



UNWINNABLE
WEEKLY
ISSUE EIGHTEEN

Braaaaaaaaaains



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UNWINNABLE WEEKLY

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Jordan Minor

Jill Scharr

Carli Velocci

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From the Desk of the Editor in Chief

Hi there,

Today, Paul Feig, the director of *Bridesmaids*, tweeted that he is working on a script for *Ghostbusters III* with *Parks and Recreation* writer Katie Dippold.

This is not the first time a headline has breathlessly announced that a new Ghostbusters movie was in the works. Rumors of that started right after *Ghostbusters II* hit theaters and have continued at regular intervals over the next 25 years without so much as a teaser trailer coming to light. Call me cynical, but I am not going to hold my breath.

I already have a pretty good threequel in 2009's *Ghostbusters: The Video Game*. Whatever the faults of its gameplay, Terminal Reality nailed the humor, the characters – all voiced by the original cast – and the story, which neatly called back to the Gozer cult at the heart of the first movie (the big bad is the ghost of Ivo Shandor, the creepy architect who built Dana Barrett's building). Dan Aykroyd said the game was essentially the third movie. That is good enough for me.

Mostly, though, I just can't bear the idea of a Ghostbusters movie without Egon. Ivan Reitman has long been in the wings for the director's chair of a

new Ghostbusters movie, thanks to a contractual clause from the first movie. He waived that clause in March, after Harold Ramis passed away on February 24.

I think we'd all do well to follow Reitman's lead and leave Ghostbusters there. We'll always have an amazing New York comedy, its flawed sequel and its flawed videogame. Do we really need any more?

* * *

In this issue's cover story, "Who Watches the Watcher" Jill Scharr shares a fantastic essay about the moralizing gaze of other characters and its effect on your decisions in Telltales' *The Walking Dead*. Joe DeMartino has *Fallout: New Vegas*'s Caesar in his sights in "I Shot the Centurion." Jordan Minor looks at some very different game development milestones in the aptly titled, "Milestones." Finally, Carli Velocci is on a quest for the shivers in "Through the Fog-Choked Streets."

I hope you dig them. As usual, you can tell me exactly what you think via email at stuhorvath@unwinnable.com.

Stu Horvath,
Kearny, New Jersey
October 8, 2014



I Shot the Centurion

By Joe DeMartino

T*his wolf-headed son of a bitch*, I thought, the town of Nipton burning all around me, *is going to have to die*.

I was playing *Fallout: New Vegas*, Obsidian's 2010 post-apocalyptic RPG. My character was a package courier shot in the head while delivering a mysterious parcel. She was then patched up by a kindly town doctor passing through Nipton on her way to New Vegas itself (in pursuit of the man who shot her). The Mojave Wasteland was in the midst of a vicious conflict between two diametrically opposed forces: the democratic but corrupt and inefficient New California Republic and the driven slave army known as the Legion – modeled after ancient Rome and wholly owned by a megalomaniac styling himself “Caesar”. My character had no allegiance to either group as of yet, but considering the game seemed to be constantly driving toward a climactic battle between the two over the still-functional Hoover Dam, it was clear that I'd eventually be forced into a choice.

The wolf-headed son of a bitch in question was *Vulpes Inculta*, a high-ranking member of the Legion and the first member of that group my character had encountered. He called himself a “frumentarius,” a kind of secret agent and spy sent with a small group of lesser legionaries to sow discord and fear among NCR-controlled territories. *Vulpes'* target was Nipton, a “town of whores,” as he called it, wallowing in greed and run by a mayor willing to sell out his fellow citizens for a few dollars. What he got instead was an abattoir – one lucky citizen left alive in order to spread the news of the town's fate, the rest butchered, smoldering in mass graves or crucified alive on ruined telephone poles. My character, *Vulpes* explained, was to be a witness to these events, and to tell the rest of the Mojave the fate that awaited it if it sided with the NCR.

It was clear that *Vulpes* was an important character. His voice actor was a good one, he had a clear motivation and philosophy, his in-game model looked to have been given more care than a simple mook would normally warrant (the aforementioned wolf-head was a rare helmet that befitted his rank), and his every line all but guaranteed my character would see him again later. I'd probably end up fighting him in some epic showdown once I'd properly leveled up – that, or he'd be a quest-giver if I decided to go evil and side with the Legion. It was about the right time in the game to meet a character like *Vulpes Inculta*, who had so much malevolent intent.

Unfortunately for this wolf-headed son of a bitch, however, my character had a flamethrower. As Vulpes and his goons started to walk away, I opened up on them. My hard-and-fast rule in any game that gives me the choice is that nearly every bad guy gets the chance, if available, to surrender and go to jail or otherwise make amends – except for slavers or rapists. The Legion were both, and I'd be damned if I was going to let something like my character's low level prevent me from at least attempting to make Vulpes pay for Nipton. I doused the frumentarius in fire, fully expecting the weight of his presumed narrative armor to kick in and force me into a quick reload of a previously saved game.

The next minute or so is tough to accurately recall. There was a lot of shouting, and hacking, and a moment where my character frantically gulped medical items while I dodged a burning Vulpes' chainsaw sword. When it was all over, I was left with just a sliver of health and almost no fuel for my nearly-broken flamethrower, alone save for crows and a few more bodies than had been there when I started.

Vulpes Inculta, the wolf-headed son of a bitch was dead. I was hooked.



N*ew Vegas* has a bit of a reputation. Released at the end of a breakneck 18-month development cycle, it fell flat on its face on launch, riddled with bugs and requiring a massive patch in order to retain basic functionality. Reviewers found it difficult to forgive the game for its constant crashes or its inability to let players finish quests. So the game sits at an 84/100 rating on Metacritic – had it scored one point higher, *New Vegas*' dev team would have been entitled to a cash bonus. Its shaky launch has affected its legacy, putting it behind games like *Dragon Age II* on some best RPG lists.

None of that shit should matter to you anymore. The game is largely bug-free now thanks to several official patches and [one essential fan mod](#), but even if it was only the slightest bit playable, it'd all be worth it because *New Vegas* does something incredibly rare among games in general and choice-based open world games in particular.

It treats you like an adult.

Killing *Vulpes Inculca* had very real and nearly immediate consequences that affected both my character's standing in the game world and my actual experience playing the game. I'd gained a great deal of infamy with the Legion and fame with the NCR (word travels fast in the Mojave), all but committing me to one side before I'd had time to understand what that meant politically.

The road to Vegas immediately north of Goodsprings, your starting location, is short but deadly, infested with radscorpions and deathclaws and monstrously large tarantula flies called cazadores. Making it through at such a low level requires either unprecedented good luck or knowledge of how to break the game's design.

Either way, the game expects you to take a leisurely route southeast along Highway 95, eventually looping up toward Vegas once you encounter the Legion at Nipton. The southeast road allows you to set your level of difficulty by how far you choose to wander. Staying on the road means you'll encounter low-threat bandits that can be easily swatted or avoided. Veer off to explore an interesting landmark, however, and you could find yourself trapped in a radioactive vault or set upon by hordes of ghouls. It's a clever and intuitive system of risk versus reward.

All that Legion infamy, however, turned my stroll to Vegas into a near-constant running gun battle. Caesar isn't the type to overlook the person who killed one of his most valuable assets. He struck back. I was trekking to a nearby NCR camp to see how I could be of use when I was set upon by four



sprinting Legion assassins, each bearing much more advanced weaponry than the standard-issue machetes the group I'd massacred in Nipton had. I managed to fight them off, but that only deepened my infamy with the Legion, and more assassins soon followed. I'd been enjoying the vistas of the Mojave – one of the few places in the Fallout universe that wasn't totally scoured by nuclear fire – but I took to looking at the horizon rather than the sky, searching for the telltale movement of red-armored figures coming to kill me.

As I scraped by each encounter, Caesar's goons only seemed to get stronger, progressing from shotguns and spears to sniper rifles and thermic lances. The crimson groups on the horizon started to include brush-helmeted centurions who ran through my desperate barrages of fire to conk me on the head with kinetically-powered sledgehammers. More than once, I'd simply abandoned the fight, rushing to the nearest NCR outpost so the trailing hit squad could be cut down by massed fire from panicky troopers who were just as scared as I was.

I'd tried to be a hero, you see. Having seen that I could kill Vulpes, all my experience with RPG tropes led me to believe that I'd be rewarded for doing so. The moment his icon on my HUD turned red, I looked at him as a bag of goodies to be plundered, a way for me to move from level 3 to level 4 and maybe get a leg up on the quality of my equipment. Obsidian disagreed. Vulpes Inculta was a bastard who deserved to die, but the game remembered that he was also a person with beliefs and connections and a whole support system. Killing him, like killing anyone in real life, was an action that was impossible to do in isolation.

This is a rare thing in any game – actual, measurable consequences. Most games don't even bother trying. The cost of creating content that most players might not see is often seen as too high and it's difficult to fault companies for that stance. The majority of players do not finish the games they play, and content that requires multiple playthroughs to see may end up being experienced by an increasingly small percentage. Games like *Mass Effect* and *Dragon Age* solve that conundrum by making choices that tend to lead players along the same path each time, with the tone of any given scene changing more than the actual setting or cast – or whether or not that scene happens at all. Games that legitimately attempt a branching narrative, (like Obsidian's

own *Alpha Protocol*) often find they have to sacrifice in other areas.

New Vegas had to do this (primarily in the area of bug-fixing), but the payoff ended up being so worth it. Later on in my playthrough, my character found herself overlooking the outpost of Cottonwood Cove, Caesar's main port in the Mojave. She was in the midst of building her legend by this point, having hardened herself against constant assassination attempts to the point where most hit squads didn't even get close. Cottonwood Cove was home to a number of legionaries, several crucified victims and a ferry that would lead to Caesar's main base, but I'd just stumbled upon it.



The Cove seemed well fortified against a frontal attack, but the Legion was weak at long range, and I happened to find one of the best sniper rifles in the game in a hidden bluff overlooking the main building. Five minutes later and the Cove had been properly de-Romanized, with my character, for once, coming away with no major wounds. I freed a group of slaves in a pen next to the main office, made a quick round of the camp to see if there were any stragglers and then went to the second floor of the Cove's HQ. The door to the HQ was marked "Aurelius of Phoenix's office," which immediately put me on guard. Named Legion members could still be a threat, and my shiny new sniper rifle wouldn't be much good indoors. I made sure everything was in order, selected an automatic shotgun, and burst into the office, ready for a fight.

What I found was nothing. The boss fight with Aurelius of Phoenix – centurion, quest-giver, and supposed badass – was me shooting him in the head from a mile away without even exchanging threats. Like Vulpes, Aurelius had content that died with him, but Obsidian were perfectly fine with my not seeing it.

I'd never see it, by the by. I usually don't go full bastard in my RPGs, and joining up with a rampaging slave army led by a megalomaniac is a bit more than full bastard. The fact that I never saw it, however, wasn't a bad thing. Knowing it was out there and knowing that I'd made a conscious decision for my character not to go in that direction increased my belief in the *New Vegas* world. It was a rejection of a certain ethos – in this case, the belief that a cruel world like *Fallout* needed to be ruled by a man with total control, so that humanity could rebuild and hopefully avoid repeating the mistakes of the past. The game trusted me to respond to this choice on its own merits in a believable fashion, and sicced the consequences on me mercilessly.

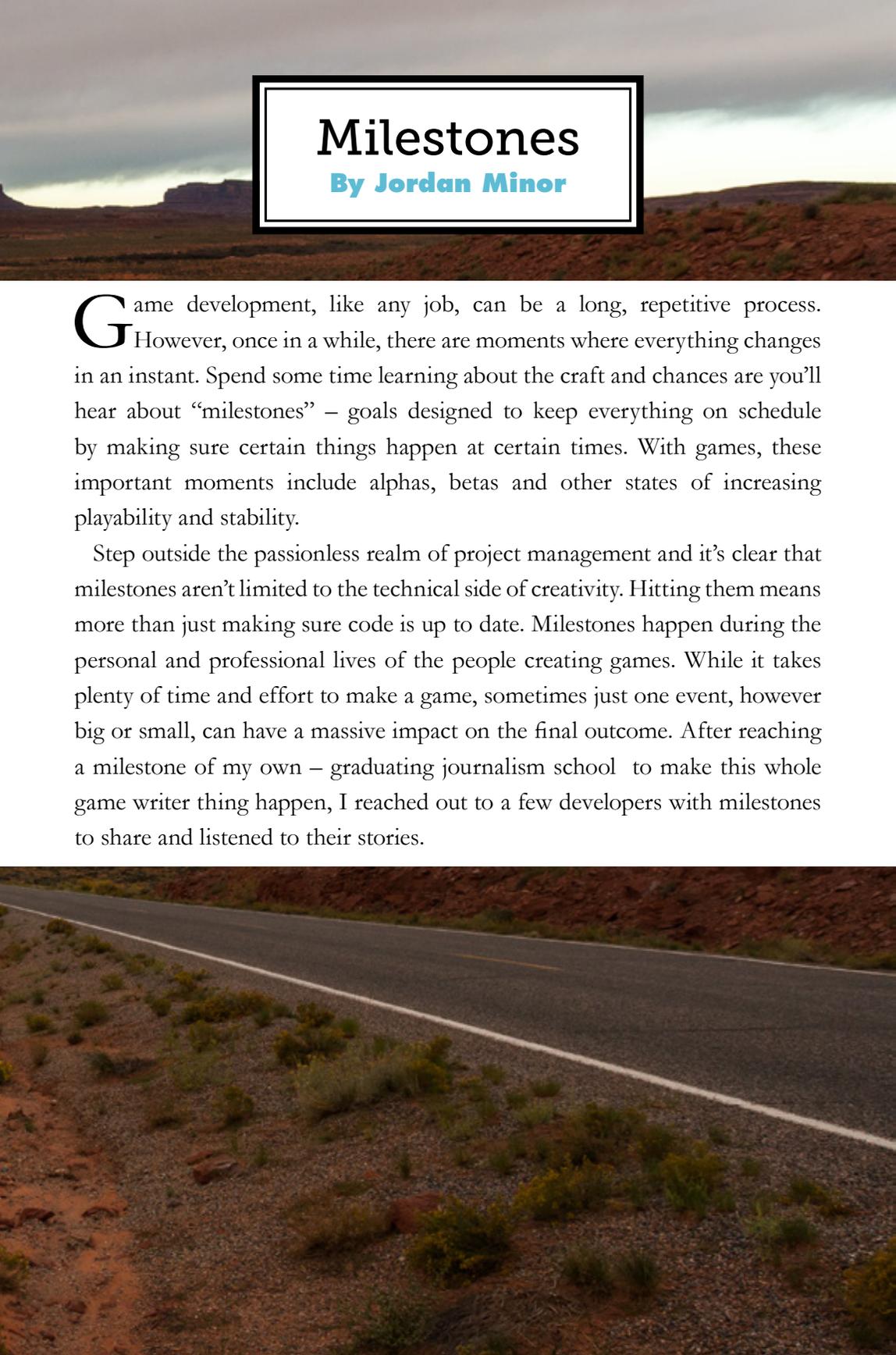
You know, just like in real life.

I had a thought while my character looted Aurelius' corpse. I could kill Caesar's top spy. I could kill the guardian of the gateway to Caesar's fort. I could kill damn near anyone in the Mojave.

Could I kill Caesar?

An hour (and several hundred high-caliber rifle rounds) later, I had my answer. Triumphant Roman conquerors on parade would have a slave stationed behind them whispering in their ears, reminding them of their mortality. My character was no slave, but she did have an ancient assault rifle with the insignia of a long-dead warrior tribe emblazoned on the side. It turned out that was enough to remind Caesar that all glory is fleeting. 🏹



The background of the page is a photograph of a desert landscape. In the foreground, a paved road with a white shoulder line and a yellow center line curves through a dry, rocky terrain with sparse green and yellow shrubs. In the distance, there are low, reddish-brown hills under a cloudy, overcast sky. A white rectangular box with a black border is centered in the upper portion of the image, containing the title and author information.

Milestones

By Jordan Minor

Game development, like any job, can be a long, repetitive process. However, once in a while, there are moments where everything changes in an instant. Spend some time learning about the craft and chances are you'll hear about "milestones" – goals designed to keep everything on schedule by making sure certain things happen at certain times. With games, these important moments include alphas, betas and other states of increasing playability and stability.

Step outside the passionless realm of project management and it's clear that milestones aren't limited to the technical side of creativity. Hitting them means more than just making sure code is up to date. Milestones happen during the personal and professional lives of the people creating games. While it takes plenty of time and effort to make a game, sometimes just one event, however big or small, can have a massive impact on the final outcome. After reaching a milestone of my own – graduating journalism school to make this whole game writer thing happen, I reached out to a few developers with milestones to share and listened to their stories.



Tom Heinecke

Studio closures often leave talented developers jobless, and employees can't always sense the end is near or find closure before the axe drops. Graphic designer Tom Heinecke recalls when Iowa studio Budcat Creations, the studio behind countless *Rock Band* titles, was suddenly shuttered in 2010.

"The whole thing is just a business. That's the big secret," says Heinecke, "It's just about selling the product, selling a Coca-Cola. It has nothing to do with making games at all."

What was more surprising was that Budcat had been acquired by Activision Blizzard two years prior.

"The biggest reason it came as a surprise to me was before this happened they sent an Activision director of advertising or something, and he came to us at a meeting with the whole office," says Heinecke. "He was like, 'Budcat has been a great asset here for Activision' and went through all these charts. 'We just want to give you guys the biggest thanks for *Guitar Hero* selling so well.' It was kind of stupid."

About five months later the studio was gone. Upset over the loss of a job with no micro-management, Heinecke initially directed his anger at Budcat's owners instead of the larger Activision machine. However, eventually his ire and depression subsided.

"I'm friends with them. I still know them. There wasn't anything they could do," he said. "They're not business men. They just want to make games."

Since then, Heinecke has become a "normal artist" and works on his own indie mobile games on the side. His first title, retro roguelike *bit Dungeon*, did

well enough to spawn an upcoming sequel. Heinecke even says the revenue his games bring in could allow him to quit his day job. However, along with wanting to spare his wife and children the instability of indie life, Heinecke says the moment Budcat closed soured him on game business for good.

“I kind of hate the games industry because of all this,” he says. “I would never do any deals with any of those companies. I will never work in mainstream video games ever again.”

David Laskey

By many accounts, post-grad life in the real world is full of uncertainty. For David Laskey and his partners at The Amiable, the question is “Does anyone care about our game?” Cooperative shooter *Tetrapulse*, which began as a 2013 Global Game Jam project before becoming a senior year capstone prototype during the team’s time at DePaul University, now holds the hopes for The Amiable’s future as their upcoming debut game. And Laskey remembers the moment that shift happened, influenced by Kickstarter.

“We were still really excited about the game, and people who played it were excited too,” says Laskey. The team went to work after graduation, spending two months preparing their own Kickstarter

campaign, to be set at \$15,000. They quickly learned just how much work goes into getting a Kickstarter to fund. The team quickly ran out of friends, family and press contacts only days into the campaign. Drumming up the remaining \$11,000 or so over the next month would essentially be a full time job.

Laskey and his team didn’t feel they could just spam the same promotional tweets over and over.



“We didn’t plan out all of our updates,” he says. “There were dead zones in the center of the campaign where we were at a loss of things to talk about. We didn’t think we were going to make it.”

With time running out, and failure very possible, hitting the campaign’s goal was sweet. “It was in the final six hours when it happened,” says Laskey. I remember sitting in a lab working on a project and I saw the number break \$15,000. I just slammed my hands on the desk and stood up. Everyone in the room was really pumped because they all knew.”

Matt Carter



Indie developers are used to being the little guys. The idea that a game made by a handful of friends in their Texas garage can compete with the best triple-A gaming has to offer is still a relatively new concept. So, after a few months of friendly emails, when Sony offered Ragtag Studio the chance to demo their game *Ray's the Dead* onstage as part of their E3 2013 PlayStation 4 indie push, the team didn't quite know how to react.

“We felt like we were a little bit out of our league, says Matt Carter, one of Ragtag’s co-founders. We had been making games for a long time, but none of us had ever had the opportunity to take the spotlight.”

Carter says the invitation from Sony was entirely unexpected.

“It was surprising to the point where we weren’t sure if we even wanted to do it,” Carter says. “[But] we did it because it was a once in a lifetime opportunity. It’s really good exposure and you just can’t pass that up.”

While the rest of the team worked behind the scenes keeping finicky systems running smoothly, Carter stepped onto Sony’s stage for PlayStation’s E3 indie showcase – his surreal moment of industry fame. “It just was overwhelming the size of these video screens that you are standing in front of, the size of the auditorium, the amount of tech support. It was really impressive, larger

than life,” says Carter says, who called the whole array of E3 experiences “indescribable.” Carter says he was happy and humbled to share the stage with industry luminaries like *Oddworld*’s Lorne Lanning and fellow indie friends like *Octodad*’s Young Horses.

Having worked in the industry for over 13 years, Carter says moments and new initiatives like this provide encouraging and unprecedented legitimacy to indie developers.

“It seems like some of these big blockbuster games are just made by the computers. But there are hundreds of people with talent and interesting stories to tell and involvement in the game that aren’t seen by anybody,” Carter says. “It’s amazing now that the smaller groups of guys making games are actually having their faces seen.”

Even now, Carter and Ragtag are doing their best to put these new emotions to good use. “Every day since then, it’s been understanding that all of our hard work and focus is going to pay off in the end. It changes the game when you have an event like that happen.”

Brianna Wu

On July 24, 2014, after three years of development and entire genre switches, Giant Spacekat released its first game, *Revolution 60*, on iOS. The action-RPG features an all-woman cast, created by an all-woman development team. Studio head Brianna Wu has experience from politics to animation to investigative journalism – videogame development was a new frontier.

“We went into the most ambitious project we could make starting from the very beginning, and I think it turned out well,” Wu says. “It’s weird, but I think not knowing what I was doing actually led to us making a better product. I have this attitude that the best way to learn stuff is to get in there and make it happen. So that’s what we did.”

However after the culmination of Wu and her team’s hard work – finishing *Revolution 60* brought a different response. “I always imagined launch as being this magical moment, for it to be this feeling of overwhelming pride sweeping over me, but it was nothing like that,” Wu says. “Anticlimactic is a fair word.”

Wu said the day-to-day challenges of development made launch day just another day.

“It was like I had been wandering through the desert for 40 years at that point and I was so used to solving crises as they came up, and solving later problems down the line,” she says. “I wish I could say it was some magical moment, but it was like ‘yeah this is something positive, but I’ve got 20 emergencies to solve this day.’”

Wu says that developing a game or running a studio means there’s always another fire to put out.

“Sometimes it’s political problems, sometimes it’s engineering, sometimes it’s money issues, sometimes it’s a bug at the last minute and sometimes it’s things you need to change for the website or this or that. It just never ends,” she says.

But overall, the experience has been a good one. “On a personal level, it’s really gratifying for me to have parents sending me pictures of their daughters playing *Revolution 60* and just loving the game. It’s a wonderful feeling, but as far as things changing, right now I’m planning the next mountain that my team needs to climb.”

As Wu continues her post-launch life, she acknowledges the progress she has made. “I would have thought that my life was going to be a dream,” Wu says, reflecting on how impossible success seemed at the beginning of *Revolution 60*’s development.

Still, at the end of the day this milestone is just one of many for Wu and developers like her. “Don’t get me wrong, I’m very proud of what I’ve accomplished, but I don’t feel very different or happier or less happy as a person,” she says. “The truth is my life feels the same.” 🍷





Who Watches the Watcher

By Jill Scharr

Danny St. John wants to eat you alive. He attacks you in his family's



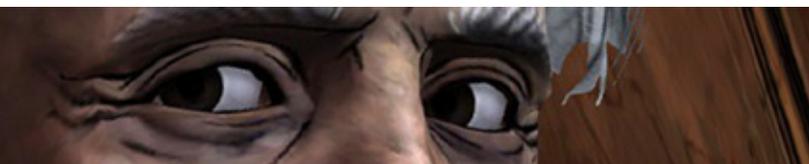
barn with a shotgun. You fight back with any farm implement you can get your hands on. Finally you knock him down, hold him, at hoe point, on the ground.

This is near the end of the second episode of *The Walking Dead's* first season, where your band of survivors happens upon a family desperate enough to resort to cannibalism. Fifty-five percent of people who played chose to kill Danny.

But if you kill Danny – you being Lee, the protagonist of the game – the camera jump cuts to a close-up of Clementine, the young girl that Lee has promised to protect. When Danny dies Clementine screams and recoils in horror. The screen, if environmental hints are enabled, displays the words “Clementine witnessed what you did.”

Moments later, players must make a similar choice about Danny's equally sadistic brother Andy. Once again, Clementine is watching. Only 20 percent of players killed Andy.

In *The Walking Dead*, players' main goal is Lee's – and Clementine's – survival. Clem is the driving action of the plot, the “motivator” for players to continue playing and making choices along the game's branching narrative paths. Nearly every action players can take: killing someone, sparing someone, speaking kindly, speaking harshly, these are all arguably all motivated by a desire to keep Clementine from witnessing the horrors of the world. Players can decide which choices they will make in order to subjectively fulfill that notion.



Your choices don't happen in a vacuum. Other members of your

party of survivors all have strong opinions about Lee's (i.e., your) decisions. They all want Lee to act a certain way and your opinions of these characters may influence your decisions as Lee. Clementine is among these opinionated characters, but she's different from the rest.

Unlike some of the other survivors – unstable or flighty or reserved as they may be – Clementine is consistently portrayed as kind, affectionate, innocent, willing to defer to the player’s decisions but always able to make her displeasure known when you do something she would consider bad. Because of this, Clementine’s opinions about your choices are coded differently than anyone else’s. Given *Walking Dead’s* construction of narrative choices, Clementine is not only a motivator: she is your moral compass.

That isn’t to say she outlines the single “correct” or “good” path players must choose to succeed. Instead, Clementine acts as the motivation for you facing those decisions in the first place, rather than necessarily acting an influence on whatever choice you pick. Still, there are times – as with the St. John brothers – that Clementine also becomes an active moral guide for steering players toward decisions one would code as “kinder” or “more merciful.”



Moral compass characters are common in videogames, and more often than not they are female. On its surface, the inclusion of female non-player characters appears to be an effort to increase diversity, but in many ways it continues to play into the established convention of the (often morally gray) male protector who must do right by an (often younger) female character.

Examples include *BioShock Infinite’s* Booker and Elizabeth, though because *Infinite* has a linear story, Elizabeth’s moral influence doesn’t influence players’ in-game choices. Rather, her moralism compounds her role as motivator, keeping players engaged with the story.

Joel and Ellie of *The Last of Us* also offer a variant of the device, though in this case Ellie’s survival for its own sake isn’t the entire motivator – she may hold a cure for the pandemic that has stricken the world. (Joel is also eventually motivated to commit acts that one might consider amoral instead of moral, though still for Ellie’s sake.)

Telltale even uses the same idea in its game *The Wolf Among Us*. As Alexa Ray Correia noted in an article for Polygon, a variation occurs in a scene where the

player, Bigby Wolf, must interrogate a suspected murderer while his ladyfriend Snow White watches. The more Bigby uses violence to get the answers he needs, the more Snow White clearly disapproves.

“And as we struggle with Bigby to retain his humanity despite dealing with some truly despicable characters, we measure his success in keeping it against Snow’s reactions,” Correia says. “She is our moral compass, our barometer for how much of Bigby is left. We see ourselves through her eyes.”

In its use of Clementine and her gaze as a moralizing force, *The Walking Dead* deploys a motif common to many other American decision-based RPGs.



Everything changes in *The Walking Dead*'s second season.

When the game picks up from the end of Season One of *The Walking Dead*, the player is now controlling Clementine. Unlike Lee, whose goal to protect Clementine was clearly defined, Clementine herself has no such mandated allegiance. The scripted “motivation” to continue playing is to keep Clementine alive – nothing else.

Without another character to motivate her, Clementine also has no one “moralizing gaze” to influence her decisions. In *The Walking Dead*'s first season, Lee had the ability to put Clementine’s needs above any other character’s, and the assurance that he was correct in doing so. In Season Two, Clementine does not have that privilege. It completely throws out the notion of the moral compass character.

Instead, throughout the game Clementine must weigh the desires, values and goals of several different characters, primarily Kenny, Luke, Sarah and Jane.

Of these, Kenny, Luke and Jane are almost always in indirect or outright conflict with each other. They constantly disagree over the “right” thing to do and they drag Clementine into the center of their arguments. None of them are portrayed as more morally righteous than the others – if players wish to side with one over the other, they must make that decision on their own, without

even the suggestion of assurance that they have chosen correctly.



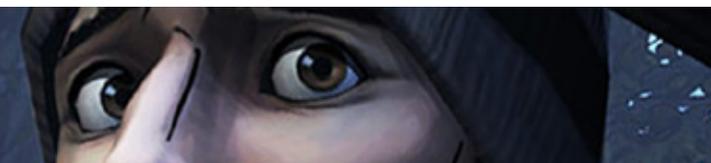
Sarah is perhaps the closest to the role that Clementine played in Season One. But Sarah isn't a Clementine. Unlike Irrational Games, who were very concerned that players not feel annoyed by Elizabeth in *Infinite*, Telltale made Sarah naïve, fragile and unreliable. She is annoying. If you want to help Sarah, you're going to have to work at it, and you'll probably be miserable while you do it.

Discussion of female characters in videogames has been even more heated lately. Some people, skeptical of “diversity for diversity's sake,” criticize the idea that adding female playable characters increases a videogame's aesthetic or dramatic value.

Season Two of *The Walking Dead* is proof that a female main character is capable of exploring angles and scenarios that just aren't open to the male characters we most often see. That's not to say that the roughened male trying to do right by the female is inherently bad. Scenarios become motifs for a reason: they evoke powerful emotional responses from us. And as seen in *Infinite*, *The Last of Us* and *The Wolf Among Us*, the motif still leaves room for some variation.

But these devices can become so common that re-experiencing them feels like tracing tire-grooves in a well-worn street. We know how these things go because we've seen them before. Though these games may be about a man protecting a woman, paradoxically it's the male character who is always constructed as dependent on the female character for moral and narrative guidance through the game.

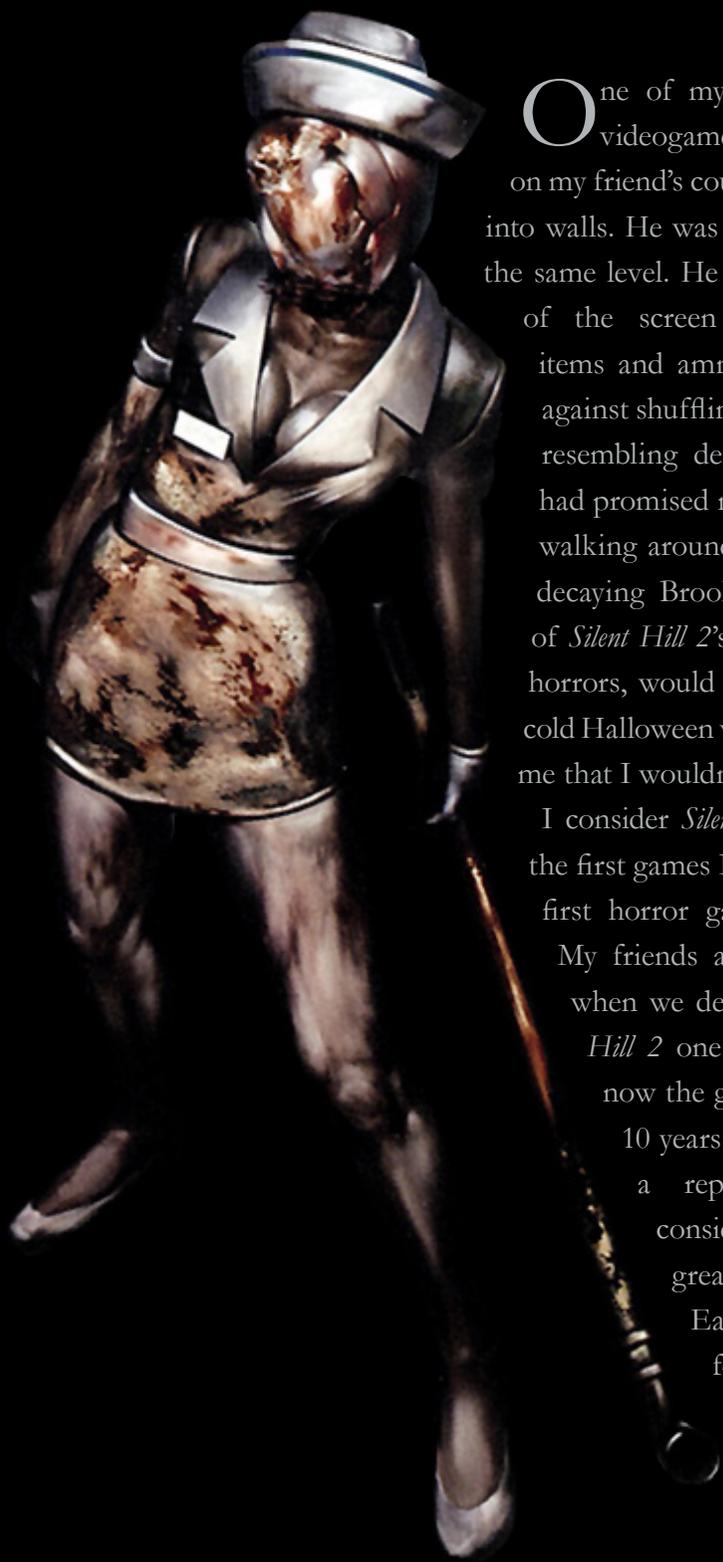
The Walking Dead's second season isn't like that. Clementine has no Elizabeth, no Ellie, no Snow White and no Clementine of her own. The game gives you no hints as to what the morally right answers are. With no moral compass and no defined motivation other than “stay alive,” the game sets players adrift in



its increasingly difficult scenarios – ones with much more compelling and emotional payoffs. 🍷

Through the Fog- Choked Streets

By Carli Velocci



One of my first most complete videogame memories is sitting on my friend's couch as he kept running into walls. He was backtracking through the same level. He ran around the edges of the screen looking for health items and ammo to defend himself against shuffling, twitching monsters resembling dead nurses. My friend had promised me – he promised that walking around in the darkness of a decaying Brookhaven Hospital, one of *Silent Hill 2*'s many environmental horrors, would be perfect for a dark, cold Halloween weekend. He promised me that I wouldn't be the same.

I consider *Silent Hill 2* to be one of the first games I ever experienced, my first horror game notwithstanding. My friends and I were in college when we decided to try out *Silent Hill 2* one quiet Halloween. By now the game had been out for 10 years. Its scares had earned a reputation, and many considered it one of the greatest games ever made. Easy enough; I was down for anything.

I knew I wouldn't be scared.



It was a local haunted house – one of those blanketed hallways that get set up in fire station for kids to go through every October.

Volunteers hide behind curtains and with a few well-placed mirrors, the illusion is complete. It costs \$15 to get in and the whole thing takes around 10 minutes to traverse, but whatever, there's candy at the end.

I paid and walked in first, before my friends, who all conglomerated into one trembling mass that stuttered and screamed at their own reflections. I walked too quickly for them, going around corners before staring at a space behind one door, where I knew one of the volunteers would be hiding in a clown costume. I pointed at it.

“There's going to be a guy here,” I said. Of course, there was. He jumped out and my friends shrieked.

I went into the next room, full of dummy clowns. I pointed at two, knowing they would move. Emerging as demons. A tall, still Bozo in the corner moved slightly in our direction. Once again my friends were terrified.

I told Bozo I liked his mask. He said thanks.



Every horror film I watched as a kid desensitized me to the genre. When I was young I would watch Nickelodeon's *Are You Afraid of the Dark* after school. It was an episodic show about kids sitting around a campfire telling corny stories about ghosts and magic (and in one case, lizard people), and by mid-1990s standards it wasn't terrible (for a seven-year-old it might have been great, but I can't remember). I do recall being enthralled by some of the stories, drawn in by the occult and the idea of the supernatural. A couple of years later, my mother got me a ghost-hunting kit and a guide to the paranormal. I decided after seeing *Ghostbusters* for the first time that I wanted to become a parapsychologist.

I continued to absorb every scary film that I could find, for research into how I could write my first horror story. (This ended up being an *Inuyasha* fanfiction, but I am not ashamed.) That's when I started reading Stephen King and getting into all the good stuff: the PG-13 and rated-R flicks, the Boris Karloff and Bela Lugosi classics. Even, disappointingly enough, the knockoffs of *The Ring* that perpetuated theaters in the early 2000s.

For horror, that was a low point.



I was leaving the theater with a group of middle school friends, my first lone movie-going experience. I was disappointed that it had to be *The Grudge*. The people around me were trembling and screaming and shaking my chair. My friends were shrieking. I was sighing. Everyone around me seemed to just be feeding on the energy of a dark movie theater.

At one point, my friend sitting next to me grabbed my arm, her fingernails digging into my skin, starting to cry. I rolled my eyes and waited for the film to end.

As we walked out of the theater I came to a sad realization. I had watched tons of horror films. I had devoured them and studied them, so much so that I was desensitized to the most important part: the scares. I had never connected with anything I had seen or been horrified that I couldn't sleep for weeks. If horror was supposed to mirror our human experiences and to expose the true monsters, I wasn't getting it. There was something I was missing. In a way, I envied my friends, who seemed to get possessed by shitty, fake horror. I needed to have a terrible night's sleep.

Four of us were squeezed onto my friend's couch. The lights were off and the PlayStation 2 was loading. My friend swore that this was one of the most terrifying games he had ever played. Despite my prior research into the genre, I had no experience in videogames, let alone horror ones; "Silent Hill" meant nothing to me. I wasn't expecting anything from the experience apart from a bonding with friends and being given another reason to laugh at anyone who got spooked.

It took five minutes to realize I was wrong.

It started the moment James Sunderland walked into the town of Silent Hill, drawn into this weird place by a letter from his dead wife. The fog cloaks it at first, but soon James discovers a trail of blood on the ground leading off into the distance – a place the game is forcing you to go, despite every instinct telling you to get back in James' car and drive away. You have to follow the trail of blood, of course, down a wooded path around a corner out onto a street. That's when you see something, a shadowy figure that looks like it's dancing, taunting. The image itself is dragging you forward, into Silent Hill's surreal world – you know it's going to be awful.

It was at this one scene where my shoulders stiffened as I saw the shadowy thing skulk back into the fog. At one point I may have even grabbed my boyfriend's arm. Later I would dig my nails into his bicep to the point that it probably hurt.



There are many types of scares: jump scares, gore, creepy feelings. Each works in its own way. *The Grudge* tries to work from the Japanese source material, scaring the audience with cheap jumps, which become predictable after repetition, and body horror, which doesn't quite go to a place of true terror – instead the aesthetic doesn't push the effects budget too much and is uninterested in truly disgusting the audience. It's a film that doesn't take risks – Sarah Michelle Gellar attempts to deal with the ghosts, characters die, there's a false sense of security when the film leads you into thinking it's over, then that's shattered. It's like *Friday the 13th*, *Carrie*, *The Ring*, *Halloween*, any piece of formulaic horror, too safe to be effective.

Horror conventions are why I could see the guy in the mask around the corner, why I could predict a 90 minute film. They are also in a way why *Silent Hill 2* works: it never tries to be safe and it doesn't take cues from things that have come before. It creates an aura of mystery that cloaks the entire game in shadows and, most importantly, manages to make you uncomfortable.

You don't find out why the town is populated by grotesque monsters until much later in the game, when you discover that these abstract beings are actually more than just products of horror imagery for horror imagery's sake. They stalk James for a reason – one that makes sense. You can almost sympathize with them and the fact that James has to kill them. Almost.

Silent Hill has always been about atmosphere. It's never been about the jump scares or any other typical horror fare. You will see scary and disturbing things, but the games have always prioritized its setting over anything else. It's what you immediately notice in first five minutes of *Silent Hill 2*, when you start to see that James is not fully aware of what he's in for.

I wasn't prepared either. The uncertainty of where James is and what will ultimately come of his goal to find his dead wife permeates the experience, bringing a sense of anxiety. When I play the game my eyes are glued to the screen. For the first time in a long time, I am jumpy. There is nothing here that can bring me back to reality because I can't predict what the next room will look like.

No more knowing what's around the corner. No more cynicism or predictability. Just a feeling I couldn't shake that brought me back to true horror. 🍷

Joe DeMartino doesn't believe videogames cause violence. He does believe in aliens but doesn't believe they've ever visited Earth because they're too far away, in space and/or time. He doesn't believe in bunting or the intentional walk except under very specific circumstances. The extent of his beliefs can, sadly, be found on Twitter [@thetoycannon](#).

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