat, escapes, saves a princess from being sacrificed to the Eye of Argon (a "many fauceted scarlet emerald") and falls unconscious from blood loss and blob explosions. Grignr is such a poorly defined character that he comes across as an amorphous murderous rapist, and his hair is so red and his passions so fierce that the prose makes it sound as though he is constantly on fire.

#26

THE WORST
FANTASY
CHARACTER
EVER



Bad Craziness in Skara Brae

MIKOLAI



» The first time I played an RPG I had no idea what I was doing. I'm guessing it was 1989, and for reasons I still can't properly understand or explain, I decided to purchase Bard's Tale 3 for my Commodore 64.

Maybe I had seen it a magazine somewhere, or I liked the box cover, or I don't know? But when it arrived in the mail I quickly discarded the box and instruction manual, placed the 5" floppy disc in the drive, and nodded in approval as a full screen animation of a bro playing the lute kicked in.

The character creation bit came next. Apparently you could import your characters from the previous two games, but that meant nothing to me, so I just got down to brass tacks and made up some party that I felt could handle the job at hand... They couldn't. And some 25 years later I can finally admit that I never even cleared the first dungeon.

Instead, I spent a very long, very hot summer confined to my room, grinding my way through the games overworld and the ruined town of Skara Brae. At some point I must have lost my mind, because I distinctly remember playing for several hours straight without saving, suddenly getting up from my chair, and unplugging the entire computer via the wall socket. That memory is etched in my brain, and so is Skara Brae, the site of my descent into bad craziness and confusion.

Before we get into all that, it's perhaps worth noting that the Bard's Tale trilogy was an early-ish computer RPG series, viewed from a first person perspective, in which you explored dungeons, cast spells, and generally did RPG type stuff. By the third game the producers had gotten kinda ambitious and you were supposed to teleport to different dimensions to do stuff.

I only learned this years later, because as noted above, I had no idea how to play the damn game. Every time I ventured into the catacombs it would end in sadness and shambles, my party shrugging their shoulders and looking around helplessly as their Hit Points and Magic Points were whittled down to nothing in some far-flung corner of the dungeon.

So instead I improvised, spending countless hours wondering the countryside, schlepping around the ruins of Skara Brae, hanging out behind the church, and getting a really good feel for the open world hub - even if wasn't part of the "proper" dungeon crawl game bit.

Perhaps that's why Skara Brae stays with me. Its unfulfilled promise of adventure represents all the digital galaxies that remain unexplored. The possibilities that stretch out beyond the horizon, like neon bright lattices in a William Gibson novel. Or maybe it's because that game "literally" broke my brain...

After I rage quit, I grabbed my bike, stepped into the sun, and enjoyed the rest of the summer outside. I never did go back to Skara Brae.

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