



*This Game Was Made For Me*

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## MEET THE AUTHOR



## VINCE

No matter how many ransom notes  
I send to the local Notary they won't make  
me Pope. I just want the hat, they can keep  
the rest of it. I'll take the stick, too.  
It'd be pretty cool to have the stick

## FOREWORD

I was listening to episode 261 of the Insert Credit podcast where guests of the show Andrés Velasco y Coll and Fünk-é Joseph talked at length about video game zines and the extensive garage-rock merits thereof. After hearing them talk, I realized this might be the outlet that I needed to return to longform writing about gaming. It used to be such an important part of how I processed media for myself, and older friends of mine might remember my old Tumblr account where I would brain dump about every game I had ever completed. The idea of a zine excited me, but I didn't want to do it alone. Luckily it didn't take much asking around in my friend groups to assemble the wonderful contributors in this very zine.

Gaming has always been deeply important to me. It's brought me a lot of entertainment, sure, but it's also helped me make strong bonds with so many of my incredibly talented friends. In this zine I feel so lucky to be able to share the fantastic work of some of these friends with you, and we're excited to bring you our pieces here. The games we talk about are games that went beyond simple enjoyment for us. The games we talk about here are the games that reverberated deep within us and feel like they were laser-targeted to be for us. That sort of deep communication between a game's creators and the audience is something rare and special, and hopefully, it happens or has happened for you in your gaming experiences. We hope you enjoy what we've shared here. It has certainly meant a lot to us.

-Sterling

## SEEK A WAY OUT

In the summer of 2005, I was thirteen-turning-fourteen and learning how to spend all of my time on the internet. Facebook was just starting to eclipse MySpace, *Neopets* (and learning how to cheat at *Neopets*) was still a huge draw even into my teen years, and flash games of every genre ruled the net. One day during this pivotal summer, my best friend and I had just come home from a full day at my community pool, reeking of chlorine, our hair dripping onto the white and blue IKEA couch situated in my family room. We were huddled around my very first laptop—a gift from my incredibly generous grandparents—as it straddled both our laps. Flash game after flash game filled the screen as we took our time picking out one that would entertain us for longer than five minutes. We weren't interested in the offerings where you decapitate Disney princesses, or make *Family Guy* characters say cruder sentences than usual. We wanted something substantial. Then we found it: *The Crimson Room*.

*The Crimson Room* was my first escape-the-room game, and I fell head over heels in love with the genre. It's important for the reader to understand that I was terrible at *The Crimson Room*. I don't think I figured any of it out without the guide my best friend looked up for us. But it didn't matter. The creepy music, the mystery to uncover, our cries of "wait, click that again! Something moved!", the unsettling shade of red splashing the walls of the room I was trapped in—I was obsessed with all of it. My friend and I "completed" the game and immediately sought out more just like it. And luckily for us, escape-the-room games were at their peak on flash game sites.

When I wasn't getting up to l'm-almost-a-real-teenager boundary-pushing antics that summer, I was playing my escape games. And I got good at them! Eventually. Some were scarier than others. Some were downright pleasant. But my favorite—my absolute favorite—were the games where you played as someone with amnesia, or an incorrect understanding of who they were. The games where the puzzles revealed bit by bit the truth about your personhood filled me with a joy that was impossible to explain at the time. It's nearly impossible to explain now. But if you've ever felt wrapped up in a warm blanket on a stormy night, comfy in your pajamas and slippers—it felt something like that. Except creepy, in that delicious way.

Looking back, I wonder if I loved the amnesiacs because I was still working out who I was at that age. Being a teenager is that confusing time between being a child and being an adult, and in a lot of ways it's the worst of both. My sense of self was almost nonexistent at that time, and maybe I felt solace in playing these puzzle games where the

"transcend their fear." The translation info is from a fascinating article I found while researching more about this game. Googling "Ikaruga Lore Guide"<sup>6</sup> will get you there if you're interested.

What spoke to me and what I still admire is the willingness for non-action to be a viable but unstated option. You can match, and often outdo, the violence performed against you in *Ikaruga*. Within the narrative of the game your ship does not ever get hit, however, you kill a lot of people. The lack of violent retaliation in a "Pacifism/Dot Eater" playstyle is shown to be more stubborn and radical than meeting violence head on. The ability to maneuver through violence without succumbing to that violence is, as the game suggests, "transcending fear." Rather than react, you accept that violence will occur. And you deal with that violence (bullet hell lasers in this case) by accepting that you have no control over it. You don't control the NPC ships shooting at you. There is no way you can make them do what you want. You can give into fear and retaliate with deadly force. Or you can make a conscious decision to not engage. In this way, you hone a unique skill set that keeps you safe without endangering your enemy. And given my own desire to stay furious and indignant. And given that I've been attempting Dot Eater runs for nearly ten years. It only stands to reason that I'd have such feelings as

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6 Or click here if you're reading digitally <https://gamefaqs.gamespot.com/pc/757440-ikaruga/faqs/79010>

you google 'Ikaruga' you'll find out you can beat the whole game without shooting your laser. I didn't have to beat my head against anything. Why would I resist these war machines? These big nerds with their big nerd cannons. I didn't have to blow them up. Amongst the shouting and the metal scrape and the failure, failure, failure, I could do my favorite thing. I could do nothing.

I could do nothing at the start of Chapter 1. The bolt laden baddies would cruise by me. "Who's that ship?" they'd wonder. "Must be nobody."

Psych.

I'm gonna win this mech war by blasting crusty 2010s pop and putting my futuristic laser ship on cruise control. I did nothing throughout all of Chapter 1. If I was the same color as the enemy I'd absorb their hits. The only thing I had to do was not collide with their cockpit. And for the most part I didn't. The boss of Chapter 1, the most humanoid mech you fight, will facepalm if you don't kill them. The boss then leaves. Every boss fight has a timer. You just gotta get that clock to zero, dude.

*Ikaruga* has got one of the few instances of bullet-hell platforming. You gotta maneuver around the iron crates in a factory. If you hit them, you blow up. But the Ikaruga (and the player two ship, the Genki)—they've got a secret. Their cockpit is no thicker than a slice of swiss cheese. You can slide between the cracks in those boxes. In practical terms the game devs<sup>5</sup> made the hitbox so slim that, with great precision, it could fit between spaces that look like they'd kill you. I did this in Chapter 2 and 3. I still have not beaten Chapter 4 without shooting. If you're interested, and I'm assuming you are by this point I mean come ON, pacifism runs in *Ikaruga* are dubbed in game as "DOT EATER". That's your score for leaving everyone, including yourself, unscathed. Every other score is a letter grade based on how many dudes you blew up in a row. But you get a special title for not blowing things up in the blow up game. The game tells you "Nice Job For Thinking Different, Kiddo."

Further digging has shown Ikaruga is filled to the *brrrrrrrrrrrrim* with Buddhist imagery. I burrrried the lede again. Part of the red warning before bosses is a message written in Sanskrit. According to a GameFAQs article, the warning is your ship enacting a prayer to help the player character

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5 Hiroshi Iuchi, Hiroshi Iuchi, Hiroshi Iuchi\*

\* Please reference Action Button's Review on Ikaruga found on their website and at other participating locations

character I played suffered from a similar identity crisis. It was around that time I started seeking out books with a similar theme. I continued to be drawn to those same twists of the unknown self. I felt like an unreliable narrator in my own life and needed media that made me feel just the teeniest bit more normal.

Eventually, I played every escape-the-room game I could find on the internet. It took me about a year to exhaust my options. On the way, I introduced other friends to the genre and loved watching them play these games for the first time, games out of which I'd sucked all the juice. But vicarious enjoyment was all I could manage at that time, as I couldn't find any new escape-the-room games to play. Perhaps I wasn't looking in the right spot, or maybe I was getting too picky. Whatever the reason, I was without these precious games for years—just about a decade, even. These games that helped define me, these games that I was actually good at, these games I felt special for discovering on my own, I missed them with my heart of hearts. Until I went on my first date in 2015 with the man who would become my husband.

My four-hour date with Jordan is the subject of a completely different essay, but the relevant aspect is that I told him about my teenage love of escape-the-room games and how I hadn't played in years, and he asked me if I had ever heard of the *Zero Escape* series. You see, I had not heard of the *Zero Escape* series at the time, and Jordan was flabbergasted. He'd assumed that my love of escape-puzzle games would have led me straight to *Zero Escape*—otherwise known as *The Nonary Games*. He successfully described the first game to me, *9 Hours 9 Persons 9 Doors* (otherwise known simply as *999*), as a game about nine people who wake up, seemingly aboard the sinking modern-day Titanic, unable to figure out why they're there nor how to escape. A mysterious entity known only as Zero claims to have put them all there as an experiment, but they must play the Nonary Game to escape within nine hours. Each person has a bracelet with a number on it, and they must use these bracelets to break into groups and enter rooms that are, in fact, escape-room puzzles—each with the instruction "Seek A Way Out." On top of that, there are different timelines that your character, Junpei, must hop between to unravel the true mystery behind Zero and the Nonary Game.

If you've made it this far in this essay, you would not be wrong to assume that hearing about this game was a crucial moment in my life. I asked Jordan, completely stunned, how I'd never heard of this game. He told me it came out for the Nintendo DS, which I'd never owned. I deflated at first, since I had no immediate way to play this game, but he had joyous news for me: Both *999* and its sequel, *Virtue's Last Reward* (*VLR*), were bundled together as *The Nonary Games* on PlayStation

4 and Steam. I ended up waiting to play these games until Jordan and I moved in together, and he could watch me play and live vicariously through me, just as I had done with my friends all those years ago.

999 was 20+ hours of nonstop escape puzzles, with a juicy mystery that swept me away. I was hopelessly captivated and thought about it all the time—at work, when I was out with friends, when I was trying to enjoy other media, *all the time*. I didn't need a single guide to help me through the rooms, and I didn't even need Jordan's gentle prodding. My time as an escape-the-room aficionado prepared me for every nook and cranny of this game. However, that twist ending... nothing could have prepared me for that. I was trying to guess how it would end the entire time I played, but Jordan just gave me coy shrugs and left it at that. Dear reader, I will not tell you how it ends because I truly hope you decide to pick it up for yourself. But I will tell you that my jaw was on the ground, and I'm known for picking up on twist endings long before I'm supposed to.

But 999 isn't the game that was made for me. I thought it was, and in a lot of ways it's perfect for me, but I hadn't played *VLR* yet. It took me a few weeks to pick up 999's sequel. I was grieving the loss of one of the best gaming experiences I'd ever had, and I also missed that cast of characters so deeply. Jordan told me *VLR* would feature an almost-new cast of nine people, and I just wasn't ready to fully embrace new compatriots. But eventually the time came for me to embark on a new adventure—an adventure I've thought about every day for six years.

*VLR* is similar to 999 as it is a direct sequel. There's another Zero, this time known as Zero the Third. There's once again nine people, all with their own shadowy backstories. No one knows where they are or how they got there. Everyone has bracelets, each with a different number on them. There are multiple timelines you need to hop between to solve the overall mystery. And, of course, there are escape-the-room puzzles where you must "Seek A Way Out." But this time something is very different, and it's not only the addition of the Ambidex Game, a puzzle similar to the prisoner's dilemma where this group of people is forced to potentially kill other members by voting to either Ally or Betray. This time, there is a vibe of uneasiness and paranoia, and it's obvious upfront that nothing is as it seems. People are lying to you, and sometimes the way they react to you—a man named Sigma—doesn't make any sense at all. There's something *off*, and I gobbled it up.

In 999, Junpei knows who he is, and he even knows another member of the group—Akane. When you play as Junpei, you have a strong grasp on reality. Junpei is extremely trusting and determined, which makes him a mediocre detective, but good at getting people to

*extra, extra, extra*" right as the warning flashes. Your ship panics. Best I can tell by the time the second boss comes around, it repeats the same warning but slower. By the time the third boss shows up, who is a ferris wheel of Buddhist Hell, your ship is screaming, "IT IS NOW RECOMMENDED THAT YOU KEEP ON FIRING!!" I'm not 100% sure that's what your ship is saying. To me it sounds different from the first warning.

At the end of the game, your ship announces its destruction. Or maybe another pilot announces your destruction. The language is all machine translated and vague and perfect. There is a transcript of those words from a GameFAQs article and they are as follows: "RELEASING RESTRAINT DEVICE. REMOVAL OF THE LIMITER WILL CAUSE OVERHEAT AND POSSIBLE DESTRUCTION OF THE SHIP. WAS I HELPFUL TO YOU? I AM DEEPLY GRATEFUL TO YOU." And then your ship sacrifices itself to stop the final boss.

There's one more unique and quirky mechanic in *Ikaruga*. By which I mean a core mechanic of the game you're forced to play around. If you're the opposite color of the laser that hit you then you blow up. That happened to me a lot. During my early college days I beat my head against that game on a cooked laptop. The laptop would sit on a big pillow. In solidarity I would sit cross-legged on my bed and listen to my computer WAIL at me while I blew up. The second boss, Bupposo, is a giant ship shaped like a Yin-Yang with retractable cannons. That's one of my favorite bosses. Not just in *Ikaruga* but in all of video games. There was a need inside me to beat it. There was no other option. It kept *blowing* me up. There was no way I was going to let it keep me down—this thing! This wretch of my spine nerves, this phlegm in my spaghetti, this petulant blockade!! My destination to sainthood was guaranteed given the halo headaches I got against the Yin-Yang.

Turns out you can't just shoot it. You have to shoot a hatch that opens a weak spot. Then you wedge yourself in the weak spot. If you stay too long, the hatch closes and crushes you. It took me a long time. Ke\$ha's "BLOW" tranced through big Skullcandy headphones while the *Ikaruga* blew up over and over. It took days til I got it. It took days for me to set Bupposo ablaze.

And then I understood *Ikaruga*.

I died again on Chapter 3 and was forced to reflect on how I was wasting my youth. Was I supposed to have found love like the others had? Was I supposed to stargaze with someone who I could feel the weight of the night sky with? I went looking for an answer. Turns out if

Ikaruga is a shoot 'em up. *Ikaruga* is a shmup. It's a bullet-hell. It's got a story, and that story is that you're one of two pilots fighting against an army. Each level has a big boss, and the boss is an important person in that army. Probably. You do fight their mech. You don't fight them. You don't see any people in *Ikaruga*. You can see some in official game art. But not in the game. When you're playing it—when you're playing the game<sup>3</sup>—you don't see like ... like, you don't see a person. Some of the mechs look like people. But, like, people can eat breakfast and decide what kind of butter they want on their microwave waffles. Mechs can't do that. Mechs can't do that in *Ikaruga*—it's not that kind of mech game. It's not a mech game. *Ikaruga* is a danmaku.

*Ikaruga* doesn't have a lot of mechanics. You can shoot a laser. You can shoot that laser in a big beam that shoots all the time or you can shoot it one by one. You can turn your ship blue/white or red/black. The enemies are those colors too. When they shoot a laser at you, their laser will be one of those colors. If you are the same color as their laser, you absorb it, and it goes into a meter for your bomb. Your bombs are homing missiles.

Your ship has a wonderful robot voice that's probably from a real computer and not a voice actor. When they decide to pay robots for their labor, then they can be recognized as a voice actor. It would be wonderful if that happened.

When your bomb is maxed out, your ship will talk to you. Your ship will say "ENERGY MAX." i think it sounds like it's saying "Energy Legs." The ship's voice brings me several full sized halloween candy bars worth of joy each time it speaks. It is my friend. It is direct. It is frantic.

Like. When a boss comes down a bunch of sirens go off and there's bold, red, flashing text on the screen and your ship says, amongst the noise, "WARNING A BIG ENEMY IS APPROACHING AT FULL THROTTLE. ACCORDING TO THE DATA IT IS IDENTIFIED AS 'BUTSUTTEKKAI'."<sup>4</sup> Your final gifts of encouragement are the unspoken words NO REFUGE at the bottom of the warning. And if you've got a high score going, your ship declares, "One chain, two chain-three chai-four-five-six chain-seven chai-eight-nine-extra,

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was experienced.

3 The Game is *Ikaruga* (2001) published by Treasure.

4 Glance Research Indicates this is what the game calls bosses. The Henway Editorial Adjudicator Association has requested a transparent indicator for the acquisition of non-English.

open up to him, especially since Akane openly trusts him. Yes, people are keeping their cards close to the chest, but Junpei is sure he'll figure it out. He has a strong sense of self and a confidence he may not have necessarily earned.

But in *VLR*, reality doesn't piece together as neatly as it is in its predecessor. Something isn't quite right about where you are, or who you're with. Sigma doesn't know anyone, and yet a precocious friend(ish) named Phi acts like she's known you for a while. Others make comments about who you are that don't align with what we, as the player, understand to be true. It's not quite amnesia, as the title of amnesiac belongs to a man in an iron-clad suit named K, but it's adjacent. There's something not quite right about *you*, and that's affecting how the player views the world.

This is where *VLR* beats out *999* for me. While both are perfect gaming experiences for those who love narrative-heavy puzzle-based visual novels, the eeriness and uncertainty of *VLR* had me yearning for more every second of gameplay. The fact that I couldn't quite place why everything about the experience felt so strange and unsettling is exactly what drew me in. I didn't identify with Sigma, even though by all counts I *should have* since he was a very relatable guy—that precarious relationship with the man I was supposed to embody was exactly what I needed out of a mystery. It was like the director, Kotaro Uchikoshi, reached deep into my budding teenage heart and built one last perfect escape-the-room game for me with a narrative I'd always ached for. The puzzles themselves were phenomenal, challenging but not frustrating. The story took turns I couldn't even begin to predict. The main character didn't suffer from amnesia, but there was a mistrust that built over the course of forty hours that nothing was right, and maybe nothing was real.

When people ask me what my favorite game is, I tell them *Virtue's Last Reward* and they give me a wan smile. I've convinced some to play *The Nonary Games*, but most of the time they just nod and smile and we move on with the conversation. But that's alright. After all, *VLR* was made for me.



## MEET THE AUTHOR



## ABIGAIL TYSON

Abigail Tyson is a Narrative Designer in the video game industry, with a soft spot in her heart for visual novels. Before Narrative Design, she worked in marketing and community management for games. When she's not working or writing, she loves to bake gluten free treats, read (especially mysteries and YA fiction), and play games of all sorts (video games, board games, card games, tabletop games, you name it). She's so thrilled and honored to be a contributor to Rumble Pack!

## ENERGY LEGS

"non-violence as a lifestyle is an intimidating concept" It's got all these implications, right? "Hopefully they can show me some grace today" are the words said by a coworker who was so strung out, so toasted about her job, that her tears turned to steam on the way to the coals of her stomach. One day the collective told me that grace in that context means forgiveness and understanding. A dry-heaving sentiment. It's condescending in the context of an action another person can take. Grace implies—for me—do you wanna know what it implies? It's like they've taken my doing-ness away. Why would i give so much power to another person as to allow them to give me grace? There's a part of me that thinks people who say it don't need it. That people are to be treated with dignity by default. Grace-full people act like they've never been to the Outside Place. The world beyond my cable wires backlit fan-whirring tinnitus machine. Some people think that dignity and acknowledgement don't factor into the treatment of our fellow everyone. But i've seen it. In meetings on playgrounds in lunchrooms on trains in the park in the mildew of a green room. The gum under my desk in Algebra 1 told me regular as god rays on the field trip mountain. Some people just want it all.

"What do we do?" i whispered in hushed, rabid, tones to the well loved watermelon delight under the desk. "We gotta stop 'em. We can't let them put all the chains on us, man. We gotta get free and go go go. What do we do, what am i gotta do, how do i get untrapped? How do i fight back?"

The crusted sugar spoke; "Don't let 'em have it."

*Ikaruga* is a game about doing nothing. That's my favorite thing about it. i don't ever have to do anything. i can, as the dads who lament their youth now say, Abide. *Ikaruga* is not for everyone. Some people—they like action games. They like it when the lights are fast and beat your retinas into the world of Legally Distinct Hot Vampire Kink Fics. In the metaphor sense. You can (not) get wet and wild with a Vampire in *Ikaruga*.<sup>1</sup> What *can* you do in *Ikaruga*? Nothing. Nothing is one of your options. God gave us two hands, and *Ikaruga* let me sit on them and make retching noises until i got my way. Waddaya gonna do? Not play one of the most critically acclaimed games on the Gamecube? I sure as h\*ck didn't.<sup>2</sup>

1 Our dedicated group of frothing research lads have asked the narrator to add a citation as required by Article IX Section XIV Subsection 2.b in the Formal Publishing & Euphoria Headache Contract. You signed it, young man. Own the consequences.

2 Submission requirements indicate narrator make clear how the game





## MEET THE AUTHOR



ChromeEdwardian

ChromeEdwardian is your cheerily morbid bachelor uncle, a Maryland ex-pat living abroad in Pennsylvania, a librarian, a writer, a gentleman heathen, spooky kid, and absolute mad lad. She writes under the same name on AO3 and will finish playing *Dark Souls* if it kills her.

## FTL IS THE GREATEST VIDEO GAME EVER MADE

I was at a holiday party last year, and when walking into the 'weed garage' (as designated by the host), I was immediately bombarded with the unique mix of Hookah smoke and marijuana (please note, I live in a civilized state where weed is legal) and a question:

"ERIC!!!!" my friend hollered. "What's a game that you love that's underrated as hell?"

I had to chew on that for a second. As a niche music liking, IPA drinking, pedantic knower of unimportant facts, and overall contrarian, I pride myself on liking underrated things. It's toxic of me, but every time I talk about something that someone around me has never heard of, a year gets added to my lifespan.

But sitting there amongst my friends, I was dumbfounded for a moment. A game I love that's underrated? When I think "game I love," my first thought is *Fallout: New Vegas*. *New Vegas* is probably my favorite video game, full stop. But here's the thing—I don't think *New Vegas* is underrated. I think it's EXCEPTIONALLY well rated. Go google "fallout new vegas video essay" and enjoy hours and hours of content where people sing this game's praises. This game is beloved by such a rabid fanbase that it's slipped into the cultural fabric and has become extremely rated at this point. This game is rated as hell. It's so good. You should go play it if you haven't, and if you don't like it, that's entirely on you because I KNOW the game is good; and if you disagree with me I don't really care.

The point is, my favorite underrated game can't be *Fallout: New Vegas*. I've been thinking about this question ever since, and the part of the question that makes my brain fold in on itself is the word "underrated". What the hell does underrated mean? Does underrated mean something no one's played? Something that I like that other people don't? It's a really weird question to think about— every single game I went through in my head had its own niche and rabid fanbase, and top reviews if you search around. How on earth do we define underrated? Is it a purely vibes-based system?

I didn't come to any huge epiphanies standing there amongst my stoned friends. The answer I finally gave was a bit of a joke (though I'd challenge anyone to disagree with me)—the Windows XP Space Pinball game that came pre-packaged. That game slapped unironically, and once again, if you disagree with me, I do not care. I walked out of the weed garage,



laughter in my wake.

I've been thinking about the word 'underrated' in the context of video games for weeks, ever since that night. What seemed like a relatively random question really got me thinking, what IS my favorite underrated game? What defines underrated for me? For any of us? Is it a personal label, an objective one, do reviews and sales figures come into play? In the interest of personal reflection and discussion, I have finally come to a conclusion.

I landed on *FTL: Faster Than Light* (2012) as my favorite underrated game. Now, I think I'm still a little full of shit on account of I feel this game is probably also very rated (hell, it has a 10/10 on Steam!). People know about this game. But I don't think this game is talked about nearly enough, and I've decided that is a good enough definition of "underrated" for me.

At a high level, *FTL* is a roguelike-like, which is to say, it is like a roguelike, which is a game style that is like *Rogue*, which is an old video game. Roguelikes and roguelike-likes (also sometimes called roguelites) tend to have permadeath (your death ends your run and you start over, usually with some sort of overall system mechanic progress you can make to make future runs easier) and randomly generated content to make grinding repeated attempts more fun. The mechanics and gameplay qualities of the roguelike formula mean that you can take the general philosophy and twist it around to suit your game, meaning that roguelikes are more of a medium than an actual genre of game. Within this framework, *FTL* is a spaceship management and combat sim, set in a far off future. You play as a little scout ship who has info on the rebel flagship, which is integral to destroying the rebel flagship and defeating the rebels.

There are a couple zones you go through, all while completing quests for other ships and destroying the rebel fleet, pirates, and anything else you encounter. Along the way you upgrade your ship, choose the weapons you want to use, select the members of your crew (from a couple possible species of aliens who all have their own stats, pros, and cons), and eventually make your way to the end of your journey where you drop off the crucial info and take on the rebel flagship.

The gameplay loop of *FTL* involves a lot of clicking, pausing, clicking, and hoping you don't get wrecked by the RNG mechanics.

That's the game at a high level. On a more granular level, I need to impress upon you how elegant everything in *FTL* is. How intuitive. Once

horse driving a cart full of goods and a driver and what would happen if the spirit went bad.

It would have to be a bird, then.

He approached a flock of starlings gathered on the monastery grounds, picking at the packed dirt by the stables. He couldn't get too close or they would fly off, but he didn't want to be so far away that the spirit would get...distracted or something, instead of going straight into the birds. He turned around, walking slowly backwards toward the flock. Over by the door to the kitchens, he saw one of the serving men look up and watch him. He must look like such a fool. Young Alistair's not right in the head, they'd say. And so what? Alistair shot back at this imagined slight, burning.

He looked over his shoulder and decided he was close enough. "Alright, are you ready, spirit? I've got some birds for you."

"I thank you for your generosity," said the spirit. "And because you have not betrayed me, I shall not betray you. And I owe you a boon, do I not?"

Alistair's fingers loosened on the cork stopper. "Oh, like a wish?"

"A boon."

"Well, I guess I wish that one day I'll be able to see the world too." And he uncorked the vial. He saw wisps of blue smoke empty out of the vial and dissipate toward the birds. He saw one perk up from its hunt suddenly, its eyes changing from an alarmed white to blue and cloudy. It looked like it had worked after all. The bird took off suddenly, disappearing into the vault of the sky almost immediately.

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Bemused, Morigan stared back at him, his expression idiotic in its assumption of triumph. "Be that as it may, Alistair, I am not teaching you how to change into a bronto."

think. He placed the vial in a place where the spirit could look at the sky and the grass if it wanted to, and then he threw off his robe, grabbed his training sword, and went back to the practice circle.

If the sister had noticed his absence, she didn't care.

1, 2, and 3. 1, 2, and 3. There really weren't any inanimate objects that Alistair could think of that would do what the spirit wanted besides a cart, but carts tended to stay on the same routes to and fro over the years. It wouldn't really be any different from staying bound to the vial. And this was all working under the assumption that Alistair really did have magical abilities, and enough to bind a spirit at that!

He had always suspected he had some latent sensitivity to magic. He had heard the Revered Mother musing over whether he would need lyrium at all in the end. Others doubted it, given his infamous heritage.

When he was finally freed from practice, he still hadn't thought up anything, so he picked up the vial again and tapped softly on it.

"Yes? Have you thought of something?"

"What if I just release you near some wild animals or something, and you swear you will go straight into the animal and stay there. I cannot do any more than that."

The spirit was silent for a moment. "Fair enough. I am surprised you would let me go so freely."

"Well, I'm asking you not to betray me. Really nicely." The spirit thought some more, if that's what was meant by these silences. "And if you do, well, in a few years, I'll be a templar, and I'll hunt you down and banish you back to the Fade. Probably very painfully."

The spirit laughed. "Very well."

Alistair sighed heavily and went to wipe himself down before getting started. He skulked through the halls of the monastery until he came to the main entrance. He wasn't necessarily forbidden from leaving the monastery. But standing before the entrance like that, with the whole world laid out before him just on the other side, gave him pause. He breathed slowly, and went outside. He thought the spirit might prefer being bound to a bird, since they weren't domesticated and could go wherever they wanted. But horses were bigger and probably lived longer if they were lucky. Then again, Alistair thought about a spirit-possessed

you've played and died a few times, you start noticing patterns in the weapons, what systems you like to use, what weapons and drones you personally will always pick up when presented with them, what routes you like to go down—this game is OOZING with personal choice.

All of the game mechanics are well thought out and deep while being straightforward enough that they work with the 'pick up and play' style of the roguelike mechanics it's built upon. Every time you jump sectors, there is a moment of trepidation as you wait to see what the game's procedurally generated encounters have in store for you. There is a frantic beauty to the micromanaging required to move crew members in and out of combat, to carefully balance the time you can spend having them recover HP in the infirmary versus the amount of time they can fight—or how long enemy intruders can spend destroying your shit. And destroyed your shit will be, OFTEN. I've lost a lot of runs to one mistake snowballing; an enemy ship kills my crew or deals too much damage to my shields, and even though I survive the encounter, I don't realize I've lost my run until I've hopped sectors a few more times.

Speaking of intruders, there's a lot of little tricks you pick up after playing *FTL* so much. One of my favorites is when faced with intruders, you can vent all the oxygen from your ship, and, with a large enough infirmary, the rate that the infirmary heals your crewmates at is the same as the rate at which they take damage from having no oxygen. The intruders die and your crewmates don't. I'm realizing now how brutal a sentence that is out of context, but little things like that make you feel like you're really mastering the mechanics. There's so many decisions to make: at what sector to upgrade your shields, which encounters are worth fighting through, what type of approach you'll take, what types of weapons or ship layout you prefer—it's all there.

There's even quests to unlock more ships. At the start you'll only have the Kestrel, a repurposed federation ship. Each ship has three variants (with the exception of the two *secret ships*), and they're all unlocked via achievements, quests, or just beating the game with the previous variant (which are all options that are just difficult enough to require multiple runs to achieve them, but just enough in reach that you feel ENCOURAGED to go for them, changing up your usual routine or run strategies). One core part of most roguelikes that cements the gameplay loop as so addictive is your progress outside of and between runs (a way to control your gameplay experience outside of RNG), and *FTL*'s version of this let's players other ships that each have their own crew, load-out, and aesthetic.

All of this elegant chaos is paired with what I have decided is the best

video game soundtrack of all time. I have a degree in music, so my source is “dude, trust me,” but just go google “FTL music”, close your eyes, and be washed away. *FTL*’s soundtrack was written by Ben Prunty, a composer who I have utmost respect for—dude is an absolute master. I can honestly say that a large part of the reason I have so much love for *FTL* is the music and general sound design. The sounds of *FTL* hit a perfect balance between lonely, contemplative, excited, and dangerous. Some standout examples of this are the title track (“Star Cruise”), which starts off quiet and serene before quickly building up with a second synth voice outlining the main melody (a quick “plucked” sequence, awash with delay and reverb), and then finally it hits its apex with electronic drums and a counterpoint melody reminiscent of laser beams whizzing around during ship combat. It stays in that section for a little bit before mellowing back out and building up on the original, “chill” A-section of the piece. The title track of this game is so evocative of what’s to come, as well as so mesmerizingly catchy, that all it takes is those first two notes to make me smile.

Another favorite feature of the soundtrack (and something that outlines another part of its brilliance) is the different themes *FTL* has for each species’ sector. One version plays while there’s no battle happening, and the other version plays when you’re in the throes of spaceship combat. The Mantis exploration theme is quiet and contemplative to the point of almost being unnerving. Each section of the melody is handled by a different instrument, from a sad plucked bell-like synth, to a slightly detuned glassy lead, to a somewhat grimey bassline—they all take a few measures of the same simple melody and pass it along, almost like performers playing their own take on an existing motif. The result is a deeply compelling lullaby almost whispering to your ship, speaking of mysteries to unravel, places to visit, and danger on the horizon.

When you jump to the next jump point and see an enemy spaceship laying in wait, and battle begins the exploration theme seamlessly transitions into its battle variant. “Mantis (Battle)” shares the same instruments as its exploration-themed companion track, but with a frantic underlying beat. Glitchy hi-hats speak urgently under those same melodic motifs we heard before, but the lullaby is shifted. What was once a song compelling us to move forward into the great unknown becomes the terrifying known. The melodies are the same notes being passed along by the same instruments, but they’re now overlapping each other, almost shouting their neighbors down in a desperate attempt to scream “DANGER, DANGER” at you as missiles lock onto your hull. Just thinking about it gives me chills. *FTL*’s sound design is such a work of art that any time I experience any media set in space, I find myself mad that it doesn’t sound like *FTL*. There is absolutely nothing like it. Just wait for a

“You...can let me see the world.”

“I don’t think I’m allowed to uncork you...so.” Maker, he sounded like a child. “Allowed” indeed.

“Peace. I don’t need freeing from this object. It has allowed me to see things as a part of this world. No, I only wish to be set with a being who will take me far and wide. Throughout Ferelden, throughout Thedas.”

“You mean, like putting this vial in someone’s pocket?”

“That would suffice. Although, I fear I wouldn’t see much from inside a pocket.” The voice laughed.

Alistair thought it sounded like the spirit was hinting at something more akin to possession. He still needed to be careful.

“You have...magical abilities?” ventured the voice.

“No! I mean, not yet. And they wouldn’t even count as magical. Since I’m a templar. Novice. So actually I’m probably better at banishing spirits than...helping them.” There he went babbling.

“Ah, but I do sense magic in you regardless. My entire being vibrates in kind.”

“What exactly are you asking? If not a pocket, then what?”

“Bind me to a bird, or to a horse. Something that sees!”

“Erm...I don’t think I can do that.” It would be fantastic if he could, though. Alistair would be lying if he didn’t envy mages’ magical abilities sometimes. Ignoring all the other sticky parts, of course. “What...what about a cart? Or a walking stick?”

The voice was silent for a moment. “Find what you can. I will grant you a boon.”

Alistair sighed. “Oh alright. Why don’t you come with me in the meantime so you can ‘see’ something else.”

“I would be much obliged.”

Alistair left the restricted stacks, dodging a pair of old sisters walking through, and the rest of the library, and went out to the courtyard again to

there?”

“Oh..erm. A friend. Maybe?” He felt a little silly, so he tried thinking the words very loudly in his head. “Can you hear me?”

A pause. “Yes, I can. What’s happening out there?” The voice was low, steady, and gruff.

“Wait, wait, what are you? Who are you?”

“Last I remember, I was called a Spirit of Travel. Someone...a mage called me here. What’s that around you?”

Alistair’s stomach rolled with excitement. “Books. What are you doing in the vial?”

“A library then? But where?”

“The... a monastery. Ferelden.”

“Thank you. Mm...I was summoned as part of a quick travel spell. Must have been...what year is it now?”

“9:25, Dragon.”

The spirit let out a soft mournful sigh. “Nearly forty years ago, then.”

“I suppose...I suppose you want me to let you out?” Alistair said quietly, but the spirit kept talking over him. He smarted a little at that.

“The mage who bound me made a deal with me, to bring me along on her travels so I could see more of the world than what I could see from the Fade. In return I would allow her to travel instantaneously from point to point. But I see that as soon as she reached this first destination, she cast me aside and went along her way. No longer in such a hurry.”

“Oh.” This wasn’t going to be as interesting as he thought if the spirit was only going to talk, but he did have to admit it was nice talking to someone not already prejudiced against him.

“And so I’ve seen nothing but dust collecting on these monastery bookcases, and I am weak from the disappointment.”

“Can I do anything for you?” he asked, bracing for the answer.

rainy day, turn the lights off, and listen to the *FTL* OST. And then probably play *FTL*.

If you haven’t gotten this by now, *FTL* has a lot of content. They actually added an “advanced mode” that shipped with a release of the game, that adds even MORE content, though you can switch it off. I’ve never turned it off. Want to know something else I’ve never done? I’ve never beaten *FTL*. I’ve never once, not even one time beaten the Rebel Flagship final boss at the end. I’ve been playing this game off and on for ten years. And I play on easy every single time. I have never once tried any difficulty that isn’t easy, and I’ve never beaten the game.

But here’s my weird, absolutely biased take. I think this is fine. I think the fact that the game is essentially a full game with an unreasonably tuned boss at the end is fine. I’ve lost to that damn rebel flagship hundreds of times and never felt like it makes the game any less fun for me. A more informed writer might talk of the political or emotional ramifications of this, the fact that an unpassable final boss is all that stands between you and the game’s credits, that there’s something meaningful in the fact that the final boss is just armed to the teeth with missiles, drones, and lasers. But here’s my only take: I think it’s fine. I think it’s incredible that the rest of the game is so damn fun that I don’t even care.

I’ve been replaying a lot of *FTL* in the last couple days, I found some overhaul mods that add in a lot of fan made content to spice it up a little bit after 10 years of losing to the rebel flagship. There’s actually a huge fan modding community for *FTL*—two of the most popular ones you’ll see are Arsenal+, and *FTL: Multiverse*. Arsenal+ is more of an even more advanced-advanced edition: It adds a bunch of weapons and events, and makes a bunch of changes to the existing ships. It’s been a lot of fun, adding a refreshing wave of new content for someone who’s pretty extensively played the base game. *FTL: Multiverse* however, is a bit of a different beast. Multiverse is a full overhaul of the game, one that requires an entirely separate mod to run. Running on top of *FTL: Hyperspace* (described by their website as “a *FTL* hard coded modding API”), Multiverse is not just a complete overhaul of the game with different weapon types and values, it introduces a plot and some new system mechanics and UI. It takes place after the original plot of *FTL*, and introduces a frankly staggering amount of new EVERYTHING, feeling more like a fully fleshed out sequel to *FTL* than a simple mod. I’ve only played a couple hours of Multiverse, but I can personally say it is one of the most impressive community efforts I’ve ever seen for a game this old.

I think at the end of the day, it’s pretty clear this game isn’t underrated.

But I also think that I don't care. Call it a bit of personal growth for a person who recoils in pain at the idea of liking popular things or maybe call it delusional on my part for trying to call a game underrated when it was (in its time) a big part of the boom of roguelike video games, but I find myself always coming back to this game. I absolutely think it has a place in your Steam library, even now in 2023. It certainly has a place in my heart. (BTW, if you've beaten the rebel flagship, I don't care and don't want to hear it. I'll get him someday.)

scolded and sent to practice without any answer. But if it was written by a sister, then the monastery must have it in its restricted stacks. And that was exactly where Alistair was headed.

He stood in front of the expensive glass doors of the bookcases, looking reverently at the titles. He tried at one of the handles, but it was locked. He stepped back, sighed, and walked around the little alcove, testing for a door that someone might have left unlocked by accident. At fifteen, he was already fairly tall, so he reached up to the tops of the bookcases to feel around for any spare keys that might be stashed there. No luck at all. He turned around to do a second pass, and this time, his fingers brushed against something new. Not a key, but it was cold and smooth. His heart raced with triumph and he plucked it from the bookcase to take a closer look.

It was a glass vial, swirling with blue smoke. It looked a little like lyrium, but it didn't sing to him the way lyrium did when he got too close to it. And the templars had never mentioned lyrium being cold. It wasn't a phylactery either, if he understood what those were correctly. Alistair grinned at this great new mystery in his hands. Much better than a book.

He sat down on the floor, put the vial before him, and examined it. There was a little cork stopper. The most direct way to figure out what it was would be to go for that first. But he had read enough to know that he needed to be cautious. He might accidentally summon a demon, or a revenant, or some other nasty thing he wouldn't be able to handle. Everyone else might think he was thick, but Alistair knew he wasn't.

Being only a novice, he didn't have any templar abilities that would allow him to neutralize the magic, and honestly he probably wouldn't want to do that anyway. And the likelihood of one of the remaining templars finding him back here and lending a hand was non-existent. So--

The vial shook. It was subtle, but Alistair had been staring at it so intensely that he saw it. He snatched it up again. "H-hello?" Okay, maybe he was thick.

He got the singular impression of someone tapping on glass. Alistair steeled himself. He couldn't let himself be deceived by whatever demon or spirit was residing inside. Even if the thought of unleashing some Fade spirit upon the monastery was more exciting than anything the place had ever seen before.

The tapping stopped, and a voice entered Alistair's head. "Who's out

**OUT THERE**  
by ChromeEdwardian  
a Dragon Age fanfic

It was at the monastery at Bournshire, of course. They didn't let him go anywhere in those days. They had taken a handful of his cohort to Kinloch Hold as a "fun outing," but Alistair had not been invited since his attitude made him unpopular with the templars and the sisters. So the monastery had fewer figures of authority roaming around finding reasons to give him a hard time.

He had been in the monastery courtyard, perched on the fence of the training circle and re-reading the Cantic of Silence when he should have been practicing his stances. Ser Agnetha wasn't there though, and had been substituted with Sister Berenice who was more concerned with her large needlepoint treatment of Andraste-on-the-Pyre than with watching a middling templar novice go through the same three moves.

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*And with a heavy heart / Returned to unassabile Minrathous / To prepare his people for the doom to come.* Alistair closed the little chapbook and tossed it with the rest of his things. He stretched, bored, in the warmth of the courtyard. His time was much better spent doing things that actually interested him, rather than this busy work. He actually knew the stances very well. He just didn't like doing them. But all the templars saw was willful disobedience, so they kept him on stances until they decided he was disciplined enough for their liking. Alistair stood, balancing himself on the fence, and looked over at the sister. She was hunched over, holding her project close to her face.

At a split second's decision, he leapt off the fence, scooped up his belongings, and ran back into the monastery to do something, anything, else.

He was still only in his shirt and breeches, and it was chilly in the halls of the monastery, so he went back to his room to get his novice's robes. As he pulled them over his head and cinched the rope around his waist, he had an idea. This was an ideal time, while the monastery was quiet, to see if he couldn't get his hands on some of the restricted items in the library. He had been reading everything he could about the Fade and demons and magic that was available to him, but these tertiary sources kept referring to texts that weren't accessible to mere novices. He had asked about them once, particularly "Of Fires, Circles, and Templars: A History of Magic in the Chantry" by Sister Petrine, but he had been

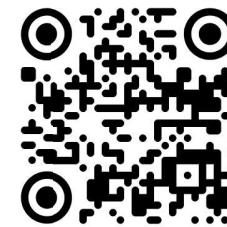
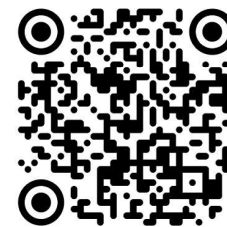


## MEET THE AUTHOR



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## SPRINTING TO THE MODERN ERA: MINECRAFT SEVTECH AGES

I've played *Minecraft* for over ten years now, and it's gotten a bit stale. The best thing to combat staleness is to slap some mods on an existing game, and BAM: it feels like a whole new experience. Modding PC games has become somewhat more common since I started gaming—you can even download mods for your console games now! Some mods add gorgeous cosmetics, while other mods provide “quality of life” adjustments. But total conversion mods like *SevTech: Ages* fundamentally change the theming, progression, and mechanics of the underlying game. *SevTech: Ages* is one of the most unique, engaging, and complex modpacks I've had the pleasure of playing through. Before we get into the mod itself, though, I'd like to write a short love letter to *Minecraft*.

*Minecraft* itself, or “Vanilla *Minecraft*” to differentiate it from “Modded *Minecraft*,” is a classic for a reason. Its seemingly limitless sandbox play and blocky aesthetic inspired many beloved games over the years. It is a staple of cozy game lists worldwide and is one of the first games I played together with my now-husband.

Simplistic gameplay is perhaps why it became so universally known, but it is that same simple game which lends itself so beautifully to being added to and expanded upon. In most modified versions of the game, you can still do things like build the Crafting Table out of logs you punch out of a tree, but *SevTech: Ages* is something quite different.

Its tagline is “from stone to space.” Instead of the usual structureless block-building entertainment of Vanilla *Minecraft*, this mod essentially applies strict partitions around these technological ages: Stone Age, Bronze Age, Middle Age, Industrial Age, Modern Age, and Futuristic/Creative Age(s). These partitions change recipes, alter game mechanics, restrict or restore your ability to see certain materials, and allow you to construct better and better machines as you progress. I cannot properly articulate the confusion I felt when I could not “punch-tree-get-wood” or even make a proper Crafting Table when I did finally get Wood. Usually those two things are the first things I do in a new world no matter the mods! Ore is invisible in the tutorial! Bonkers! It made me completely rethink the very bedrock of the game and what it could be.

Each age has a specific item that you must obtain, craft, or place in order to progress to the next age. Those items increase in complexity as you advance, requiring you to pass through many different tech trees through the Advancement screen before attaining your goal. The way this works

outside of it in the end. In *FE3H* particularly, players don't get the entire story in just one run. Each route contributes new information to the player's understanding of What Happened Here. The lore is not always just laid out before me, but instead, revealed through inference and cross-referencing. Learning a new piece of information puts those decisions I've made in a broader context.

I mostly engage with this playground of useless facts by writing fanfiction. I've found that having an entire realized world to find my niche to settle into is much more satisfying than having free reign over everything. I can pick an aspect of the world that interests me—for example, the ancient Tevinter magisters in *DA:O* who became the Archdemons—and tug on its string until I find out everything I can. I hunt down the details that will put my stories within these worlds. But sometimes you run out of lore to dig into and you still have questions that will *never* be answered unless a new game comes out. Were the magisters even real? If not, where did the Archdemons and darkspawn come from? If so, what does that say about the literalness of the continent's theology, or the schism that divides Tevinter's Andrastianism from everyone else's? Perhaps it's a failure of the game to not address the things I'm curious about (a sentiment fairly lobbed or not), but at least there's the sense that there *is* an answer out there in the world of the game, and maybe there is meaning in their absences.

It's like a ball pit—just deep and chaotic enough that I can wallow in my enjoyment, but not so deep that I can't touch the bottom. History of the real world is too endlessly complex and too tangled up in human lives to get the concrete answers I'm looking for.

Unfortunately, there are dead ends in real life too. I am writing this in the echoing eaves of a library, surrounded by lore I don't have time or interest enough to sift through. It won't tell me why melancholy settles down on my heart, how I will meet the love of my life, or when I'll be able to afford a home of my own. But perhaps I decide the Adrestian Empire has some similarities to Renaissance Italy and I toss in some cypress trees. I name a Pentaghast OC something vaguely Greek. I decide the court of King Maric was filled with large communal feasts every night, or that Edelgard was able to kill Thales herself, or that Seteth can sprout a dragon's dick if he wants to, or that Alistair has some magic tendencies, or the Crests can lay dormant in your blood when the goddess lives inside you, or that the Chasind trail signs in the Korcari Wilds are more than just an asset in one area of the game. Or, or, or, or...



I suppose I could say that *Fire Emblem* also found me at the right time. I moved away from ten years' worth of support systems for work, and then there was a pandemic. I was lonely, overwhelmed, restless. By the time 2022 rolled around, I thought maybe I'd adjusted. But then I finally played *FE3H*, which I'd heard was good. And it *hurt*.

I don't know much about the *Fire Emblem* series as a whole, but this particular installment follows Byleth, a mercenary in her<sup>2</sup> father's band of sellswords, who is suddenly put in the position of instructing a class of young adults at a parochial academy in the art of war. Throughout the course of a year, Byleth gets to know her students and colleagues, coming to care about them as people and taking an incredibly influential role in their lives. These students ultimately end up needing to use those skills in a war that will change the cultural landscape of Fodlan for years to come, and the relationships the characters have built end up under immense strain. It's a game of politics whose entire crisis is that the history most people know is ultimately false.

I sit in my armchair playing this game and grieving over another world's upheaval. Yes, this is the longest I've ever stayed in one location since reaching adulthood. Yes, there's been a pandemic and I've no friends or lovers around. Yes, I am experiencing things I need to escape. Yes, I want to feel something. And yes, the decisions I have to make in this game and in *DA:O* are difficult, and the fate of a country will rely on what I decide, but at least I can make them, and they *will* have an impact. And oftentimes, a knowledge of the lore makes these decisions harder, or more emotionally weighty.

Lore is inconsistent reckonings, unreliable narrators, the sense that there is more out there if you choose to find it. How often did we hear Loghain railing against the unseen Orlesian army? How many times did we hear about Holst von Goneril or the Count von Bergliez, who never made an appearance? What exactly did Those Who Slither In the Dark do to Edelgard and Lysithea? Why did the humans showing up make elves lose their immortality?<sup>3</sup> A world with sufficient lore is one I can disappear into, regardless of why I want to. Lore is escapism, so I buy the tie-in books. I haunt the fandom wikis. These games give me huge swathes of lore going back centuries. The feeling that these worlds have *histories* that actually have an impact on the game that I can piece together like an amateur historian or archaeologist in a universe where nothing actually matters

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2 f!Byleth supremacy, soz.

3 Dragon Age: Inquisition was not my favorite game, but ho boy, does that game have lore.

in game is something like this: You need a bed to set your spawn point. In the Stone Age, Beds don't exist, but you can make a Sleeping Mat which is made with a few pieces of Leather and some Thatch. Crafting Thatch is relatively simple, involving crafting, drying, and chopping Rushes (plants which must be found as Agriculture is not yet 'invented'). But Leather is quite the process.

To make leather, you have to kill a cow for its Cow Pelt and scrape the Pelt with a Flint Workblade. The Flint Workblade is made with a Stick, Twine (crafted from Plant Fiber, which is acquired from breaking Tall Grass), and Flaked Flint which is acquired from a Sieve and then processed. A Sieve is crafted with Sticks and Twine, thankfully one of the simplest machines. Once you have the Sieve you take a piece of Gravel and take the resulting Flint and hit it against whatever stone based block is handy to get the Flaked Flint. There are other types of Flint pieces, so you must be sure to use the correct one! Craft the Workblade with the Cow Pelt to get Raw Hide. This is the raw product that you will treat and cure to become Leather.

Take your Raw Hide. Drench it in Water and Salt. How does one get those, you may ask? This is clearly well before the Iron Age, and therefore, no Buckets are to be found. Well. You need a Fluid Bladder. This is made with two Brown Floral Powders, an Ink Sac, and three Twine. Usually you can kill Squid to get Ink Sacs, but no squid spawn in this age either! You must craft a Grindstone to process Flowers into Dye and then again into Floral Powder. What on EARTH is a Grindstone?? One: the most annoying machine in the game until you hook up a Buffalo to run it for you, and two: doesn't matter, you need one. It's made out of six Stone and one Stick, which, sure, it SOUNDS easy, but at this stage you cannot yet craft a Stone Furnace. You have to make a Kiln!! Which means Clay and fire (you get Clay from rivers; I don't even know how to get fire because we started ours with lightning, and I am not joking) and baking the Kiln itself before you can even use it... and then you have to POWER it somehow. Probably with Low-Grade Charcoal. Oh, and you need Salt, which is one of the few things you have to go out and mine and it is a PAIN!! Once you've made the Kiln to cook the Stone to craft the Grindstone to pulverize the Powder to craft the Ink Sac to create the Fluid Bladder to craft with the Salt... only then do you finally get Salted Hide. Oh, and we're not done yet.

You now have to put your painstakingly treated Salted Hide on a Drying Rack (don't even ask; it takes FOREVER to get this one thing and please do not make my mistake and make Item Racks first!!) to get Dried Hide. Then you drench AGAIN with your Fluid Bladder filled with Water together with Resin. After all this, Resin is at least straightforward. You

simply grind Bark, which is carved off of placed Wood Blocks using your handy-dandy Flint Workblade. Oh, and did I mention that the Grindstone is not automated in this age? You have to sit there and keep it going constantly until it finishes. The second drenching produces Wet Tanned Hide, which must be dried to turn it into Leather. Congrats! Now you have Leather. Oh, and the Sleeping Mat has a durability bar, so expect to do this often. I was the dedicated leatherworker during much of the time I was on that server because it was so labor intensive to supply six players with all the gear they needed. I adore this modpack for being such a stickler for involved processing.

All these silly little Advancement tasks help you build into more industrial eras, where you can access other dimensions like The Betweenlands, The Beneath, and Twilight Forest. You get more and better machines to streamline your otherwise grueling manual crafting; you get power generation and use it to process steel, inscribe chips for electronics, and eventually build a Galacticraft Rocket. This is no small endeavor even only operating within just the *Galacticraft* mod, but with the altered recipes and the partitioned Ages it felt extremely satisfying to finally have enough to make it happen. Especially since there's not really a time when you fully abandon all tech from previous ages. You may find yourself, like me, returning to the Stone Age Work Stump with your Crafting Rock for some additional survival gear before you finally leave for the Moon!

Once you land on the Moon, you unlock the last age(s): Futuristic/Creative. I admit, I've never made it past this point because my group decided we were going to stop before making computers. Even so, the entire experience was very immersive, like I was some sort of Minecraft based time traveler speedrunning into the modern era. I had a lot of fun on the journey there, and perhaps someday I'll dust that modpack off and enjoy it again! I hope you try it out for yourself. Maybe you'll even make it farther than my group did and see the Creative Era. If you do, let me know what the future is like.

## LORE: A DREAM OF ANOTHER WORLD

The two great video game loves of my life are *Dragon Age: Origins* (*DA:O*) and *Fire Emblem: Three Houses* (*FE3H*).<sup>1</sup> They have a lot in common—big international maps, characters you can deepen relationships with, tactics-based combat, blood magic, church, *dragons*. Most importantly, they have lore. Names of characters I'll never meet, extant codex entries from songs, prayers, publications. References, name drops, legends that are only tangential, there for flavor. Questions of “what happened here?” abound.

I didn't start playing video games until college when my tastes were more fully formed than they might have been if I started earlier. But you know, some games come to you at the exact right time. Senior year of college was rough. A heady miasma of chemical imbalance and interpersonal angst had me in a difficult position. But then I played *DA:O*.

The game is a fantasy RPG where the player character is enlisted to become a Grey Warden, an order dedicated to ending catastrophic invasions of demons, dragons, and Darkspawn, known as the Blight. When an act of betrayal results in the player character becoming one of the two only remaining Grey Wardens in the country, she must cobble together allies and armies to defeat the Blight anyway. *DA:O* is succeeded by two sequels that expand upon the world of Thedas. It was my first RPG, my first third person game, my first game where I could actually develop my character's relationships (during a time in which I was mired in an unhealthy friends with benefits arrangement). The best part, which I didn't realize until later, was the lore. *DA:O*'s codex entries number in the hundreds, some of which date back thousands of years. Thedas is a world with deep lore (and Roads). It's home to fully-fleshed out characters who talk to one another and to you. The music is beautiful, and the menu music apparently imprinted upon me enough that just hearing it takes me back to 2013. Beyond the typical high fantasy aesthetics and late-2000s graphics, it's bleak and dark and fucked up (hello Broodmother!). It's also goofy and weird, and in some places, elements remain unexplained that have you going “wait, what's that supposed to mean?” That's lore. That's what whets the appetite to hunt down what exactly that is supposed to mean.

I sometimes wonder whether any old game I played at that time would have become My Game. Or was it the lore-filled world where my choices matter that spoke to me in my vulnerability?

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<sup>1</sup> The actual game that was made for me is *Bloodborne*. I haven't played it though. FromSoftware hates me specifically.

## MEET THE AUTHOR



David Bowman

David Bowman is a writer from Maryland. His work has appeared in Thrice Fiction, DomiCile, and on MAGFest's MAGES blog.

HOLD 'SPACE' TO SLOW DOWN

## MEET THE AUTHOR



SMATTERDOODLE

SMATTERDOODLE is a nonbinary trans swamp creature from another realm temporarily residing in Seattle. They are often found making horrid purring noises in a pile of blankets. They are known from their 2 frame cameo in MoPOP'S Minecraft exhibition and their occasional hobby modeling for alt fashion styles. They can be reached at [smatterdoodle@gmail.com](mailto:smatterdoodle@gmail.com) excepting rainy days due to their poor aching bones.

## A MAN AND HIS ULTRA

Have you ever seen a video game geek out about something? Ever play a game with such an earnest love for its source material that every detail is passionately, excitedly *right*? That's 1998's *Ultraman: Fighting Evolution* for the Playstation 1.

*Ultraman* is a Japanese franchise older than commercial video games about a 40 meter tall alien fighting equally sized monsters. This original series was started by the guy who headed special effects for *Godzilla*, Eiji Tsuburaya, who took a break from making ridiculously successful movies to make a few ridiculously successful TV shows. These shows, and by extension these characters, went on to become a foundational pillar of modern Japanese pop culture. Even if you've never seen a single episode of any of the *41 seasons* that make up the franchise, you've almost certainly seen some incarnation of the titular Ultraman in passing. Maybe you've heard the song about being unable to beat Air Man, which uses the words "Ultraman Seven" (the title of the second or third season of the show depending on how you count) as a chorus. Maybe you've seen an anime where the characters go to a summer festival and buy masks, and one of the masks on the wall has big yellow eyes on a silver face. Perhaps you've played *Katamari Damacy* and rolled up a huge red and silver hero named "Jumboman" doing a wrestling move to a giant monster. All these things and more are because of *Ultraman*.

You know, this guy:



sometimes, I stumble when I try to shift my perspective. All it took was seeing it through her eyes to remember that *Depression Quest* is right: our outlooks make all the difference in the world.

Fig 1: This guy

that will keep the cold gray fog from overtaking me. In the years since I first played *Depression Quest*, I have sunk to my lowest lows and seen my highest highs. I have been paralyzed by a sense of futility, leading me to give up things I once loved for years at a time, and I have reclaimed those things, attempting them anew.

There are days when I will have to make choices very similar to the ones the Player Character faces. The day I drafted this portion of the essay, I was exhausted from a day full of repetitive, faceless meetings and undoing edits to a document for work because the project manager changed her mind about what content should be included. I wanted to watch TV all night and ask my partner if we could order dinner so neither of us had to cook, but because I've been regularly going to therapy, taking my medications, and reminding myself of the way such things have made me feel in the past, I took my time preparing dinner. After we ate, I went to the basement to write this down. I felt good—even proud.

I do not believe I played *Depression Quest* dishonestly. I do not believe I missed the point. It's just that its simulation is limited, structured in a way that cannot account for the things beyond our control. Now, revisiting it years later, I have the words to describe the places where it falters. Though *Depression Quest* carries in its design the possibility of a feedback loop, it does not show how those who have developed healthy coping mechanisms for their depression can still struggle to cope with perfectly normal events because one or two things go wrong in succession, knocking them off their game.

I entered this essay intending to say something like “*Depression Quest* may have value for those that have only just started down the path to recovery, but it offers very little to someone who has been in long-term treatment.” That is too broad, but being asked to inhabit the role of someone who is dealing with all of this for the first time while also being primed to recognize the moments where your small decisions could send you into a gray, numb mindset for days on end makes it difficult not to make “positive” choices.

After my partner's playthrough, she and I talked through her experience. She, too, got the relatively positive ending on her first run. As I pestered her with questions, she twisted at the end of her French braid.

“It felt good to do the things I knew were right and see that they helped,” she said. I sat on our couch for a moment before grabbing a notebook to write down her responses. I may have developed lots of little tricks for untangling my thoughts and seeing through the cognitive distortions—I keep a list of them on my office cork board—but

The thing that made *Ultraman's* action scenes good wasn't just the masterful and deeply charming special effects work of its creators; what made those fight scenes work so damn well was the choreography. Ultraman, facing up against every flavor of gigantic alien monstrosity, almost always fought unarmed. What resulted was a no holds barred melee combat consisting of only those attacks which were the most flashy and fun to watch. Put another way, Ultraman is a pro wrestler if a pro wrestler was the size of a building and could suplex Godzilla. *Ultraman* is also excellent as a show for many other reasons, but suffice it to say that he and his peers were hotter than hot in late '60s Japan.

If *Ultraman* is a franchise stretching back to the past, *Virtua Fighter* was a 1993 fighting game that felt like it was stolen from the future. Fighting games up to this point had flirted with the third dimension in passing, but only with two-dimensional characters. *Virtua Fighter* eschewed the pixel for the polygon, sculpting its cast out of three-dimensional triangles instead of two-dimensional squares. Not very *many* triangles, mind you; the hardware the game ran on simply wasn't powerful enough to render more than a handful, and it certainly couldn't draw pictures (known as textures) on top of them. Instead, each polygon consisted only of a single, flat color. Despite all these limitations, *Virtua Fighter* managed to convey extremely convincing interaction between two human shaped figures battling across three dimensions. There are animations in this game that still impress me today. If it was only beautiful it would still be an important milestone in the medium, but it's also *extremely smart*.

It features a set of inputs so simply mapped to function that by merely telling you what they are you're able to play it: Punch, Kick, and Guard. You can alter your attack timings, push different directions while you press these, press them at the same time, but at the end of the day 90% of what you're doing is one of those three things. Most fighting games up to this point involved twice as many buttons, so why simplify? *Virtua Fighter's* designers realized that by moving the game into three dimensions it would not only entice players who were new to its famously complex genre, it would also make each action in that genre more complicated. Each action now moves the limbs of your fighter in different ways, making them easier or harder to be hit by other kinds of attacks. Some of these attacks are better at bumping your opponent towards the edge of the ring, where you can eliminate your opponent in a very sumo-like Ring Out. By reducing the inputs to the absolute bare minimum, it made itself more approachable even as it became more complicated. It may not surprise you to learn that *Virtua Fighter*, like *Ultraman*, was a combination of flashy technical achievements and rock solid foundations which also made it *hotter than hot*. Everybody had to be

*Virtua Fighter* and they had to be it now. It was the *Street Fighter 2* of 3D fighting games and it didn't even need to make a *Street Fighter* first to do it.

In the next five years, the resulting explosion of *Virtua Fighter's* imitators gave us *Tekken*, *Soul Calibur*, *Dead or Alive*, *Bloody Roar*, and the first entry of many, many 3D fighting games you've almost certainly never heard of. Much like the 2D fighting game boom happening around the same time, there were lots of licensed games using The Foundational Text (*Street Fighter* for 2D or *Virtua Fighter* for 3D) as a skeleton to drape their own IP over. These were often rushed out the door on a tight budget and meant to cash in on two simultaneous crazes, fighting games and the licensed IP. But when you cheat off of the smart kid in class, you can still get a pretty good grade on your test. These licensed fighters, while always derivative and often competitively busted, were also joyful things. The rock solid foundation laid by the seminal works was so sturdy you could build a shack out of two-by-fours on it and still have a building worth spending time in. And it's here, in the 3D fighting craze with a popular IP that we find *Ultraman Fighting Evolution*.

*Ultraman Fighting Evolution (UFE* from hereon) drapes itself over the bones of *Virtua Fighter* in ways it doesn't even try to hide. Right down to the button combination to hit downed foes (simultaneously pressing up and Punch), it's a game which springboards off of a very specific mechanical identity. It's what it does on top of that identity that's the labor of love. UFE is able to capture with incredible, almost uncanny accuracy the physicality of an *Ultraman* fight. Each character moves with all the precision of expertly done motion capture and is presented in just the right way to strike sparks against the brain. They move *exactly* like a bunch of stunt actors in rubber suits. And on top of that, they also look like stunt actors in rubber suits.

In the five years since *Virtua Fighter* appeared in arcades, 3D graphics had taken another notable leap; the triangles could have textures on them now. The texture work in *UFE* was at just a high enough level of fidelity that it had the wonderful opportunity to draw the seams and folds in the rubber costumes of each of its giant monsters. Most *Ultraman* games prior to this used their graphics to gesture in the direction of the mythos. Eleking didn't have rubber creases on his legs; he was simply a large yellow monster. He was made of whatever aliens were made of. But *this* Eleking? Unquestionably made of rubber and moves around through the puppetry of a suit actor. And what a wonderful decision that was! By adding this visual flourish to the remarkable animations, a match of *UFE* manages not to feel like *Ultraman* fighting Dada but like *an episode of a 1960s TV show where Ultraman fights Dada*. This is further

All of this culminated in a conversation with my partner where I said I would never get back on track, I could never find time to finish the songs I've been working on, I would never finish the tool chest I was building, and so on. If it seems flippant to truncate the list of "nevers," know that I only do it because in my own mind, the list went on forever. It was a negative feedback loop—building and building until I catastrophized every potential outcome—and *Depression Quest* captures these banal spirals.

Because I stumbled in December—whether by circumstance or as a result of my decisions—I spent January feeling morbid, and if there is one downside to *Depression Quest's* accuracy, it's that it replicates this cycle too well. Players can get locked into one of the bleaker endings simply because of early, seemingly inconsequential choices. In her playthrough for the book *Video Games for Humans*, Toni Pizza laments that it "[seemed] like this battle hinged upon [her] first few decisions." She was unable to call a therapist later in her session because she the Player Character was too depressed, and in her ending the Player Character's relationship was over, their work had become "unbearable," and their "life [had] become just a series of trudges from one emotionally exhausting moment to the next." This ending and the fact that it is so easy for players to stumble into it makes *Depression Quest* effective. Players see that their small decisions tallied up to a worse outcome for the Player Character, and they feel the weight of this illness.

But to leave the player in a hopeless place would hardly comfort those that happen to struggle with depression, and to mitigate this, every run of *Depression Quest* ends with the same hopeful epilogue. For brevity, I've provided the most relevant passage here:

Instead of a tidy ending, we want to just provide a series of outlooks to take moving forward. After all, that's all we can really do with depression - just keep moving forward. And at the end of the day it's our outlook, and support from people just like you, that makes all the difference in the world.

It is a beautiful reminder that players, regardless of the outcome, can and must keep going. It is the only option. And I am reminded of all the times my mother quoted the adopted aphorism of Twelve-Step programs: "Live one day at a time."

All I have really done is locate myself in *Depression Quest*. I'm not closer to saying whether I played honestly, and I'm not closer to knowing whether I really am deluded enough to believe I can make the choices

1. How depressed are you? How is depression affecting your ability to live your life?
2. Are you seeing a therapist? How is therapy going? How do you feel about therapy?
3. Are you taking medication? How is the medication helping? How do you feel about taking medication?

I cannot count how many times my partner, parents, siblings, and friends have asked (with love and sometimes exasperation) if I have been taking my meds or whether I have a therapy appointment soon.

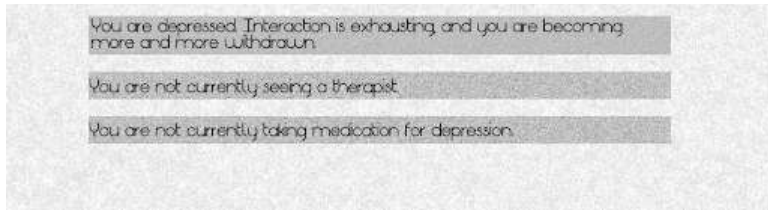


Figure 2—The three status bars in *Depression Quest*.

But the most effective part of the entire simulation is *Depression Quest*'s decision based feedback loops. As you make choices, your status bars change, and based on how depressed you are, you gain or lose options. For example, if your depression is too severe, you won't be able to tell your friend you are busy when they message you to talk late in the game (Figure 3). Choices that worsen your depression make it harder to make choices that *won't* worsen your depression. Positive choices make it easier to make more positive choices.

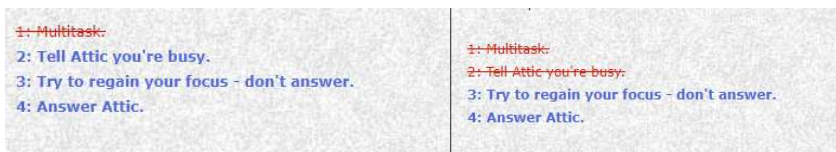


Figure 3—Depending on your decisions, different options may be available to you as you go through *Depression Quest*.

A little over two months before I drafted this paragraph, my partner and I recovered from catching COVID-19 and I learned my grandfather had lung cancer—truly ironic since my grandmother smoked from high school until the year I was born, and she suffers from COPD. We found ourselves ordering food more often, and as I felt worse about our wasted groceries, I stopped exercising, which led to me playing video games for long stretches at night, which meant I didn't sleep well, which made my work harder to do during the day.

bolstered by the game's recreation of the show's original miniature work.

If you want to have a human sized actor portraying a building sized monster, you'd need to surround them with some miniature scale buildings and trees, and Tsuburaya Productions was the best in the business at this. The miniatures never looked completely *real* (though perhaps on a 1960s television they were more convincing), but they always looked *good*. Some truly impressive work was done and continues to be done on the *Ultraman* shows for making teeny tiny sets to stomp around on. The limited graphics capabilities of the original Playstation are well suited then to representing these tiny buildings. After all, they're so small you don't need to put very much detail on them to fool the eye.

It all comes together like a magic trick. You see them lift the cup, and the ball is gone, and even though you *know* that the ball is in their hand, you're still delighted and impressed. What makes all this remarkable visual presentation so wonderful, then, is how it all feels to play. The weighty melee and ridiculous grapples make rounds dynamic, fun, and short. The characters feel distinct in ways that are fun to explore. Every new animation you discover is a treat! There's even a nearly useless but extremely flashy universal super move that takes several seconds to start up and is trivially easy to dodge in almost all cases. But really, would it be Ultraman if he couldn't shoot a laser out of his hands?

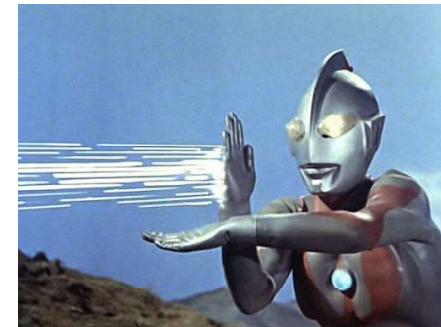


Fig 2: You've gotta

Now sure, the game has some problems. The AI is hilariously easy to cheese once you realize they have no meaningful response to just backdashing for an entire round once you have a life lead. The angles you have to be standing in relation to your opponent for your throw to do anything are small and difficult to guess in the fray. But as far as I'm concerned, none of those things really *matter*. None of them take away from the fundamental joy of sitting in front of this game with a friend and

making King Joe swing Ultraman Taro around by the ankles.

So if you're looking for a fighting game for your next casual get together, give *Ultraman: Fighting Evolution* a try. It was released only in Japan, but you wouldn't know it from the menus. In fact, nearly all the text in this game, and certainly all the relevant text for actually playing it, is entirely in English. Find a friend, hand them a controller, and spend a few hours in the stretchy tapestry of a licensed PS1 fighter. You will feel like a boxer. You will feel like a wrestler. You will feel like a guy in a wetsuit giving a full nelson to a guy in a rubber dinosaur costume.

you wouldn't normally. But in order to do that, the game asks that you respond to the prompts earnestly.

I believe, as Franklin suggests, that this is not a game where players should strive for a good ending, and to reconcile the disconnect between my first run in *Depression Quest* and my day-to-day life means looking more closely at how it simulates depression.

The introductory text at the beginning of each playthrough states *Depression Quest's* goals: "illustrate as clearly as possible what depression is like, so that it may be better understood by people without depression" and offer some comfort to people struggling with depression by "presenting as real a simulation of depression as possible." Realism is not universalism, and the introductory text points out "[depression] is experienced differently by every person who suffers from it." To really achieve its goals, *Depression Quest* creates a Player Character vague enough to let players project onto them but specific enough to be placed in situations that are common for people struggling with depression.

The Player Character has no name, their gender identity is unspecified, and their physique goes undescribed. The narration is utilitarian and lacks specificity, offering just enough detail to allow players to picture a scene. During a night in with your girlfriend, the scene is set up with the two of you "on the couch, watching comedy shows on Netflix, a box of pizza open on the coffee table in front of you." The player is left to imagine what else might be in the room, and the nebulous "comedy shows" could be anything available on Netflix in 2013.

Other moments are just familiar enough to be recognizable. In one scene, the Player Character discovers they are having trouble getting aroused because of their medication, and I instantly recalled the word "anorgasmia," a different, though similarly disruptive, sexual side effect of my dear friend sertraline. I was not acquainted with the word until well into my treatment. During my partner's first playthrough, she noted that after the Player Character's mother dismisses their depression as an attitude problem, she was reminded of the time her father told her he simply "chooses to be happy."

Even the three status bars at the bottom of your screen evoke the psychic vigilance people who know about your illness develop. Each bar describes an aspect of the Player Character's situation in one or two sentences rather than displaying a meter. You could say each status bar answers questions about the Player Character with descriptive text. I would summarize the information in each bar with these questions:



## TO DO THE THINGS I KNOW ARE RIGHT

I was heated in the fire of therapy, shaped by a sertraline hammer on a bupropion anvil, but my first playthrough of *Depression Quest* made me question whether I ever learned how to manage my illness. During that playthrough, my decisions put the Player Character in therapy, let them see the benefits of medication, and got them to be honest about their mental illness with their partner. I made each decision with reasoning informed by years of treatment for depression, and I thought I played the role honestly, picking the responses that felt truest to me. I don't believe *Depression Quest* is meant to be challenging in the traditional sense, but I felt like I hadn't really earned the hopeful ending. I felt a little confused.

If I played honestly, why then, in my real life, do I still fall into lows for weeks—even months? Why, if I know what to do when I slip backward into the gray haze, do I still struggle to take restorative actions that will keep me from losing myself?

I know it is easier to make healthy decisions in a game than in real life, and that is all *Depression Quest* asks of players: read through text, look at a list of potential responses, decide how to respond, and repeat. They approximate the decisions we make every day. Do I work on a personal project after work or watch TV? Do I continue taking my antidepressant even though I feel good? It is easier to make choices in a game than in real life, but that doesn't answer my real question: did I play honestly?

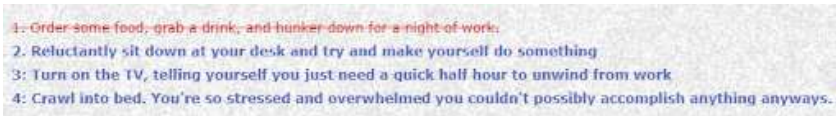
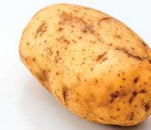
- 
- ~~1: Order some food, grab a drink, and hunker down for a night of work.~~
  - 2: Reluctantly sit down at your desk and try and make yourself do something
  - 3: Turn on the TV, telling yourself you just need a quick half hour to unwind from work
  - ~~4: Crawl into bed. You're so stressed and overwhelmed you couldn't possibly accomplish anything anyways.~~

Figure 1 - A picture of the first decision players can make. The responses you can choose appear in blue, and the things you can't choose appear crossed out and in red.

The lure of a “good” ending guided my choices in *Undertale* and *Star Wars: Knights of the Old Republic*, so it could guide my decisions in *Depression Quest*, a game with mundane, painfully resonant stakes. Chris Franklin of *Errant Signal* argued that giving in to the “temptation of picking the option that reads as the most healthy” misses the point of playing. He says:

[*Depression Quest*] conveys through systems how depression can limit your choices and make you behave in ways

## MEET THE AUTHOR



MATTE

Matte is a hobbyist indie game dev who dabbles in many other creative pursuits.

You can't stop this guy from dabbling.

An absolutely ceaseless dabbler. Woe upon he who steps between Matte and a Dabbling.

Also the world's third fastest speedrunner for Tim Burton's *The Nightmare Before Christmas: The Pumpkin King* (2005)



<http://ball.ninja/>

## RELATABILITY & WANDERSONG

For 28 years of my life, I never related to any fictional character. That sentence, like many, is false, but only depending on where you draw the line. Relatability is a huge sliding scale, and I didn't understand that for those 28 years either. I primarily understood relatability as a way to draw people in, with audience stand-in characters asking questions about the fantastical situations they end up in. This brings not only their perspective as an outsider but also perspective from their own cultural contexts. Often in my most-consumed media, this is the perspective of someone white, male, straight, cisgender, and American. Given I fit this target demographic to a T, I just assumed that's what relatability was. Having representation from other cultural and interpersonal contexts was something I understood as important. In fact, the way I understood it, representation was most of what relatability was. It's important for you to see yourself in media. That was something I understood mostly academically as I had never found myself looking at a character and going "that's so me." And I do mean never.

Maybe my brain is too picky with these parameters. Sure, I can understand that if someone kills your father, revenge doesn't feel out of the question, but I myself have never been in such a situation. Perhaps my inability to relate prevented me from seeing the value that many of the people I know saw in various media that hit them close to home. Maybe I find myself with just too limited an array of experiences, as I've never gotten drunk at frat parties in college or stacked myself in a trench coat with friends to sneak into a movie theater. But that doesn't feel right either as I'm pretty well traveled, spent six years as a radio DJ, and have worked in NASA's Mission Control. Ultimately this combination of circumstances made me disregard relatability as a factor for myself. It's not that I felt left out. I just thought that as the target demographic for seemingly everything and with my strong conflation of representation and relatability, that I would not, and probably could not, ever have a deep connection with a piece of media.

In July of 2021 I played through *Wandersong*. It's a game I had received as a gift on Steam the Christmas prior. I remember offhandedly putting it on my wishlist after hearing a description of it from a youtube video I watched. I went in expecting a short indie platformer with a cute aesthetic and a lot of charm. While many of those descriptors ended up correct, the game turned out to be closer to a more substantial eight hours. And this game ended up meaning more to me than I ever expected.

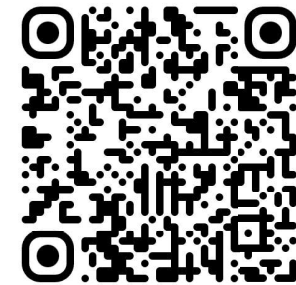
*Wandersong* was developed by Greg Lobanov and the sound team he hired with some Kickstarter money. That's it. That's the whole team.

## MEET THE AUTHOR



STERLING

The organizer of The Rumble Pack, you may recognize him from his work on *Metroid Marathon* and *Hammerspace*. You can follow him on Bluesky



@ascruffmcgruffin.bsky.social

feel something unique, and it's weird but also kind of refreshing to be able to put that almost entirely on one person. I might never feel this way about another character again. I'm not sure how many stories can be written about this type of character, but I do hope that if Greg reads this, he knows how much this meant to me.

That puts *Wandersong* in the same bubble of games like *Undertale* and *Stardew Valley*—games that are almost purely an expression of one person. I love to see that in the game space. You never know what weird stuff they'll put in just because nobody told them not to. What Greg really brings to this particular table is how he writes his characters. In Greg's game, every character talks about their feelings all the time. Even a shithead at a pirate bar who kidnaps a whole ship's crew is open about the fact that his wife left him, and it's made him feel emasculated lately, and yes, he does use those exact words. I have no doubt that this type of writing doesn't work for a lot of people, but I love it. *Wandersong* isn't just a game about saving the world with the power of song and friendship; it's also a game that is deeply about feelings.

*Wandersong* follows a cute, optimistic bard who can be given a wide variety of four letter names. I named him Bart in my playthrough, but the wider fanbase has decided his name is Kiwi. Given the cameo in Greg Lobanov's follow-up game, *Chicory: A Colorful Tale* (also excellent), it's clear that Kiwi is his canonical name. A god comes and visits Kiwi in a dream at the start of the game and tells him that the world is about to end, and she's looking for the hero to save the world. She quickly determines he's not the hero and goes away, and he wakes up and decides to go on an adventure to save the world anyways. While saving the world would be nice, I don't want to be the capital-H Hero. I generally find that heroism is mostly in a series of small acts rather than one large one, but that bit of philosophy is one that I didn't have to entirely suspend to enjoy this game. This game is ultimately about saving the world by making friends and helping people out on all scales. You help out a struggling musician mourning the passing of their mother. You help two kingdoms stop a long and devastating war. You help out literal insects by not stepping on them, and they even repay you later. The writing makes this feel genuinely uplifting while not naïve. This is hard! Only through sheer optimism and willingness to help others does Kiwi really have a chance at saving the world at all.

And this unstoppable gleaming smile of a human being is immediately infuriating to his traveling companion, Miriam. Miriam is a big ol' grouch of a witch who hates Kiwi at first. She's only on this adventure because her grandma told her to go, and she would definitely prefer the world to not end. Miriam is driven up a wall by Kiwi's extreme flavor of optimism, but a lot of others love it and find it infectious. In my life, I have been told that my smile has made people's days or lit up rooms. That's not a brag. I have mixed feelings about it, but I am definitely a generally optimistic person. I used to be even more optimistic before college beat some of that out of me, but who doesn't lose a piece of themselves when dealing with a hefty bit of anxiety and depression?

Kiwi and Miriam go on big adventures across the world, make a ton of friends, sing a lot of songs, and find out the real hero is out there after all. The real hero turns out to be a big jerk who is ruining your plans, and so you get depressed and move back in with your mom who tells you to smile more. You only manage to get out of the funk by starting a communist revolution in your hometown, tearing down the factory that stands as a monument to the capitalist oppression of the gloomy place.

A ways after that, you find yourself in a big city of witches, and Miriam feels overwhelmed. The only other witch she knew was her grandmother, and now she's standing in the middle of a city full of a culture foreign to her, but with people just like her. She goes off, and you continue your mission in town. While exploring the city, you can stumble into a big loud concert where you find Miriam dancing to a band you helped assemble when you were in her hometown about four hours of gameplay earlier. She's always been adamantly against singing and gets anti-excited when you learn ridiculous new dances, so this is a pleasant surprise! She starts chatting with you as you dance next to her, and she talks about how she's trying to figure out her feelings.

**Miriam:** How do you do it?

**Kiwi:** Huh? You mean... be happy?

**Miriam:** Yeah, how do you do it? I want to be happy.

**Kiwi:** I don't know!

**Miriam:** ...

**Kiwi:** Maybe... it's not really that easy. I have to try hard all the time. Lots of stuff makes me feel sad.

**Miriam:** Sure. But then you just get over it! Like when we were in Chismest. You were so mopey about not being the hero. And then... you were fine again.

**Kiwi:** I dunno if I really got over it. I just... stopped thinking about it.

Kiwi opens up a bit more, admitting that he's afraid he won't be able to make a difference. Miriam says she appreciates that he keeps trying even though he doesn't even have magic powers like she does. She says it makes her feel useless sometimes, but she wants to be like that.

Later in the game, Miriam has to duck away for a chapter, leaving Kiwi on his own. She sustains a bad injury and gets homesick, wanting to make sure she sees her grandma before the world ends. When she gets back, the world is actively ending, and she's carrying a lot of guilt over leaving Kiwi to fend for himself. She's realizing she's grown close to him, and she's never really been open with people before.

**Miriam:** That's what's scary! THIS... is scary! Sharing... feelings!

**Kiwi:** Are you scared now?

**Miriam:** YES!!! That's what I don't get about you. You act like everything's no big deal. Even when it is! I just admitted to you, that I basically ditched you... to go die alone in the mountains, or something, for NO GOOD REASON! And you don't even care. I shouldn't have come back. I should have never shown my face again...

**Kiwi:** MIRIAM!!! You shouldn't feel that way! I'm sorry... for pretending like it's no big deal. I know how scary it is to share your feelings. To be honest, I'm not good at it either.

**Miriam:** That's crap! All you do is share your feelings! You... sing!! At everything!!

**Kiwi:** I share good feelings! Because... it helps people. But... I have bad feelings too. I just don't like to share those. Because... they're not important.

That last line hit me like a truck.

There were a few times I cried while playing this game, but this moment hit me the hardest because I thought about all my friends who I always encouraged to talk about their feelings. I never joined in when they were griping about all the little things. I never felt that sharing my own troubles was valuable. I go from place to place, making friends with ease (enough to organize this zine even!), and only in the rarest of rare circumstances did I share even the basics of my struggles because I felt like it would only be trouble to my friends, who didn't deserve it.

What a shitty thing to do.

Not only shitty to my friends, but shitty to myself. I had only recently started regularly seeing a therapist when I played this game because of a bad breakup and a heaping pile of pandemic stress. I'm still seeing them now and this game has been the center of more than a handful of conversations around expressing myself. With a lot of help and self-reflection, I've gotten better at it. Friends I've made around or since then might know me very differently than older friends because of that. It's hard to tell how much different I am from my perspective, though. I think it's made my friendships deeper and improved my overall mental health, but it's also something I still have a lot of room to improve on.

There's something to be said for seeing yourself in a metaphorical mirror, even an imperfect one. Relatability became more than an abstract non-experience for me after this game. Greg Lobanov's work helped me