

# UNWINNABLE WEEKLY

ISSUE TWELVE



[fart joke]



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# UNWINNABLE WEEKLY

**ISSUE TWELVE**

**Contributors**

Jeremy Signor

Joe DeMartino

Edward Smith

Aurelius Ventro



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# From the Desk of the Editor in Chief

Hi there,

Summer is winding to an end and for the games industry, that means one thing: PAX Prime.

I won't be one of the thousands of faithful pouring into Seattle this weekend (too many people in one place for my temperament), but lots of our friends will be. Here's a few you should check out on the show floor:

1. Sanatana Mishra and Tim Dawson will be at the Indie MegaBooth showing off *Assault Android Cactus*. It's a madcap twin stick shooter with buttery smooth controls and an all female cast – I got my first look at the game at this year's GDC salon and have been in love with it ever since. Definitely worth your time. [Official site](#).
2. Also at the MegaBooth is *That Dragon, Cancer*, by Ryan Green and Josh Larson, which we had at the first Unwinnable GDC salon. It is strange to encourage folk to see such a difficult, serious game in such hectic environment, but if you have the opportunity, seize it. The game's emotional punch is nothing short of astonishing. [Official site](#).
3. At the Indie MiniBooth, you can play RageSquid's *Action Henk*, a physics-based speedrunning platformer set in bedroom full of toys. Playing it over and over again, shaving off precious milliseconds every run has become a Zen meditation since E3. Thoroughly addictive and strangely relaxing when the leader board isn't making your blood boil. [Official site](#).
4. Our good friend Shawn Alexander Allen will be at the MiniBooth on Friday and Saturday showing off *Treachery in Beatdown City*. Through several cruel twists of fate, I've yet to play it (we need to fix that, Shawn!), but that just makes me more keen to get my hands on it. Don't be like me, though - play it at PAX! [Official site](#).

5. Also at the MiniBooth is Samantha Kalman's *Sentris*. Another game I got a brief glimpse of at the Unwinnable GDC salon and, I mean, have you seen this thing? It is gorgeous. I don't even want to try to explain what it is (OK, OK, it is a rhythm puzzle music-making game) just go play it, at PAX or on Steam. [Official site](#).
6. Finally, Campo Santo, the *Traveling Wilburys* of game development, will be debuting their game *Firewatch* on Saturday at 10:30 AM in the Hedgehog Theatre. It looks super keen. [Official site](#).

\* \* \*

And, of course, Unwinnable is made up of party people. The folks who will be at PAX, including Managing Editor Owen R. Smith and Senior Editor Steve Haske, will be hosting a party on Friday night at the Pine Box on Capitol Hill. A good number of the folks I mentioned will be there. Let us know if you are coming by RSVPing on the [Facebook event page](#), and follow updates on Twitter at the hashtag [#unPAXparty](#).

\* \* \*

Meanwhile, the latest issue of Unwinnable Weekly is all about war. Jeremy Signor examines the long, punishing road that is *The Banner Saga*. Joe DeMartino looks at the three decades of Hiroo Onoda's World War II. Edward Smith ponder politics, war and first person shooters in a world full of too much information. And our resident Space Marine Aurelius Ventro teaches us how to wage war on household pests.

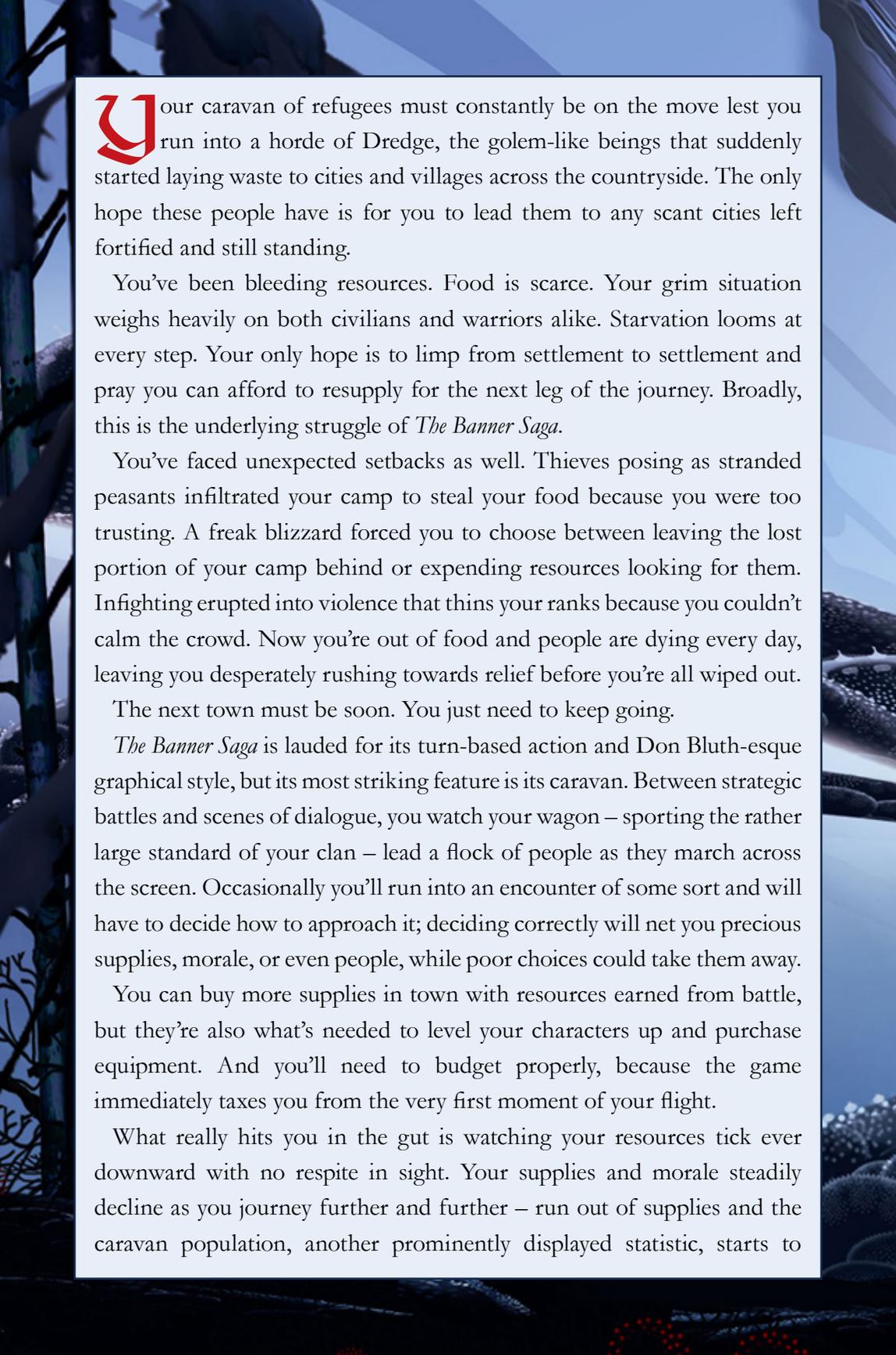
As always, you can send comments to [stuhorvath@unwinnable.com](mailto:stuhorvath@unwinnable.com).

Stu Horvath,  
Kearny, New Jersey  
August 27, 2014



# Contest of Attrition

**By Jeremy Signor**



**Y**our caravan of refugees must constantly be on the move lest you run into a horde of Dredge, the golem-like beings that suddenly started laying waste to cities and villages across the countryside. The only hope these people have is for you to lead them to any scant cities left fortified and still standing.

You've been bleeding resources. Food is scarce. Your grim situation weighs heavily on both civilians and warriors alike. Starvation looms at every step. Your only hope is to limp from settlement to settlement and pray you can afford to resupply for the next leg of the journey. Broadly, this is the underlying struggle of *The Banner Saga*.

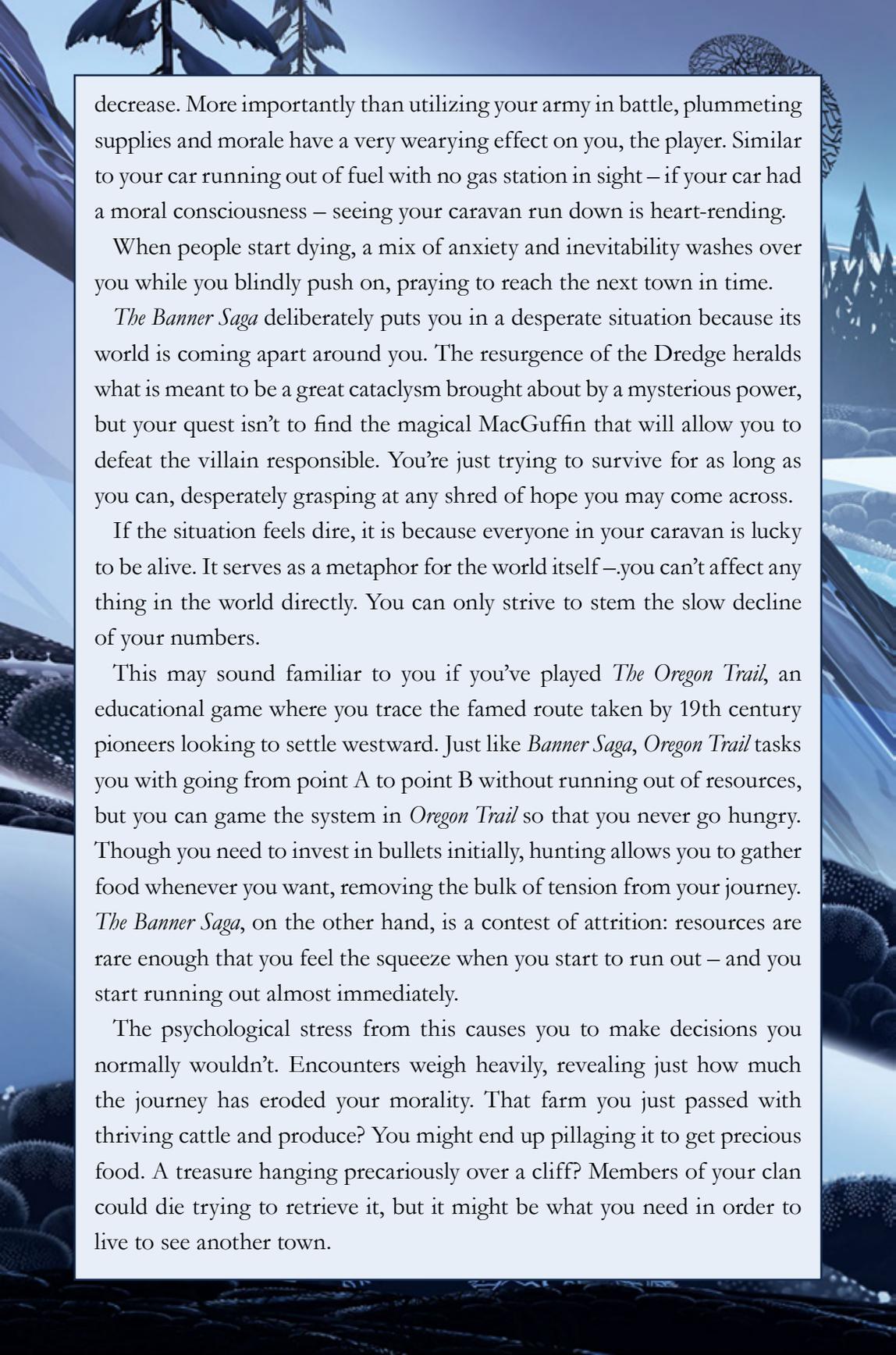
You've faced unexpected setbacks as well. Thieves posing as stranded peasants infiltrated your camp to steal your food because you were too trusting. A freak blizzard forced you to choose between leaving the lost portion of your camp behind or expending resources looking for them. Infighting erupted into violence that thins your ranks because you couldn't calm the crowd. Now you're out of food and people are dying every day, leaving you desperately rushing towards relief before you're all wiped out.

The next town must be soon. You just need to keep going.

*The Banner Saga* is lauded for its turn-based action and Don Bluth-esque graphical style, but its most striking feature is its caravan. Between strategic battles and scenes of dialogue, you watch your wagon – sporting the rather large standard of your clan – lead a flock of people as they march across the screen. Occasionally you'll run into an encounter of some sort and will have to decide how to approach it; deciding correctly will net you precious supplies, morale, or even people, while poor choices could take them away.

You can buy more supplies in town with resources earned from battle, but they're also what's needed to level your characters up and purchase equipment. And you'll need to budget properly, because the game immediately taxes you from the very first moment of your flight.

What really hits you in the gut is watching your resources tick ever downward with no respite in sight. Your supplies and morale steadily decline as you journey further and further – run out of supplies and the caravan population, another prominently displayed statistic, starts to



decrease. More importantly than utilizing your army in battle, plummeting supplies and morale have a very wearying effect on you, the player. Similar to your car running out of fuel with no gas station in sight – if your car had a moral consciousness – seeing your caravan run down is heart-rending.

When people start dying, a mix of anxiety and inevitability washes over you while you blindly push on, praying to reach the next town in time.

*The Banner Saga* deliberately puts you in a desperate situation because its world is coming apart around you. The resurgence of the Dredge heralds what is meant to be a great cataclysm brought about by a mysterious power, but your quest isn't to find the magical MacGuffin that will allow you to defeat the villain responsible. You're just trying to survive for as long as you can, desperately grasping at any shred of hope you may come across.

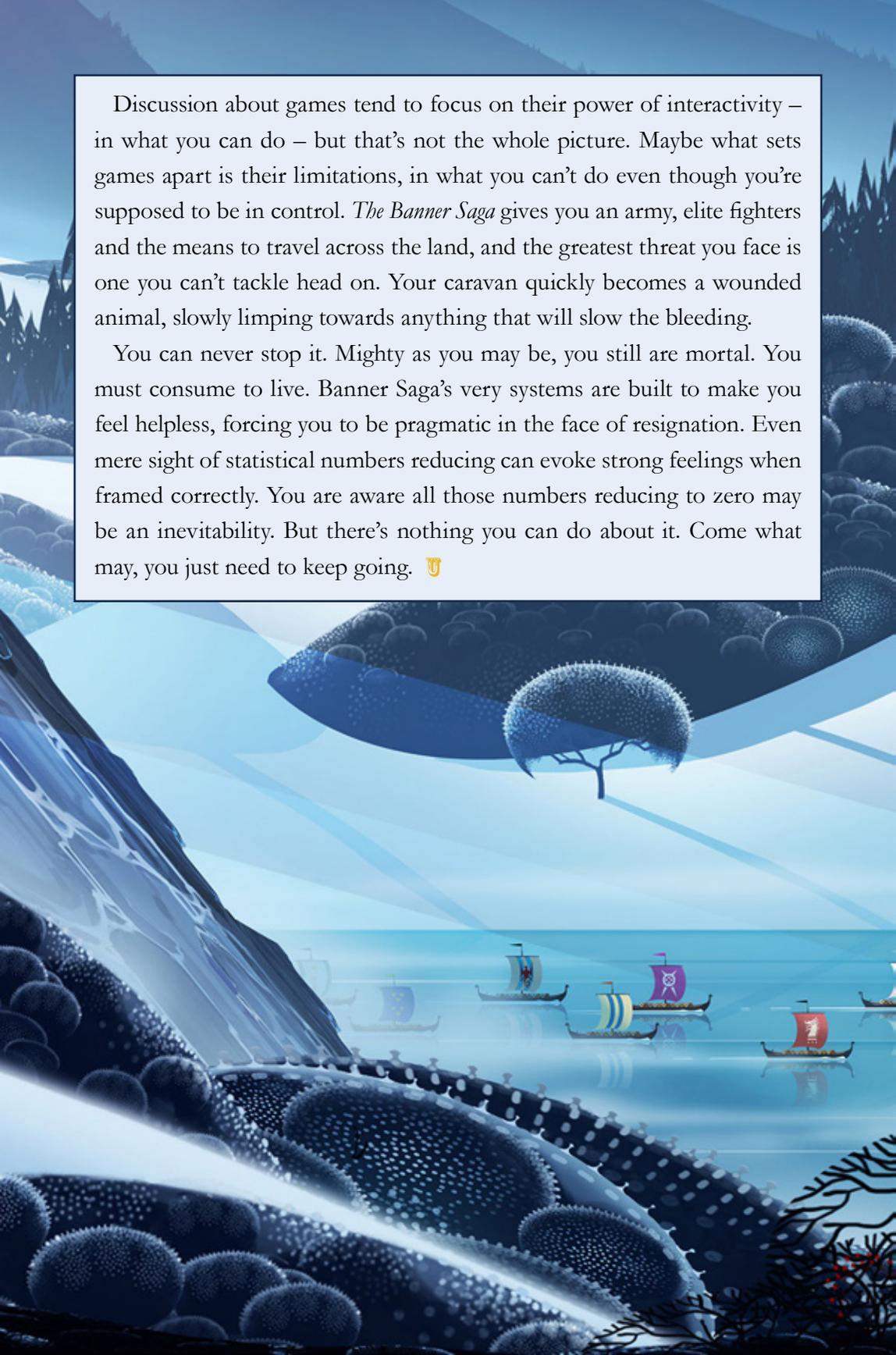
If the situation feels dire, it is because everyone in your caravan is lucky to be alive. It serves as a metaphor for the world itself – you can't affect anything in the world directly. You can only strive to stem the slow decline of your numbers.

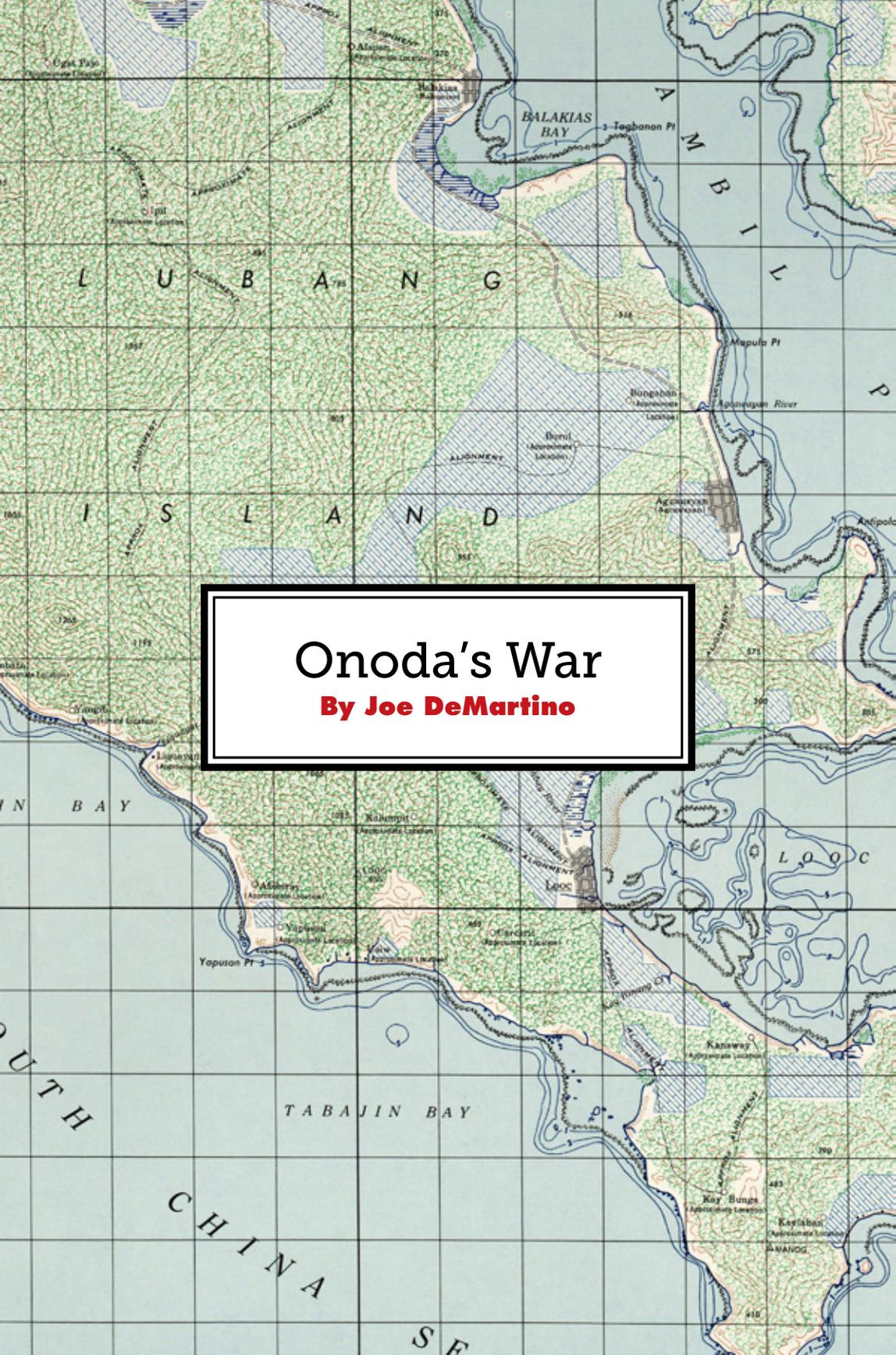
This may sound familiar to you if you've played *The Oregon Trail*, an educational game where you trace the famed route taken by 19th century pioneers looking to settle westward. Just like *Banner Saga*, *Oregon Trail* tasks you with going from point A to point B without running out of resources, but you can game the system in *Oregon Trail* so that you never go hungry. Though you need to invest in bullets initially, hunting allows you to gather food whenever you want, removing the bulk of tension from your journey. *The Banner Saga*, on the other hand, is a contest of attrition: resources are rare enough that you feel the squeeze when you start to run out – and you start running out almost immediately.

The psychological stress from this causes you to make decisions you normally wouldn't. Encounters weigh heavily, revealing just how much the journey has eroded your morality. That farm you just passed with thriving cattle and produce? You might end up pillaging it to get precious food. A treasure hanging precariously over a cliff? Members of your clan could die trying to retrieve it, but it might be what you need in order to live to see another town.

Discussion about games tend to focus on their power of interactivity – in what you can do – but that’s not the whole picture. Maybe what sets games apart is their limitations, in what you can’t do even though you’re supposed to be in control. *The Banner Saga* gives you an army, elite fighters and the means to travel across the land, and the greatest threat you face is one you can’t tackle head on. Your caravan quickly becomes a wounded animal, slowly limping towards anything that will slow the bleeding.

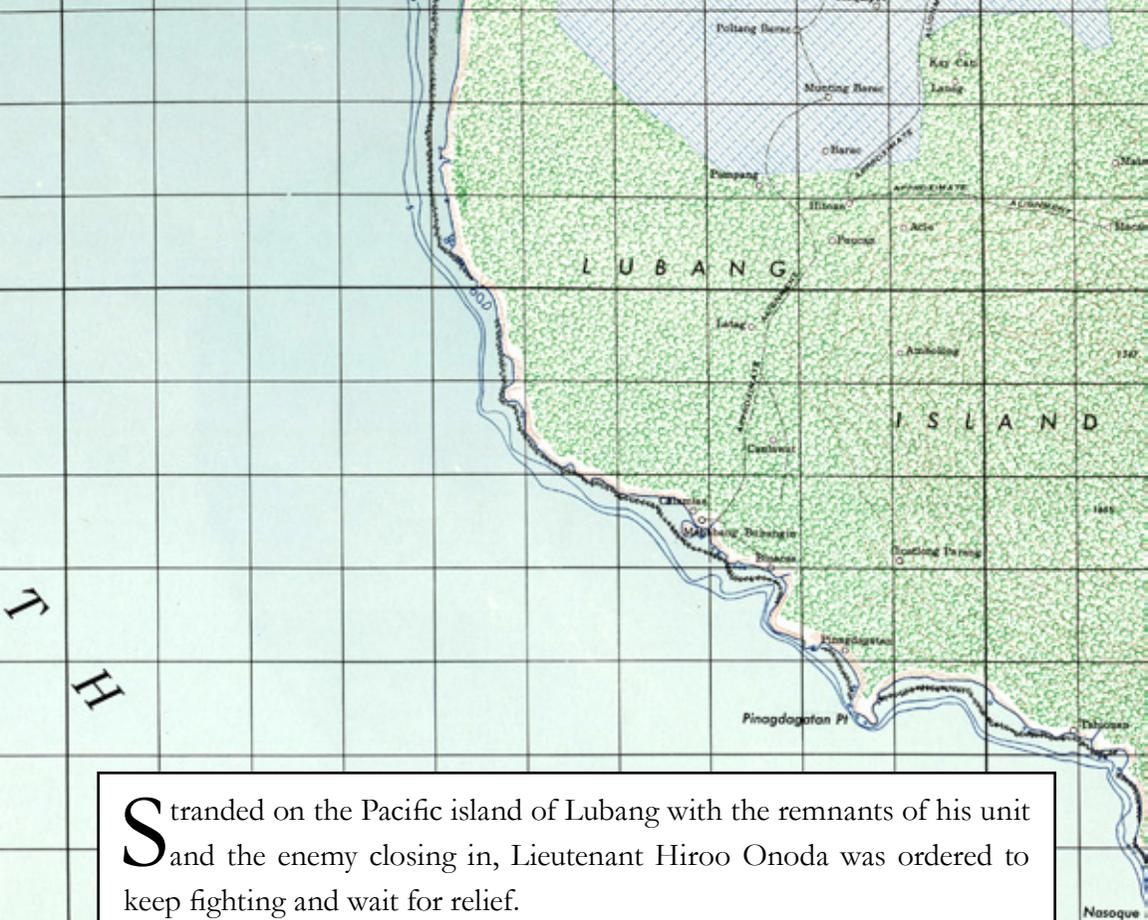
You can never stop it. Mighty as you may be, you still are mortal. You must consume to live. Banner Saga’s very systems are built to make you feel helpless, forcing you to be pragmatic in the face of resignation. Even mere sight of statistical numbers reducing can evoke strong feelings when framed correctly. You are aware all those numbers reducing to zero may be an inevitability. But there’s nothing you can do about it. Come what may, you just need to keep going. 🐉





# Onoda's War

**By Joe DeMartino**



**S**tranded on the Pacific island of Lubang with the remnants of his unit and the enemy closing in, Lieutenant Hiroo Onoda was ordered to keep fighting and wait for relief.

He took that order very seriously.

So seriously, in fact, that when his promised relief didn't come, Onoda and three enlisted men retreated to Lubang's hills in the closing months of World War II and set up camp. The four then waged a guerrilla war on Lubang, raiding the island for supplies and engaging in the odd running gun battle with local forces.

This would be an unremarkable story save for one thing: Hiroo Onoda didn't surrender until 1974.

For nearly 30 years, Onoda and his men fought a lonely war against an enemy that had long ago moved on. They found air-dropped leaflets announcing the end of the war and Japan's surrender but regarded them as tricks. Onoda and his men were military intelligence, after all – no strangers to attempts by the enemy to persuade wavering soldiers into surrender. Their own their government had sent out daily radio broadcasts telling U.S. Marines that their cause was hopeless and their president was dead. Lies, of course.

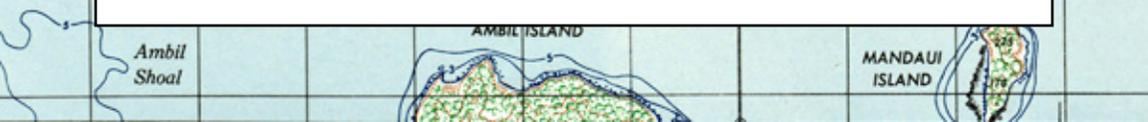
So, Onoda – who survived the war and for many years afterward, dying only just this past January – fought on. One of his men, Private Yūichi Akatsu, deserted in 1949 and surrendered six months later. The air-dropped leaflets began to contain personal letters to the men, but these too were discarded as lies. A clever enemy would do such things.



Lubang Island is not particularly large, but it can still be easy to get lost in 125 square miles in the right conditions. The Pacific is dotted with islands like these, with their mix of forests and hills, and not a few of them housed Japanese soldiers in situations similar to Onoda's. These men were caught in a unique set of scenarios that made their prolonged experiences in WWII more understandable.

All military cultures have negative attitudes toward surrender and emphasize obeying orders, but this was particularly the case in Japan – even civilians would on occasion commit suicide rather than submit to capture. A Japanese soldier who took that ethos seriously could find himself on an island like Lubang, cut off from all communication and unlikely to run into a large concentration of people.

Some soldiers found their forever wars cut short. Captain Sakae Oba and his 46 men were stuck on Saipan for over a year, but were found by a major general three months after the war ended and surrendered without incident. Lieutenant Ei Yamaguchi and 33 men actually attacked a Marine Corps detachment in 1947 on the island of Peleliu. Do something like that and the right people will sit up and take notice – they surrendered to a Japanese admiral shortly afterwards. Others found sanctuary in other



armies – the Viet Minh, China's People's Liberation Army. In one case, two soldiers who had defected to the Malayan army returned to Japan in 1990. Still others simply disappeared.

The ones who managed to find a way out were lucky. Onoda must have felt like he had exactly two options: a miserable, lonely existence fighting a last stand in perpetual nadir or death. His group slowly fell apart. Akatsu departed (as much desertion can exist in an otherwise-disbanded army). Corporal Shoichi Shimada was wounded in a gun battle with Lubang fishermen – a year later, he was killed fighting a search party sent to find the men. Onoda and Private First Class Kinshichi Kozuka continued their fight, perhaps more carefully now that they had lost fifty percent of their effective strength.

In 1959, five years after Shimada died, Hiroo Onoda was officially declared dead by the Japanese government.

He and Kozuka kept fighting. Over the course of his long war, Onoda and his unit killed about 30 Lubang inhabitants and wounded 100 more in shoot outs and through sabotage. It's almost appropriate, in a way. The Second World War was the largest conflict in human history, with casualties exceeding 100 million. Millions of bullets, bombs, rockets and shells were fired. Not all of them exploded when they hit – some of them burrowed into the earth, waiting for an errant backhoe or shovel to set them off, perhaps decades later. It's in the nature of a war to keep claiming lives even after it's over. Hiroo Onoda was an unlocked and active weapon, and anyone he perceived to be his enemy would inherit his war.

Kozuka was killed 13 years after Onoda had been declared dead. The lieutenant had ordered a raid on a rice field, but it went awry – police officers shot Kozuka while the rice burned. Onoda was alone. He would remain so for two years.

There is a human fascination with the lost and missing. If we disappear, we'd imagine, there would be an effort to find us. If we die, we hope for a funeral and remembrance. The lost don't have that luxury. Bringing them back into the fold is the least we can do. Kozuka's death hinted at Onoda's survival, and a search for the wayward lieutenant resumed.

It wouldn't be the authorities that finally brought Onoda out of the forests. Norio Suzuki, a man who hadn't even been alive when the Lieutenant's long war started, decided to take it upon himself to find him, stating he was looking for "Lieutenant Onoda, a panda, and the Abominable Snowman, in that order." After only four days of searching, Suzuki happened upon Onoda's hut. Suzuki was rather obviously not a combatant – Onoda described him as a "hippie boy" – which meant that, for the first time in decades, Onoda didn't flee or fight.

He still wouldn't surrender, though. He had orders. He was told they'd return for him.

His commanding officer, Major Yoshimi Taniguchi, had become a bookseller in the years after the war ended. He agreed to accept Onoda's surrender in person. On March 9, 1974, Onoda crept down from the hills. Ever careful, he camouflaged himself with leaves and moved only when absolutely certain he wasn't being observed. As he approached Suzuki and Taniguchi's tent, the major asked him to wait. He was still getting dressed.

Onoda waited. He'd gotten very good at it.

The major handed him a pack of cigarettes with the emperor's crest on them, then read the orders officially ending Hiroo Onoda's long war. 🇺🇵





# Mission: Unclear

**By Edward Smith**





**T**his May, 35 percent of registered voters turned out for England's European Parliament election. As a result, the United Kingdom Independence Party, which is campaigning to cut foreign aid and close the borders to immigrants, cruised to victory – with only 27 percent of the vote – gaining 24 seats in the European parliament and 161 seats in local councils. Believe it or not, you can parallel such low voter interest to the modern military shooter.

Making the leap from Parliamentary elections to FPSes demands a look at the increasingly waning interest of the average voter. In 2010's general election, where England was to choose its next Prime Minister, 65 percent of voters cast a ballot. That number was up from 61 percent in 2005, and 59 percent in 2001, but still the third lowest turnout since 1945.

Take a look at the report on voter engagement by the Hansard Society. Throughout the 2000s, figures in England, Scotland and Wales have hit historic lows. The same is happening in the United States. Despite 8 million new voters registering in time for the 2012 Presidential election, five million fewer ballots were cast than in 2008 – that's just 57 percent of the electorate that turned out on November 6.

Even when the future of a nation's healthcare system is at stake, or when a right-wing party is proposing to slice public spending and increase the defense budget, people, it seems, aren't interested in politics.

It isn't just apathy, or disenfranchisement, these statistics are showing. They highlight a paradox, between availability of information and political engagement. Particularly in the UK, turnout has been lower since the start of the 21st century – since the internet became a go-to resource for facts and opinion. Previously, leaflets, newspaper columns and sporadic party broadcasts were what influenced voters. Today the electorate has free and instantaneous access to a lot more material: blogs, speeches, manifestos, tweets, polls, videos, pictures, status updates.

Given this influx of information – a new set of resources that gives voters access to the entire political histories of anyone they may cast their ballot for – it's understandable that people are overwhelmed. A massive quantity of new data (like stats, quotes, rhetoric and finances) is also available for public scrutiny, in turn complicating decisions on election day. Everything a party promises, you may examine. Everything a politician says, you can fact check.





Herein lies the paradox: though exposure to more political literature and information should increase engagement with the electoral process, it is having the opposite effect. Instead the amount of information is paralyzing. With so much to wade through, it's easier to not vote.

You can also see this pattern, this contradiction, in today's war shooters. First person shooters in the 1990s and early 2000s were based, mostly, around the Second World War and the real events that happened as part of it. The D-Day landing scene and V-2 rocket facility sabotage in the *Medal of Honor* series (*Frontline* and the original, respectively) and the skirmish in Kasserine Pass in *Call of Duty 2* are just a few examples of how older first person shooters used history and reality as backdrops.

Contrast those games with their contemporary counterparts, *Modern* (or even *Advanced*) *Warfare* or newer *Battlefield* entries. These games take place during a genuine conflict – some version of America's war on terror – but there's no congruity with the real world. The enemies are fictional terrorist factions, equipped way beyond real terror organizations. The landscapes are often generically Middle Eastern deserts, mountain ranges, sand covered towns.

Rather than draw on specific peoples, events and places – like in the way the Stalingrad levels did in the original *Call of Duty*, modern shooters present a kind of mood board, a collection of buzzwords and images from the news which fail to specify anything factual about the conflict. The enemies are generalized Terrorists, located in nondescript countries that, at the moment of a game’s release feel the most relevant. Unlike shooters in the late ‘90s, from which you could extract a reasonable amount of knowledge on the Second World War, today’s FPSes have nothing to teach.

It’s because the war on terror is hard to understand. It remains a kind of half-conflict, comprised of non-specific attacks against non-specific opponents. Who is the West fighting in this war? What does it want to achieve? Why did it enter the war in the first place? As the blurb to Evan Wright’s *Generation Kill* reads: “Mission: Unclear. Enemy Unidentified. Duration of Tour: Unknown.”

The Second World War was fought between two opposing sides, both with contrasting ideologies. It was perhaps the last war when America’s victory was complete and unambiguous. That makes for an easy story to tell – in WWII, there were clear good guys and bad guys.





With the war on terror, however, it's difficult to consolidate all of the combat statistics, the contradictory opinions and the moral uncertainties into a cohesive narrative. America's involvement in the Middle East has been racked with controversies and unanswered questions. The debate on whether the West should have invaded has become almost sophomoric. There is no answer. There is no right and wrong. The lines are blurred.

Rather than wade through the information and attempt to unpack this difficult reality, the developers of war shooters, ever cautious about pissing anyone off, have chosen not to bother.

When a game's subject matter arouses such a plethora of opinions – such a spectrum of responses – it's simpler and financially safer to avoid making a statement. A war game with moxie would pick a side – it would get in the ring, armed with an argument, but the FPS genre, despite all of its chest-beating about sales figures and authenticity, remains largely toothless.

There, again, is the paradox. The developers behind shooters have the resources to make an informed, politicized statement, but because the data

is too numerous, the information too complex, the responses too difficult to predict, they won't do it. Much like the modern electorate (British or otherwise), they're afraid to move, paralyzed by contradictions, facts and ambiguities. The sheer quantity of questions that need answering is overwhelming.

On the back of UKIP's European election win, now is a time when England most needs a motivated voter base, a base that will step up and prevent the resurgence of 1950s Conservatism.

Similarly, as the last troops vacate Afghanistan, the West needs to think on its sins, to decide whether the past ten years of brushfire conflict has achieved anything, either for itself or the Middle East.

It's shameful that military games continually don't engage with their subject matter and are merely content to simplify, condense and repackage it over and over. At a time when games should be growing up – when Westerners should be examining closely the behavior of their military during the past decade – war shooters, for the sake of convenience and profit, cower from the discussion. 🙄



# Dear Space Marine

By Aurelius Vento



*Editor's note: Each month, Unwinnable's resident advice columnist dispenses wisdom from the ages in response to your email and Twitter questions. He just happens to do so from 38,000 years in the future. With the help of the ancient computer CHAD and the mecha-tentacled Magos Valence Mak, Tech-Marine Aurelius Ventro of the Imperial Fists delivers the enlightenment of the Emperor to your unworthy human eyes - as only a Space Marine can.*

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\*\*\*1020 ADEPTUS MECHANICUS ARCHEOTECH EXCAVATION  
SITE XB-0701-4155-J SEGMENTUM TEMPESTUS 9041.225.  
G4W6-1\*\*\*

\*\*\*COGITATUM HONORUS ANCIENTUM DIRECTORIUS .//.  
BOOT FILE 709-755-6-EL-3\*\*\*

\*\*\*TEMPORAL COMMUNICATION PROTOCOL INITIALIZED\*\*\*

\*\*\*TRANSMISSION BEGINS\*\*\*

---

Dear Space Marine,

Can you recommend a *Codex Astartes*-approved method of purging insects from the home?

- Chris Maire @dinosaursssssss

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1. **Drone Strikes.** With the assistance of Magos Mak's mechadendrites, I affixed primed bolter rounds and motion detectors to several floating servo-skulls, then programmed them to execute a patrol pattern near the mouth of the cave complex. Periodically we will hear a most satisfying "thud" as a mass-reactive round finds its mark, burrowing into the creature's tainted flesh and exploding it from within. CHAD's research algorithms indicate robotic strikes on unsuspecting targets were a popular and morally acceptable tactic in your time as well.

2. **Plasma Lamps.** In your time, humans employed "bug zappers" to attract insects with light, then fry them with electricity when they approached. I have constructed more efficient analogs using spare plasma cells and some creative wiring. When a pest approaches one of my strategically-placed "plasma lamps," a blast of superheated gaseous matter explodes outward, searing through exoskeletons and flesh with the heat of a supernova. While fusion technology has not yet been invented in your ancient world, CHAD's research suggests access to fissile material is quite easily obtained from one of your many poorly-maintained "nuclear silos."

3. **Flame.** You do own a flamethrower, do you not, Chris Maire @dinosaursssssss? Use it. Use it everywhere in your home.

4. **Live Burial.** Perhaps you already know, Chris Maire @dinosaursssssss, that we Imperial Fists are masters of fortifications. Unfortunately, I do not get much opportunity to develop my construction skills

on this assignment. To keep in practice, I recently devised a scheme to ensnare a particularly large and repulsive insect, a flying beetle of some 1.5 metres' length. First I applied a viscous mixture of Mechanicum glues to an isolated alcove in the cave wall. Then I affixed a small amount of nutrient paste and a crude bell fashioned from spare servos. When the beast attempted to land and consume the paste, its furry legs were stuck in the unyielding glue. Still it undulated, attempting to break free, thus ringing the bell to alert me to its capture. I then approached, carrying an auto-trowel and several bags of rockcrete. I knelt before the creature and began building a wall - slowly, methodically, savouring the beetle's panicked hissing and chattering. When finally the wall was near completion, I imagined I heard it say: "For the love of the God-Emperor, Ventro!" "Yes," I replied, "for the love of the God-Emperor."

For the love of the God-Emperor  
and Holy Terra, I remain  
a most diligent and vengeful  
exterminator of foul xenos-breeds,

Aurelius Ventro  
Tech-Marine,  
4th Company "Fists of Dorn,"  
Imperial Fists Chapter

\*\*\*TRANSMISSION ENDS\*\*\*

**Jeremy Signor** is a radical freelance writer who wanders web sites and mags both big and small as he explores what games mean to him. Enthusiastically examining gaming for over six years now, you can read his thoughts on videogames, tabletop games and other geeky media on his Twitter [@SnakeOfSilent](#). He also craves attention, so don't be afraid to say hi and tell him exactly what you think.

**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](#).

**Edward Smith** is a writer from Derbyshire, England. He contributes to Eurogamer, The New Statesman and Edge magazine.

**Aurelius Ventro** is a Tech-Marine from the 4th Company of the Imperial Fists Space Marine Chapter who won't be born for another 38,000 years, but that doesn't mean he can't dispense wisdom from the 41st millennium. Solicit responses to your pitiful mortal queries at [DearSpaceMarine@gmail.com](mailto:DearSpaceMarine@gmail.com) or at [@DearSpaceMarine](#). The only human he follows on Twitter is [@johnpetergrant](#).

**Amber Harris** is an artist, lover of lore and a *Magic: The Gathering* fangirl. She is trying hard to convince her parents that creating art for a living is a good idea. You can find her art at [cowsgomoose.tumblr.com](http://cowsgomoose.tumblr.com). Follow her on Twitter [@amburgersupreme](#).

## Illustrations:

**Cover:** Stoic Games

**Contest of Attrition:** *The Banner Saga* artwork courtesy of Stoic Games

**Onoda's War:** Photos via Kyodo, Topographical maps from the collection of the University of Texas at Austin

**Mission: Uncertain:** *Battlefield* and *Medal of Honor* stills courtesy of EA, *Call of Duty* stills courtesy of Activision, European Parliament photos courtesy of the European Parliament

**Dear Space Marine:** Amber Harris

**CLICK A PLANETARY BODY TO GO TO  
A DESTINATION**

**VISIT  
UNWINNABLE  
FOR MORE  
GREAT  
STORIES**

**Pitch!**

**Thank  
you for  
reading!**

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