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Cover image by Hanna Rajs Lundstrom

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Internal design by August Smith



G O D D E S S M O D E

A collection of video game writing
by women and non-binary artists

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I GUESS IT HELPS MY ANXIETY TO PRETEND TO BE AN ELF

Danielle Perry

- i.
an early memory: children chasing me,
trying to squeeze my ears into points,
shouting, 'elf! elf!' over & over.
- ii.
i have forgotten more things about tolkien
than most people ever know, mostly due to
an anarchic online role-playing game.
- iii.
d&d: a line i wouldn't cross, until
a friend's birthday / then i fell in love
with the feeling of being a badass.
- iv.
the summer that i was unemployed i saw
that same friend playing dragon age
& i thought, yes, i need to play that.
- v.
i tried not to buy the new dragon age
but i finally caved because at this point
i know it helps my anxiety to pretend to
be an elf.

*

i've always been a child who lived
more in her mind than in the world.
(my favorite childhood toy? books.)

my fixation with elves predates memory,
as does my anxiety. the two are related
only in that they are key parts of myself.

it is not for me to say why it helps to pretend,
only that it does
& that i have learned to trust
in whatever tools i can avail myself of.

CHALLENGE ACCEPTED

Danielle Perry

when i learned that i could sleep / with
four of my companions / i thought: chal-
lenge accepted // isabela, pirate queen of
my heart, / gets called a whore and jokes
are made / about all the venereal diseases
she surely has / but i love how much she
loves sex / and how little she cares / what
other people think of her // merrill, all
naivety and blood magic, / a combination
i want to like more than i do / but that
actually kind of turns me off // anders, oh
anders / (what did they do to you?) / the
only times i enjoyed flirting with him /
were the times he could be funny / like it
used to be // and finally fenris, broody elf,
second favorite / the one i had to chase
the hardest / the one i had to game the
system for

i found what happened after / almost as
delightful as the chase // my party was
always filled / with these people i had
slept with / and they kept teasing each
other / about being in love with me // this
happened a few times before i realized /
it was the closest to non-monogamy i've
ever seen / in a game // it's not perfect,

of course / (you still 'settle down' with
only one person) / but still, even getting
that close / made me more excited than
anything else in that game // it made me
hopeful that one day / even in triple-A
games / we can have something / that
approaches romance like i do

Your Possession

Kelsie Hahn

“You feed the hot chicken soup to ailing Grandma. ‘I feel much better,’ she says. ‘In return for your kindness, I have something for you. Look under the bed.’

>look under bed_

You drop to your hands and knees and peer under the bed. A large ruby ring and a black cloak are hidden there. You take them into your possession.”

King’s Quest II: Romancing the Throne

Perhaps she knows him when she is young. She the peasant girl, he the Lord Dracula’s lonely son. They sail leaf boats on a lake silver with fish, not a drop of poison in it. They scare each other in the dark with tales of Hagatha the witch. They dress-up and pretend in their parents’ clothes, he so dashing in his father’s cloak and ring, all of it too big and sliding free to pool on the floor.

Perhaps they collide on a dark country road as she hurries home to husband and child with a basket of bread. His body roars with a red hunger he fails to defeat. His hands clutch and hold. He bends over her neck, fangs alert. He disappears into the night, his cloak snarled on a tree, his ring lost in the leaves.

Perhaps he comes in the dusk of her life, jealous that her years will end while his slog on. He sets aside cloak and ring and creeps beneath the faded quilt to rest his head on her chest. Her slow, cold blood is nothing compared to the warmth curled in her arms, the hum of her voice in his dark hair. As always, he is desperate for what only she can give him.

What is known is that you bring her soup, and she rewards you with a powerful gift. When she gives you the

>keepsakes_

>evidence_

>valuables_

does she remember their source? Is he one of a thousand memories faded to haze? Or does she remember perfectly what he drew from her? His need. His fear.

Her gifts gain you passage across the poisoned lake and into the rotting castle. By your hand, the stake will pass through his heart. His long youth will end with a hiss and a shower of dust. This last need she will fill, and then she can be free of that weight. Every thread. Neither you nor he will know anything about her.

This Is the End, Directed by Evan Goldberg, Seth Rogen

Kins Stocum

Just watch this fucking movie; the drugs are quick. And for a while you try to focus, but sleep is always stronger. It's the kind of sleep you dream about.

Rachael asks, Why are there no women stoners? and then answers: because women are already too complex.

Seth Rogen takes a hit in whatever this fucking

movie is, and you're all stoned out on the couch, complex women fucking high as they come, water in your plastic cups because complex women

are still responsible, after all. Single complex women turn off that fucking movie and turn on Grand Theft Auto, drive around listening to Rihanna

—in the video game, because you're responsibly complex—get bored and begin running pedestrians over, passing

the bowl around between turns. Smooth, scratchy smoke masks the scent of animal piss, and she blows a hit into the cat's slotted green eyes. A sun is setting

pink in the distance of all of your complex lives, even for the video game man, who is now strolling out of an emergency room—he got gunned down by

a three-star police but he just starts over. It's not complex, it just costs a little money. Quilted blankets hang over drafty windows

in the quiet cold of fall, in the space heater warmth of a third floor railroad apartment. The video game man gets shot again, this time

by a helicopter. Your mouth is curled wallpaper dampened by plastic cup water, two hydrogens and an oxygen, that's it, really. And when

the sleep steals your car, you give in. Easy. Take a sip, take a whole throat-full. Pull a blanket off the window and become a blunted slumberbabe,

but never ask a woman in America if she inhabits the minds of her male characters.

Post-High School Reality Quest

Meg Eden

You are in the cafeteria. There is a high school graduation happening. Mason, the valedictorian, is giving her farewell to the class. It takes a long time.

In your pocket, there is a letter. It's crumpled and smeared from you reaching in and touching it so many times, to make sure it's still there.

Exits are: out, back and stage.

Tristan was almost valedictorian. He was about .002 points away from it. And he makes sure to not let any of you forget. Not that you'd ever forget a single word he's ever said.

>Back.

You get up from your chair and go to the back of the room. There is a piano. You look longingly at it.

>Examine piano.

You go over the piano. You run your fingers over the keys but are too shy to actually play anything. That's what everyone says about you: that you want to do something but never actually do it. That's why you wear gothic Lolita dresses only at home, curl your hair once a month, and paint on the weekends. Anything else might be too much.

Ethan gets up and asks what the heck you're doing at the piano. His hair is greased back from not enough washing, and he is often mistaken for being thirteen due to his height and boyish freckles.

"Someone might prevent us from graduating," he says, "Standing up like this. Disrupting the peace."

You're not sure standing in the back of the room constitutes disrupting the peace.

"If you're planning on ruining graduation," he whispers, "I'd be glad to help you." But you have greater plans than that. Graduation's only one day. Your inevitable college career is another.

>Exit out.

"Hey, where're you going?" Ethan watch-

es as you exit out the main doors.

You are now in the main hallway. It is very long. There are lots of doors.

You wonder if you hide in one of them long enough you can avoid growing up. Everyone says that after today, everything that you do actually matters. That every decision you make will invariably have consequences on your existence and well-being. The only consequences you're used to are not saving before entering the water temple in *Ocarina of Time*, or using up your master ball before encountering Mewtwo in *Pokemon Red*.

Exits are: cafeteria, door, another door, bathroom, main office, and out.

>Door?

You go into one of the doors. It's not very exciting.

>Out.

You are now in the main hallway. It is very—

>Bathroom.

You go into the bathroom. Sephora is in front of the mirror, fluffing her insignificant breasts. No one believes her birth name is actually Sephora but no one has any proof to say otherwise. She doesn't look like a make-up model but you keep that kind of commentary to yourself.

Exits are: bathroom stall and out.

“You dying out there too?” Sephora asks. “It's so humid in that small room.”

You nod. “Yeah, it's really hot.” You feel sweat run through your hair, down your scalp.

“When there's a whole twenty people graduating, you'd think it'd be shorter than this. But they still find a way to make us miserable.” Sephora reapplies a layer of lipstick.

You just graduated from a religious high school. You say religious, because as hard as it is for you to stomach the concept of a God, words like transubstantiation are even less comprehensible to you. And as much as your music class sings about concepts like grace, the signs posted on every door with commandments like “Skirts shorter than your finger tips are

unacceptable” and “Earrings should be no larger than a nickel” have made you eager for the alleged freedom of college.

And not just freedom from rules, but freedom from people like Ethan and Sephora, who are “your friends” only because of your small school population. Because everyone has to survive somehow, and it’s dangerous to go alone.

But you’ve survived, at least this far. Congratulations.

Sephora sighs, scratching at the dead skin on her cheek. “I can’t wait ‘til the sun comes out again. I mean, look at my skin! I need to tan again.”

Even if you haven’t seen Sephora in five-sizes-too-small bikinis before, one look at Sephora makes it clear that she has the Scottish pasty skin that never tans. Just like you. Besides your gender and your love of obscure video games, this is all you have in common with her.

“You know, now that summer is coming, I’m thinking about trying something new, just for the kicks.” Sephora looks you in the eye. “I’m even thinking about going out with Tristan. Who knows. It might be

fun! And I’ve been seeing him eye me...”

You want to tell Sephora that she’s too stupid to date someone as brilliant as Tristan, that he has better taste than that, but you can’t seem to get the words out.

>Wrestle Sephora to the ground.

You wrestle the lipstick from her hands and scream “You whore!” and write mean things on the mirror. Then you stuff her head in the toilet and prevent this horrible story from actually happening.

And by that, you only daydream of wrestling Sephora to the ground.

If you had actually done that, you might’ve beaten the game in record time. Assuming life’s a game and you remembered to save more frequently.

>I don’t like this story.

I’m sorry. I don’t understand “I don’t like this story.” You think we get to choose our stories?

>Go into bathroom stall.

You go into a bathroom stall. You pull up your graduation gown, unzip your skinny jeans and let them fall to your ankles but you don't sit on the toilet. You don't pee. You just stand there and say softly, "Why Tristan?"

What you don't say is that you've loved Tristan for the past three years for reasons that can't be disclosed at this time.

"Why? Does there have to be a why?" You hear Sephora smack her lips, like she's testing the durability of her lipstick. "I mean, he's nice. He's cute. He won't cause any drama and I don't have a summer romance planned yet. Plus, I think he might be interested, which always makes things easier."

>Check inventory.

You check your inventory¹. In your bag, you have:

- two unopened tampons
- Tristan's graduation picture (which you were way too excited to get a

¹In middle school, you nicknamed your backpack "inventory". You thought it was clever. Man, you really are a freak.

- hold of; it's creased in the corners)
- your wallet with ten bucks for Merrill's pizza money, even though you don't eat pizza (Reminder: Merrill is the mafia lord of pizza)
- a fake rose someone gave you for graduating
- a drawing of a narwhal you drew one day during class²
- a pack of "emergency" crackers
- a letter from someone you do not know and cannot remember what it says

Then of course, there's that paper in your pocket that you stuff deeper into the creases of your pants.

"Buffy?" Sephora calls when you don't say anything.

>Attempt to kill myself.

You might wanna rethink that—

²You've always loved narwhals ever since you saw them in an aquatic animals picture book. The narwhal is always pictured alone, swimming in deep benthic waters. You can relate to him, in a way. You just have to ignore the true meaning of his name: corpse whale.

>Suicide!

You make a noise. It's the sound of drowning.

You stuff your own head in the toilet. It's better this way. Except that you forgot to save again.

You are now dead. Thank you for playing POST-HIGH SCHOOL REALITY QUEST! Would you like to load a saved game?

You are in a cafeteria. There is a high school graduation happening. There is a piano in the corner. Mason is finishing her farewell address, and in the audience, Tristan grumbles about not being up there instead.

Exits are: out, back and stage.

>Stage.

You get up on the stage. Mason is very mad. Everyone else cheers. You feel like you're the hero of an unwritten novel until the principle beats you over the head with his podium. You are now dead. Thank you for playing POST-HIGH SCHOOL REALITY QUEST! Would you like to load a

saved game?

>Sorry. I've just always wanted to do that sort of thing.

After the ceremony, everyone goes outside to talk and take pictures. Your legs shake as you step forward. You touch the paper in your pocket. You're going to make something of your life today.

Outside, Ethan's mom is trying to get a picture of your group.

"Buffy!" She waves. "You got a minute? We're still waiting for Tristan and Sephora, but I'm sure we'll find them soon..."

You feel your chest clench and your mouth suddenly go dry.

>North!

You run past Ethan's mom, between parents taking pictures of their kids. An over-defensive mother calls you out for being rude, but you'll never see most of these people ever again. Maybe you'll never see any of them again. You feel the blood rush to your head—that's exactly why you need to find Tristan, fast.

You have reached the end of the parking lot to the road. Across the street, there is a church graveyard that no one visits except the goths, art students, and couples that want to make out during lunch break.

>Cross road.

You cross the road. A mini van pulling out of the parking lot honks at you. But you're not dead. Not yet.

>Enter graveyard.

You open the graveyard gate. There are lots of tombstones, but few of them have legible names. One day, you'll have a tombstone somewhere.

>North.

You cross through the graveyard towards the big willow tree at the other end. Your instincts were right, because from the distance you see Sephora and Tristan talking. Sephora's leaning against the tree, tucking her hair behind her ear over and over. Her mannerisms are so contrived that you want to go up and vomit into her hair.

>Hide behind farthest tombstone.

There's only so close you can get without being obvious. From your tombstone shelter, you see Tristan reach for Sephora with his awkward thin hands, holding her upper arms and slowly approaching her. Even from the distance, you can see Sephora's smile as he brings his head close, leans his forehead on hers. As far as you know, Tristan's never dated anyone, let alone kissed before. Maybe he was just waiting for someone, anyone to show interest in him.

Your hand reaches for the paper in your pocket.

>Examine paper.

You pull out the paper and ball it in your fist. You throw it over the tombstone and walk back to the parking lot.

You are in the graveyard, you are in a cafeteria, simultaneously. There is a high school graduation happening. You reach over the rows, hand Tristan the paper. Ethan sees it. Merrill sees it. Sephora sees it. Tristan unfolds the paper, reads it, smiles, folds the paper, puts it in his pocket. He never mentions it—never acknowledges the letter that says you love

him, that you don't want graduation to be the last time you see the only people that matter to you, that you're afraid of losing his friendship when college starts.

You are in the graveyard, leaving the graveyard, in the road. Maybe the letter was too heavy-handed. You've never been good at expressing your thoughts and feelings. Does it really matter? Sephora and Tristan won't last long. You are about to enter college; there will be so many other people. So many other friends. You might fall in love with someone else, someone better than Tristan. Heck—you might never see Tristan again anyway.

But what gets you is that feeling that something has just ended. You've never reached the end of anything before. All of the cartridges and discs in your room, you've never finished any of those games, never won any of them before.

>I will win something, eventually.

Energy Collection

E. Kristin Anderson

Enter.

Use every item
in the darkest corners
of caverns.

Watch.

If you fall,
wait.

Fire this barrier, collect thorns
and whack wondering, ripe
with progress.

Record.
Create.

Break your blaze
with the enemy on the wall.

Vertical? You've only scratched
the surface, dangerous.

Remain.

Make a map as you go.

*Erasure poem from "Metroid II: Return of Samus"
Nintendo Power, Volume 31: December 1991, p. 58-61*

This stuff disappears

E. Kristin Anderson

The catacombs have energy.
Your mission, the fire—
your drop can roll right through,
sophisticated.

Shake up open chambers,
flooded down;
that key is an eye, open
quick to continue stinging.

Lightning? On lower bodies
only to destroy.

Down, wide, out—
slip, sink, crawl. You can move
unharméd.

*Erasure poem from "Metroid II: Return of Samus"
Nintendo Power, Volume 31: December 1991, p. 54-57*

Behind, all you've got

E. Kristin Anderson

Chilly, he experimented. You try
to slide, to float, feet scorched
again, falling in this cavern.

Bluff. Bluff. Then blast
this moment over the bridge
your own cause to knife.

On the other side, his wrist
left frozen, another lock
to jump over.

*Erasure poem from "Batman: Return of the Joker"
Nintendo Power, Volume 31: December 1991, p. 12-13*

And talk about it

E. Kristin Anderson

This screaming
is the nemesis, the mind
and might shutting down
the feint of heart.

Seasoned in time
with TV, the air?
Scream. Remember:
we ran back,

we filled the future.

You still
find play anywhere—
special, full.

*Erasure poem from "Powerline" by the Editors
Nintendo Power, Volume 31: December 1991, p. 4*

Gaming as Relationship Status: Button-Mashing, Breaking Up, and Other Dangerous Forays

Deirdre Coyle

When I started hanging out in other people's basements instead of my own, I stopped playing video games. Between twelve and twenty-two, I didn't game, and I don't know what happened to my '90s PlayStation or my *Dark Forces* CD-ROM.

But when my ex and I moved in together, I suddenly found myself living with an Xbox. He was an avid gamer, while I preferred books as consumable media—but I really wanted to play *Bioshock*. He seemed interested in re-introducing me to contemporary video games, while I was interested in running around an Art Deco dystopia with a Tommy Gun.

Talking to him more recently, he said, "I was interested in how 'normal' cues to seasoned gamers were totally new to you, and thus were ineffective. Like the gun-fire direction, shiny objects, which parts of the environment were interactive, et cetera."

At first, he would always watch when

I played, gently suggesting that I stop spinning in circles while button-mashing violently.

Soon, he wanted to start a blog detailing my descent into the world of contemporary video games.

When someone you like wants to write about you (or create anything that's about you), you say 'yes' (I say 'yes'). And like most of my generation, I'm unhealthily interested in how others perceive me, which made his endeavor all the more gratifying.

Here are some early entries:

Friday, July 16, 2010

It is interesting to see the way Deirdre approaches Bioshock. She really likes exploring and looting stuff. In fact, she likes looting stuff so much that while people are shooting at her, she'll yell at them to go away while she finishes looting the body of the dude she just shot, ignoring the red screen flashing indicators until her task is done.

Sunday, July 18, 2010

*Stumbling upon a splicer crying over a coffin with her back to Deirdre:
"What, you're crying?" *BLAM* "What,*

*you're still crying?" *BLAM BLAM**

Saturday, November 6, 2010

So Deirdre actually ordered, received, and starting playing Fallout 3 a little while ago, but I haven't written anything about it.

Summary: She is playing a usually-good character, usually helping people but sometimes doing whatever she wants. She has taken the Bloody Mess perk, and laughs when her targets explode in a flurry of blood and limbs. She often says such things as, "Yeah suck it I crippled your FACE."

This continued through the fall and winter of that year, but over time, he grew less interested in this brand of voyeurism. I wasn't new to gaming, and I guess I wasn't as funny anymore.

When someone you like wants to write about you, it's their way of saying, hey, I am actively interested and engaged in what you are doing. It makes you feel famous. But the flattery of being a subject, once absorbed as a norm, is difficult to shake.

So what happens when that flattery—another person's engagement in your daily endeavors—goes away? Not just their

creation, but the entire feeling?

For a brief period, the blog became a general gaming blog for him. This lasted a few entries, and soon he abandoned it entirely. I'd harass him about it sometimes—jokingly, of course. Whenever I started playing a new game, I'd ask, "Why don't you write about me anymore?" "I don't know," was usually the answer.

During the last few months of our relationship—over a year after this blog had ended—I started playing a lot more games. There were various factors: the end of graduate school, temporary unemployment, avoiding my weirdly tilting writing life. I wanted to become some other person, who would be content to go to work and come home and then have this tiny escape that didn't involve my creating anything.

That's what I told myself. But some of it was about the relationship, too. Most of it. We barely hung out. He gamed when he came home from work, went horseback riding on the weekends, and I applied for jobs and worked on this insane novel that went nowhere. Part of me thought that if I became a "gamer"—if this became an identifier for me, instead of one of my

many recreational media consumption activities—things would get better. We would do things together. We would go to PAX. We would be like one of those comics on Tumblr about the cute couple playing *Call of Duty* (I don't play CoD and neither does he; this was a fantasy).

One day, I was playing *Limbo* on my laptop—a puzzle game that made me sort of angry at the time. He was playing something in the opposite corner on his PC. I said something about *Limbo*—I don't remember what. He turned in his chair and gave me this withering look: a look that very clearly expressed the sentiment: why are you bothering me? What he actually said was something like "yeeeah?", which actually expresses the same sentiment.

It wasn't the first time he didn't want to be bothered while gaming. I mean that was very common when we lived together—and I get it. I don't want to be bothered while I'm writing (seriously, get out), and sometimes I don't want to be bothered while I'm gaming (and I never want to be bothered while I'm playing *Tetris*). But. I felt like I was trying to change myself into a more acceptable mold, which made no sense on so many levels. I suspect he had pursued me—years ago—be-

cause I was something other. For a time, his pursuit had been unsuccessful because I was busy being other (he could raid, and I could go to this party without him). But it becomes difficult, when you live with and give a shit about someone, to feel that he has lost interest in spending time with you. Our youth exacerbated this feeling—we were in our twenties; we hadn't spent decades settling into any kind of comfortable silence. And he had wanted to spend time with me once, had actively persuaded me into his life. Yet somehow I became this nagging thing that repeatedly asked him to do the dishes. And maybe if I became this other type instead of the person I used to be, things would be okay again, and I wouldn't have to leave or change or upset the balance of our lives.

Still, I knew I should be doing something more with my time than waiting on someone to want me. I should at least be writing a better novel, or going to see that band no one wanted to see with me.

The real issue, of course, wasn't that he had lost interest in me, but that I had lost interest in myself. We're all taught to base our self-worth on external factors, and I don't know if anyone can eradicate that

mindset entirely. But effort is better than ignorance.

When we broke up, I said it was about children. He wanted kids in the near future, and I didn't want kids at all. This was true (still is), but there was a lot of other stuff. For me, maybe, it was about the broader implications of the turned head and the disparaging look. The “yeeeah?” that made me realize I was no longer a person I wanted to be—much less write about.

Dawn

Joyce Chong

On the third last day
before the end of the world,
you lay your grief at the door
of the clock tower, staggered
hollow, soul-less.

In the sky, the grimace moon
mocks you, pulled by the sting
of gravity, drawing in the end
with its blank, unending gaze.

On the second last day
before the end of the world,
you swallow your grief, learn
the intricacies of time as it
circles you and presses in
with jagged teeth.

You have seen this dream before,
died a child and not a hero
many times, you have felt
the weighty cosmic threat
erase you, only to wake
at the door of the clock tower.

On the last day before
the end of the world,
you lay your masks
before you: steadied
heart, soul returned,
you begin your journey.

It is the third last day
before the end of the world.

Fear of a Female Planet

Elinor Abbott

When you're freshly divorced, people expect you to be extroverted, social, and slutty. But having just sacrificed years of my life to the servitude of marriage, all I wanted was retreat from the entire male/female affair. I had resigned as much of myself as I could in pursuit of happiness, not only with the man I had married, but with all men, everywhere. Upon moving into the first apartment I ever had by myself, I purchased 2013's *Tomb Raider* as a gift, my own version of a bottle of champagne. Quality time with *Tomb Raider* was not a reentry back into single society, to be sure, but it offered much needed alone time to regroup and recover.

Every other *Lara Croft* game I had played in tandem with my ex. We marveled at Lara's gravity defying cleavage as she scaled ruins, or horrifically died in a sexy mess of sprawled limbs. We watched cut scenes of her confronting various female foes, the heavy-handed lesbian overtones giving me douche chills. We changed her outfits like a Barbie, every frock Bond girlesque, tight and plunging. Like so

many things in my life, I enjoyed it because it was the only option available. You want a female heroine? Well, she's the best we've got.

But this was a new Lara. She looked human. A far cry from Angelina Jolie in a ponytail. She was dirty, bruised, bloody. Her clothes were practical. She didn't really know how to do anything yet, but was learning, scrambling, screaming and sweating her way through each new experience.

One could hardly call it an 'adventure'. It was more like managing an endless series of disappointments with scraped knees and elbows. Lara whispered bracing encouragement to herself after going through something particularly harrowing, a habit I had also recently acquired. At first I found the idea of this teenage girl toting giant guns and killing grown men a little out there for a "realistic" version of *Tomb Raider*. Shouldn't more time be spent foraging? But after seeing Lara thorough so much horror, I greedily scooped up each new weapon. This girl had a right to protect herself. And not only that, but a right to freedom from babysitting men through their wickedness, always looking for the "great guy"

within, as all women are expected to do.

My Lara was going to shoot first and ask questions later. Could you really blame her? I tapped into some kind of inner NRA gun nut, gloating over my rifles and sub-machine guns. Let Lara live behind a haze of gunfire. Let every trespasser pay for his entry with a bullet.

I began murdering the island's endless, grubby male masses with glee. In my mind, Lara had not only a right to her machine guns, but a licence to kill. These fuckers had fucked with the wrong bitch, and done so for the last time. The lack of love story was a relief. Who has time for romance when the men of the world are running at you from every which way, brandishing gleaming blades and sexual deviancy? I not only enjoyed killing these men, but searching their bodies. I was going to take them for every fucking penny. I picked them off at a distance with my rifle. "One less asshole for the patriarchy," I thought, trigger happy and sated in a private, vengeful way I'd never indulged before, even in the fantastically violent, revenge soaked world of video games.

The female revenge fantasy is the white whale of female entertainment. If a wom-

an does seek revenge in culture it is usually in response to the loss of a child or a rape, status symbols of sexual worth. Women are never allowed to have revenge just for the pain they've suffered being born a woman, the mindfuck of living in the female cage, ever alert to the needs of the men in your life, their fears and worries and rages, like some kind of attentive butler with a pussy. Even on the street you are in this state, constantly bargaining with yourself and your own sense of safety and space versus the needy, fragile ego of any man who happens to trap you in his gaze. "When it will be my turn to pay the price for being a woman?" is a question you ask yourself daily, trying to make sure to be inside before dark, not walk in front of a bar, not be alone with a male client, not be a tease, not be a prude, not be emasculating to your husband, or overly sensitive to your boyfriend, or selfish, or bossy, or too kind, or too tough.

The entire world is a male revenge fantasy, where men's psychic wounds are exacted upon pound after pound of female flesh.

I recommend playing *Tomb Raider* in total solitude, in the deep hush of a late afternoon. Sit on the floor, close to the TV.

Watch Lara's brush with sexual assault with a sneer of recognition. "I've been there, girl," you might think. Then, kill the assaulter. He is just the first of many, so don't get too upset by your moral transgression. You're about to become an avenging angel (and haven't you wished to be one for so long?).

They're going to come after you with guns and knives, with needs and bargains. They're going to betray you, lie to you, try to indoctrinate you. And here, in this digital world, this life, for this one teenage girl, you can not only resist, but triumph. The contract of gender has become null and void, and now they're the ones who need to worry over your whims. You don't need to feel sorry for enjoying it. You've been sorry long enough.

Interview with Ms. Pac-Man

Georgia Bellas

How does it feel to be such an icon such a pop star such a sex symbol, the Bettie Page the Betty Boop the Be-Bop-She-Bop of it all? What lessons do you have for young women trying to break into the seductive world of arcade video games today? What's your go-to lipstick? How do you keep your figure so round? Is your hair bow custom made? What's the real deal the skinny-minny the lowdown on you & Pac-Man? Boxers or briefs? Pixel or vector? Is it true you only went out with Inky to make the P-Man jealous? What do you have to say about the gender pay gap in your line of work? Is it true you have a drinking problem an eating problem a body image problem? What do you have to say to people who think your job is easy not a real sport a waste of time? Favorite drink? Fav vacay spot? Secret celebrity crush? What's next for you? Thank you so much for your time. This interview has been edited for clarity and length.

Meet Me at the Fountain in Caras Galadhon

Berit Ellingsen

Meet me at the fountain in Caras Galadhon in Lothlórien, where the trees stand golden and wide. Since the expansion is no longer new, I'll be the only other player there, the rest are computer-controlled puppets going through the motions, as they do with or without us, and will continue to until the game closes. In the fountain is a beautifully rendered statue of a white swan spreading its wings as if it just landed on the water, which is covered in orange, red, and yellow leaves, and reflects the lamps and platforms and treehouses around us. The light from them is always dim and hazy, due to the graphics bloom effect, which is particularly strong here. This is not about refusing to see the world clearly, but enhancing what's already there. From the fountain we descend past Galadriel's Garden, exit the gates of her city, and enter the Golden Forest itself. Don't be alarmed by the identical look of the trees and stones and bushes, they are cloned and elicit a sense of uncanny valley in the observer. Just ignore it and it'll soon seem right.

South of the city we reach the gardens of Imlad Lalaith, the Valley of Laughter, where countless celebrations have been held among the lanterns and tables. I once knew a player who called himself Lalaith, because he wanted to be happy always. He left the game, found a spouse and had a child, so perhaps it worked out for him. From the quays of Imlad Lalaith we could cross the broad and fast-flowing Anduin, but the other bank only leads to Mirkwood, which we've cleared already, so instead we'll follow the river out of the Golden Forest. The mobs here are bears and wolves and brigands, and because we're so close to Mirkwood, the occasional orc or goblin as well, but they'll be easy to deal with.

Soon, the land opens up to a flat and sunny plain that has models of lavender, liverleaf, bird's-foot-trefoil, and low, dense bushes. The paving of the road is cracked to emulate an ancient merchant path even though its virtual bricks will never wear or change, no matter the number of travelers that walk along it. This road probably saw its fair share of use when this region first opened, but since then most players have moved on to newer and higher level areas of the game.

The largest town on this map is Stangard, on the border between Rohan, Gondor, and the unknown East. Many of the game-controlled characters living here have been banished from the central regions of Rohan because of errors or petty crimes and must now serve in the outlier. The town is protected by a high wall of stout timber, tall watchtowers, and bristling stockades, yet behind the fortifications are small houses with thatched roofs, horse carvings leaping in the eaves, and warming fire pits.

Due southeast from Stangard looms the Gondorian ruin of Parth Celebrant. If we listen closely in the darkest part of the server cycle, we will hear the moans and cries of the restless dead inside. It's a tight spot, so stay close when we cross the bridge so you don't pull any aggro and make them attack us. Further southeast lies the Rushgore Marsh, full of stinging insects, biting turtles, and fire-spouting lizards hidden inside the reed thickets. Here we may cross the most shallow part of the Great River, but the Brown Lands on the other side are full of Eastern sorcerers, so we'll go back there when you've gained a few levels.

Instead, we'll follow the faux-old Gon-

dorian road south and cross the bridge to East Rohan; Eastemnet, and its northernmost map, The Wold. Here, the towns of Langhold and Harwick are made of the same building models as Stangard, only their surface textures look cleaner and nicer. Yet, rather crude-looking compared to the treehouses in Caras Galadhon, don't you think?

Once we've seen Eastemnet we have also seen Westemnet, the map of western Rohan, since they've used a lot of the same visual assets to build that area. Thus, both ends of the Horse-Lands are a seemingly endless plain of wild grasses, wild horses, and wild orcs, along with a few forested corners and some mountains, particularly up in Kingstead in West Rohan, where wight-haunted catacombs burrow all the way to Gondor. We won't be visiting those places yet. Instead, we'll follow the path that climbs up from the fields of The Wold to the high plateau that overlooks them. We might draw aggro from orcs and goblins in the pass, but they'll be regular mobs with just one or two elites.

The highlands on top of the plateau, known as Wildermore, are among the most unique maps in all Rhovanion. Only the distant region of Forochel, far away

from here, in Northern Eriador at the edge of the Belegaer Sea, is colder and more snow-covered. Looks a little like the Misty Mountains in the first part of the game, don't you think, when we were all new and enthusiastic and couldn't imagine playing anything else? Not all of Wildermore is buried beneath snow, in the southernmost and lowest lying areas heather, grass and firs still peek out from the white, but the central and northern reaches of the highlands are completely frozen over and seem untouchable by spring. Who knows what dark powers have caused this change in climate and may continue to do so in the future?

From the southern cliffs at the edge of the plateau we can see all the way to Sutcrofts, the most distant map of Rohan, and nearly to Gondor. Had it been possible to peek over the edge of the mountains that bound the northernmost rim of Wildermore, we could also have gazed all the way back to Stangard, and maybe even seen the Golden Forest shimmer in the distance, like the dream the world is.

On the Edge of Immortality

Anna DaCosta

Here in her videogame blanket she rides the wind
Electric guitar strings wiring her brain
Pink hair soaking
Clouds moving, skin glowing
Adventure in everything

Racing in the rain, a ride through the city
Speed in her dance, a fire across the world
She rises and falls, an epic wave slays
She flies

Skies beget her, trickling stardust and thunder
Never ending sky, so high the horizon she climbs
Thunder stomps across the atmosphere
Making way at the speed of light
Senses sharpen
The world opens up to her
Empty space surrounds
She can do anything

She steadies her eyes
Focused, determined
Burning

She cranks into high gear

Fire spills, dropping out of the sky
Dodging effortlessly
She swims and soars, ducks and swerves
Flowing on the edge so easily

Burning

A smile curls in the midst of life and death
On the edge of her mortality
So alive, she's breathing every moment
Surfing on the waves of her experience, her seconds
Her near misses
Surfing on the edge of immortality
Never feeling her superpowers
Glowing and growing like this before

She dives again
Nothing can stop her
Effortlessly daring
Intuition overpowering
Letting go
Somehow she knows

She jumps
Catching onto a snaking dragon
Flying
Together, roaring across the sky
The moon rises
She can touch its light
Smooth and cool
They slither to and thro
Moonbeams flickering
She feels them soaking in
Gliding into her electric veins
Moonbeams pumping

Soothing her restless heart
And its ceaseless desire for speed
And immortality

Blasting Stereotypes

Judy Adourian

“Mom!” my eight year old son J.P. shouts with excitement from across the school parking lot. “I’ve got to go to Cheetos-dot-com on your computer today.”

I wait until he reaches the car to respond. “Why?”

“There’s a video game there. I played it at school today. I have to play it again.”

“You played a video game at school?”

“Mom, please!”

“In my day we didn’t play video games at school.”

“Mom!”

“We did crazy things like read and write.”

“MOM!”

“We’ll see.”

“But Mom, you don’t understand. It’s so

cool. I’ve just got to play it again.”

Little does my young son know, I more than understand. Not so long ago Judy “the mean ol’ mom” was “Judy the *Tetris* addicted teenager.” *Donkey Kong*. *Frogger*. *Space Invaders*. Even the names of such games send a thrill chill down my spine today. Few things engage my competitive spirit as easily as a computer game and the elusive “number one” spot on the score-board. Truth be told, even today as an adult I find myself online playing *Bejeweled*, *Mahjong*, or *Scrabble Blast* when I should be vacuuming, dusting, or cooking dinner.

So after checking out Cheetos-dot-com myself, I agree to let J.P. play for twenty minutes.

“Isn’t it cool!” J.P. gawks as the site’s neon orange background displays on the screen.

“Very cool.”

“And that’s Chester Cheetah. He’s so funny.”

“Any Cheetah that wears sneakers must have a good sense of humor.”

As my son maneuvers around the website (with fine motor skills he rarely reveals in daily life), I pretend to busy myself with cleaning up my office. I tell myself that I'm just being a good mom—keeping an eye on my young son to insure he isn't exposed to anything too mature for his age. In reality, I'm itching to see what kind of games the website has, so I can try them myself later.

“Hey Mom, watch this! I'm the spaceship, see? And I have to dodge all these space rocks. And if I don't get hit by them, I win.”

I watch J.P. deftly use the arrow keys to “win” the first round of his game.

“You're very good at that,” I praise. “And lucky. When I was a kid I had to go to a noisy place called “the arcade” to save the universe.”

Ignoring my sarcasm, J.P. shouts, “Look at that—one hundred points!”

“Good job.”

“I'm the best at this game.”

“That's wonderful.”

“No one can beat me.”

“Really?”

“Really!”

Was that a challenge? No. Stop it, Judy. He's an eight year old boy. He's your son, for goodness sake. Let him be number one.

J.P. continues playing.

I keep watching.

Unknowingly, J.P. keeps taunting me.

“It's too bad you're an old lady, Mom.”

What did he just call me?

“How come?”

“Because old ladies can't play video games.”

Oh no he didn't!

“May I give it a try?” I ask coyly.

“Okay. But remember, Mom, this is a very

hard game. Don't get mad when you don't get a hundred points like I did."

J.P. gives me his seat and instructs me on which icon to select to start a new game and which keyboard keys I should use to operate the spaceship. While he "coaches" me, I read the game's directions. Just as I suspected—this game is nothing more than Atari's Asteroids. My heart pounds with excitement. I don't care if he's my son. Time to show this little boy what an "old lady" can do.

I press play and begin my computer battle. Not only do I avoid being hit by the asteroids, I press the space bar and shoot at them, blasting them into smaller and smaller pieces until they disappear completely from the screen.

"Mommy! What are you doing?"

Keeping focused on the game, I continue my onslaught, racking up way more than one hundred points, earning more and more extra lives, and completing level after level. The adrenaline rushes through my body and before long I'm a preteen at the arcade again. In a flash, I earn top billing on the scoreboard.

"You're right, J.P. That is a fun game."

J.P. stands dumbfounded. "How did you know to shoot the rocks to get more points?"

"Like I said, my days in school were spent learning to read—things like directions. But also, I used to play this game when I was a kid."

"You had Cheetos-dot-com when you were my age?"

"Not exactly. Come with me."

I bring J.P. into the den and pull out a small, clear plastic bin. I take out the Atari Flashback system my husband bought me as a Christmas present several years ago. "Your game," I explain as I set up the system, "was originally called Asteroids. And this is what it looked like when I was a kid."

I explain to J.P. that the little triangle on the screen is his spaceship and the circular blobs are the asteroids. He laughs at the cheap graphics. I show J.P. how to use the joystick to move his spaceship, how to shoot the asteroids into smaller and smaller bits, and how to make his

ship disappear and reappear. For the next twenty minutes we are no longer mother and son or young kid and old lady. Our rivalry evaporates. We are buddies saving the universe from total destruction.

Shooting the Moon in Vice City

Kirsten Irving

for Angela Cleland

Tax really wasps up my picnic, he says,
ordering another, calling me Brother.
And he chucks my jaw, lovelessly,
purring, Seek to cure. Remove the collector.

Stopped an old man today. Bang.
And five steps on,
was offered a nudey show, hot dogs bloody
with ketchup, a case of Colombian white,
a bullet suppository, custody.

Now the radio's singing *Hurry boy*.
It can get a guy down, the shit you get shown
but who could be blue in the VC sunshine?
No, Sir. Not in this short-shorts town.

We all hear the drums echoing tonight
through your fake palms, City.
But it's gonna take
a lot to take me away from you, so let
your wild dogs cry and your hookers stalk.

Tomorrow could be autocide
or a silent shot and concrete boots. I'm not
frightened of this thing that I've become,
as such, but it kind of tires you out.

It's only whispers. Forgotten words,
but through the haze and the sirens' brays,
De Niro: *Some day a real rain will come.*
Yeah, well I bless the goddamned rain.

Ten Green Bottles

Kirsten Irving

after Lemmings

She tells me she was a builder before all this
and before that, a miner. I have been staring
at her flexed palm for an hour.
In the distance, Francis has climbed
a glowing cliff and walks towards the edge.

He's going to fall. Let me through,
I beg. She shakes her mossy hair
and holds her T-shape.
Frank plummets,
with a small cry, into chalk.

Mike begins to scale the side.
I ask her again to step by.
She nods towards the new mountaineer,
who walks off the edge, but opens
a yellow parasol and drifts down.
The gods are learning, she says.

And then he stops, over the other side,
inches from escape, and spreads his arms
like her.

Now, she says, and I find myself scrambling
up the bright block. Which, I see now,
has arrows pointing to her
and the trapped hundreds.

*We must start from the other side, she calls,
to get there at all. Now open your parasol.*

And I do. And as I float to the floor,
the golden door is there, just beyond
my steadfast predecessor.
*You spoke to Marianne, Mike grunts,
his fleshy blockade so like hers.
Do you want to save the others?
He is such a different creature
to the one who went up.*

Yes, I want to save them.
Then turn around and dig.

As I start to claw, I hear muffled
crying and scurrying: the others panicking
that we will always be stuck here.
Chanting the names
of the dead and the missing.

I am not a miner like you, Marianne –
help me,
I shout into the stone face.
I am not a miner comes back.

Just as my stripped hands

threaten to show bone,
and my small heart nearly clocks out,
an eye appears in the tunnel,
and joy and feet flood it.

*I can see it I can see the door oh Gerard is it true
it's not a myth I see it too*

They run as their robes will allow,
towards freedom,
towards Mike,

who screams *STOP*
and explodes.

And it's over the crumbs of his body they go
it's the door it's the door at last woo hoo

I –

Marianne: *Go. GO, YOU IDIOT.*

So I do,
and only when my hand is on the door frame

and I can smell grass, do I turn
to see the countdown start
above her head.

Asteroids

Karen Locascio

You want to know what killed the dinosaurs?
It was an asteroid.

If the dinosaurs had been killed by a comet
or a meteor
they would've called the game *Comets*,
or *Meteors*.

There was a knockoff game called *Meteors*
but everyone knows knockoffs aren't real.

*

Asteroid means “starlike.”
Once they must've looked like stars—
like comets—“long-haired stars”—
but they're not like stars—
they're like little planets, an orbiting cluster
of little planets
and like planets, moons to the sun.

*

In the game, there was a little siren ship
that blared across the screen.
I hated it, its noise, its intrusive proof
of life—life other than mine—

in the vast comforting void of space.
I shot it as fast as I could every time
it showed up.

*

The biggest asteroid is named Ceres, alias
Demeter, World's #1 Mom.
Or, if you disqualify Ceres—technically a
dwarf planet who only happens to live in
the asteroid belt—
it's Vesta, aka Hestia, aka stay-at-home
spinster.
Never, ever a mom.

*

My favorite thing to do playing *Asteroids*
was push the joystick forward,
make my ship fly straight, fast as I could
make it go
shooting as fast as my thumb could press
the button...

I miss joysticks—
I could handle a joystick—
I was Princess Allura, beautiful and

butt-kicking.
I can't handle these controllers now—
too many buttons, nothing really to grip.

*

The five biggest asteroids
are named after goddesses
not important enough
to get planets named for them.
It's like how one month is Women's History
Month and the rest aren't.

Venus is our token but Venus
like all those old gods slept around
and she also gets a flytrap and a tennis player
named after her
and you can see how she barely really counts.

*

I always liked the music in the game—
dunt - dunt, dunt - dunt
—and how it would speed up the more
danger you were in.

Opportunity Cost

Bridget G. Dooley

She learns in fourth grade civics that opportunities have costs. Everything is an option, the teacher says.

If for example she claims the dog-shaped monopoly piece then she can't also have the piece shaped like a boot. At least not during the same game, and who has ever played two games of monopoly in a row, with all the the set up, accounting, sorting.

Her table group is asked to write on their worksheet, in their own words, in complete sentences, what opportunity cost means to them. You can only do one thing at once so you got to pick good things to do. If what you're doing isn't good then go do another thing, she writes, then sets the sheet in the turn-in tray without asking her group for approval. They're trying to fold loose-leaf into little toilets. She's happy with her answer, confident that life's a competition to see who can experience the best things possible, or at least to experience the most things possible. To pick up as many experience jacks as

she can in the time it takes her life-ball to bounce.

After school her brother, home from junior high an hour earlier, plays the video game that is a whole world, an island city with gang wars to incite, several makes of cars to steal, cartoon pedestrians to rob or, in rare cases, befriend. Sometimes she plays as fireman, taking over the truck- and life-saving responsibilities for a little while. To put out an office building blaze she has to aim the hose at the fire's base. To lift rubble off a survivor's body (and see them live through it) she has to make careful, subtle movements like those required to win a claw game. Rarely does she win claw games. Rarely do her survivors make it to the hospital before bleeding out. Her brother gets mad about this because it raises the casualty count on his file, which he can't afford going much higher. Not with all the rockets he's been launching into department stores lately.

He's kneeling now on the carpet, shag marking his knees, swathed in a dead aunt's afghan. On the TV he is swimming his character out into the ocean that surrounds the island, swimming away from the coast and the city and the point-earning missions he still hasn't completed,

butterfly-stroking into oblivion, into the invisible wall where the programmers built the map's boundaries. The well-toned avatar peddles his geometric arms forward into emptiness with perfect, mechanical form. Every so often a glitch fractures the avatar's image and the swimmer appears from the wrong angle, as if the endless water's messing with the light. A breezy tune loops again, again.

"Wouldn't you rather actually play," she asks, "wouldn't you rather like win points?"

"I've heard if you keep at this long enough you unlock a whole other level, a whole other terrain." There's Doritos dust under her brother's nails, like a manicure with Nacho-Cheesier tips. He sets the controller on the floor beside him and presses the joystick forward with his orange-rimmed pointer finger. His hand's in the position of a president pushing a big red button. He turns from the TV, swimmer still swimming, "Think I got better shit to do?"

We are Tetris

Francine Rubin

Right angles are everywhere.
Trees are too nonlinear,
so they are annexed to rods.
Only the broadest shoulders

have the correct corners. Breasts
are bound to appear flat, and we never
gaze at the sun anymore. Each day
we practice our geometries:

march the 2 by 4 block that parallels
the skyscraper intersecting
the village square. We move in 2/4 time,
calibrating 2 beats per measure

with our bodies, curbing beats
that overstep boundaries.
Occasionally at dusk, our limbs ache—
feeling perpendiculars widening,

softening on the horizon—but
the sensation pales. At night, we hone
our drawings of arcs and lines, preparing
for the day when we will shape the sky.

You are Tetris

Francine Rubin

I press your wrist
to make you move.

I add a square, a stair,
my foot fitting

into a step of your limb.
I walk up, picking

a pear from a branch,
placing it in a crevice

of your body.
I add lines:

one, two, three,
and climb higher,

almost reaching wrens
from each new apex

I make of you.
Flush, I bleed

into each of your
cloughs until you begin

to disappear bit-
by-bit, sometimes with

apocalyptic flash,
sometimes simply

dissolving, parts
of you I had formed

with my hands
gone as if I had

never envisioned
them into being.

I seep into branches,
wren feathers tumbling,

the pear, each bright
reference of you

now pale, absolved
of you, until I too

have dissolved down
to no squares.

Cut Wide Open

Danya Bush

Maddie was eleven, and she wasn't totally sure what masturbation was yet. She and Sara were just sitting there in the cafeteria minding their own business, eating their bologna sandwiches on white bread, when Brandon walked by their table with his friends. He said, "Hey, Maddie the Fatty," soft and low at her, "I got something for you." His friends were already sniggering as he made a fist with one hand and shook it back and forth against the zipper of his jeans towards her, eyes screwed shut, top teeth clamped down over his bottom lip. They howled with laughter, and Maddie could feel herself going bright red, even as she tried not to, the blood pumping beneath her cheeks, tears welling up and stinging.

Sara was saying she would tell on them, she would get them all in trouble, but they just walked away, still laughing, and Maddie didn't know what it meant, why he did that. The shame of it knuckled deep into her stomach, knowing it was a bad thing, but it thrilled her, just a little, to know that their teasing was different this

time. The guidance counselor told her to ignore it, the mooing in the hallways, the occasional shrieks of, "She's going to eat me!" but Maddie didn't really understand why they did that either. Maddie wasn't fat, but she wasn't skinny, and anyway, Sara weighed more than her—she knew because a week ago, they weighed themselves on the scale in her parents' bathroom after riffling through her mother's makeup drawer and stealing a tube of lip gloss, and as Maddie looked down at the numbers between her feet, her lips were sticky but beautiful—but Sara carried her weight the way girls should. Sara was growing boobs now—*breasts*, her mother would correct her, if she overheard Maddie saying that—and she complained about them all the time, how sore they were, and how her bra was so uncomfortable, and Maddie would look at herself in the mirror later once she'd gotten home, staring at the flat expanse of her chest and her roundish stomach and mottled thighs and trying to position her body in a way that hid all that.

Anyway, she knew she wouldn't tell Miss Allison about what happened with Brandon in the cafeteria, even though she'd rather spend the afternoon in her office instead of class. Miss Allison would make

Maddie a cup of tea and let her put in as much sugar as she wanted, and she'd water the plants on the windowsill as Maddie talked, and it would feel like Miss Allison was actually listening to her, instead of thinking she was just some dumb kid. But she didn't go to Miss Allison's office after lunch. She and Sara finished their sandwiches without saying anything else about what happened, and they went back to class when the bell rang, but Maddie was still thinking about what happened when she got off the bus that afternoon. She replayed it over and over in her mind, the tight ball of Brandon's fist jerking back and forth, until she felt sick.

Boys were different down there than she was, everyone knew that, and you're not supposed to talk about that kind of stuff in school—she knew that, too. It made her feel weird, stomach going watery, mouth suddenly filling with saliva, and when the bus finally dropped her off at home, Maddie immediately raced upstairs and pulled out her laptop. She needed a distraction. She booted up her favorite game, a life simulation, a virtual dollhouse. She'd made herself in the game— a better version, obviously, older, with an adult body even better and perkier than Sara's. In the game, her waist was cinched between two

halves of an hourglass. In the game, her hair always fell in a glossy sheet down her back, and her skin was always flawless. She was pretty. She went by her full name, Madison, because Maddie was a dog's name, childish.

Madison was dating a guy whose hair was gelled into a slick dark coif, whose chiseled jaw was darkened by a permanent state of five o'clock shadow, and he never had acne like the guys at school or acted gross like Brandon. His name was Lucas, and he was spawned by the game, just a stranger walking by Madison's house, a randomly generated combination of characteristics, but his pixels were beautiful.

Clicking on someone brought up a menu of possible interactions, and as a relationship progressed, more options would pop up for Maddie to try. The first time she selected the bright blue kiss bubble, the momentary shock of it hurt all the way down to her feet, and then Maddie watched intently, nose to the screen, feeling like there was a hand gripping her heart and squeezing. Their arms wrapped around each other, eyelids falling closed, and their lips puckered cartoonishly and pressed together—just a peck, but Maddie felt her breath quicken. She felt silly, em-

barrassed, and checked to make sure no one was watching her from the door. She quickly shut the laptop.

As she booted up the game that afternoon, the loading music calmed her, and she realized it probably wasn't such a big deal, what Brandon did—it was probably just like someone giving the finger, which had confused and scared her with its brute violence the first time she saw it. She didn't want to make a big deal about it, to be *that girl* who couldn't take a joke on top of everything else. She tried to put it out of her mind.

Maddie had to go through some of the routine maintenance of the game, making sure Madison's needs bars were full and green. Her hygiene was low, so Maddie had her take a shower, watching her strip down to a veil of magnified pixels, which blurred her body from her knees up and shoulders down. Maddie didn't even have anything worth blurring out—the one day when they went to the public swimming pool for PE, Maddie pulled on her old one piece, the one that was pilling and saggy on the bottom, and Brandon and them snapped the elastic on her swimsuit and said she had mosquito bite tits. She hated that, that they called them tits, and she

suddenly felt old fashioned, too much like her mother. She didn't say anything back, just tried to swallow down the painful welling in her throat and remember what Miss Allison had said.

She could look like Madison when she got older maybe, and she imagined it would happen by unzipping her skin. Madison would step out, the pretty girl who was in there all along.

Lucas was coming over to the house. When Madison opened the door, they hugged, and she kissed his cheek. Their smiles were blown up to ecstatic proportions, movable mouths cut into otherwise seamless faces, and giant plus signs ballooned and popped above them—it was so easy to make people fall in love. They started talking animatedly in gibberish, but it was easy for Maddie to imagine they were just talking in a foreign language.

Her bedroom door opened. “Christ, Maddie, are you playing that dumb game *again*?” Peter came in without knocking and plopped down on the bed next to her, rumpling the covers and pinning pillows back against the wall. “That game is for babies.”

“Whatever.”

Peter was a couple years older and had just started high school that year, took a different bus and everything, and now suddenly everything was for babies. Not much else about him had changed, but a stick of deodorant was now on display in their shared bathroom, and the counter-top was somehow always carpeted in little black hairs.

He leaned in close to the screen and squinted, reading. ““Madison?” Is that supposed to be you?”

“No,” she said. “Don’t be stupid.”

He grabbed the laptop from her hands, laughing.

“Hey!”

He said, “It doesn’t even look like you, Maddie! And who’s this? Your boyfriend or something?”

Suddenly the whole thing felt wrong. The embarrassment crawled and itched all over, and the idea of it, making herself, a better version, in the game, made her want to throw up. How could she think that was a good idea? She basically made herself a boyfriend. She wanted to die.

“It’s not – just, give it back, okay?”

Peter clicked on Lucas, hovered the cursor over the blue *yell at* button, and clicked. Madison’s face suddenly hardened, and she started screaming at Lucas, her fists punctuating the air, as he cowered. Big red minus signs floated and blinked over them. Maddie felt detached from it all—suddenly seeing them as just rendered code, not real people at all.

Peter looked at Maddie and handed the laptop back, saying, “Jesus, Maddie, it was just a joke. You can play your dumb game if you want to.” When she didn’t respond, he said, “Anyway, Mom says you have to go walk Sadie.”

“What? I walked her yesterday—it’s your turn!”

“Yeah, well, I want to go over to Alex’s, and Mom says I can only go if I walk Sadie first, and so maybe you can just do it for me, and then I’ll walk her tomorrow and the next day.” He whined, “Come on, Maddie. Please? I’ll do the dishes tonight.”

“Fine.” Maddie didn’t mind taking Sadie out, but she didn’t want Peter to think

she'd do it for free.

Peter exhaled a big puff of relief. "Thanks. You're the best." He hopped off the bed and turned to leave, then wheeled back around, saying, "Oh, Mom got something for you," and the image of Brandon's clenched fist popped in her head, and the nausea felt viscous and slippery. Peter was saying, "At the store. She wouldn't tell me what it was."

Maddie said, "Okay, yeah." Peter would know what it meant, probably, but he would laugh at her, call her a baby for not knowing. Before she had time to stop herself, she said, "Peter, what does this mean?" She mimicked the way Brandon did it in her memory, jerking her fist back and forth while keeping her wrist loose, and the motion felt strange and stiff to her, instead of relaxed, the way his looked.

Peter sneered a little, like he'd found Sadie's poop on the floor. "Don't do that. It's weird if a girl does it."

"What, why?"

"Where'd you see that?"

"Some boy at school. Is it like giving someone the finger or something?"

"Just, you can't do it, okay? Girls can't do it."

"Why not?"

"It just doesn't work that way. I don't make the rules." He shrugged, and as he walked through her bedroom door, he said, "And don't forget to walk Sadie."

"Yeah, I know." She yelled, "Close the door!" at him, but he didn't, so she had to get up and do it herself. She checked the game, which had been running in the background ever since Peter gave her laptop back, and Madison and Lucas were sitting on the couch watching TV, knees bent at perfect right angles, stiff as dolls. Their relationship had dropped, just a little, since their fight—but maybe she should just forget it. She remembered the embarrassment, how grotesque the game looked just a minute ago, but then looked at their relationship bar with a gnawing panic. Maybe she'd play just a few minutes. She had to make sure they made up.

She clicked on Lucas and had them hug. They had to stand up to do it, swaying

gently in place, smiling and sighing. Maddie tried to imagine what it would be like, to have someone hold her like that, the pressure of his body on hers, the soft rasping of his scruff against her cheek, and she thought that that must be what it's like to be in love. Madison and Lucas were the best example of love she knew—all of her friends' parents were divorced, and her own parents were in the middle of getting a divorce, but her mother was letting her father stay at their house until he found his own place, but that was supposed to happen six months ago, and nothing had really changed except for that he'd started sleeping in the guest room.

Madison and Lucas just stood there now that their hug was finished, blank faced and expectant, and it became clear to Maddie that she was the facilitator of their love—without her, they would stand there forever, and it was her responsibility to make sure it happened how it was supposed to. She clicked on Lucas and had them follow the slowly escalating sequence of romantic interactions – flirting, kissing, caressing—but it wasn't seamless the way it would be in real life. The movements were broken apart by brief pauses – one action would finish, the next would get slotted into place, and then they would

jerk back into motion. But none of that mattered to Maddie. Today was different. Today was special.

She hovered her cursor over the blue *woohoo* bubble, its icon a purple heart smiling with teeth and one eye bulging slightly larger than the other. The whole idea of it seemed garish—the euphemism, the clownish heart—and Maddie had always pretended not to see it because even the word *woohoo* put that sick feeling into her stomach, but now she just thought she was being a baby. There was nothing scary about a stupid game. She clicked the bubble, and the action was slotted into place. Madison and Lucas walked to her bed, not holding hands or anything, as if they didn't even see each other at all. They climbed into bed and disappeared under the covers, which suddenly bulged with their hidden shapes beneath, and the lumps moved without any kind of logic around the bed. Small fireworks burst above their indistinct shapes, and a cloud of hearts floated around the bed with tiny popping sounds. Madison gasped and giggled, and then they both suddenly appeared, sighing, the duvet pulled up to their chests.

Maddie's heart was pounding in her

throat, in her stomach, in her tongue. She looked up from the screen and around the room, and she was surprised to see it still there—the porcelain horse figurines lined on her white laminate bookshelves, the discarded pile of clothes on the floor in the corner—it was all still there in the deepening afternoon sunlight. She felt different, not that sick feeling from before, but she was suddenly aware of all of the skin on her body and what it was touching—the comforter, her t-shirt, the plain cotton underwear that came three to a pack from the big box store.

There was a knock at the door, and Maddie shut her laptop quickly. “Yeah?”

Her mother came in and closed the door behind her. “Peter told me you’d be in here.” A plastic shopping bag swung from her wrist. She nodded at the laptop. “How’s your game?”

A brief panic fluttered in Maddie’s chest. Did she know? “It’s good.”

“Can I sit down?”

“Sure.” Maddie moved to make space. She knew – she must know. She wants to talk about it.

“So, I was at the store today, and I picked you up a couple things.” She flattened the shopping bag in her lap and pulled out a jumble of brightly colored training bras by their plastic hangers. “I know you’ve been kind of jealous of Sara, you know, because she started wearing them, and I saw these on sale, so I thought—you’re old enough. I thought they were pretty.”

Maddie fingered the flimsy elastic band of one of the bras, the puckered material looking cheap and pointless. She wished she had Madison’s body, had the need for underwire and lacy cups and clasps in the back, but instead, she had a handful of neon fabric. Sara had shown Maddie how her bras came from the store wrapped delicately in tissue paper, and Maddie had hoped Sara’s older sister would offer to take her shopping one weekend too, but the offer never came.

Her mother was saying, “So, I got a call from Miss Allison today. She says you haven’t been by her office in a couple weeks.”

Maddie suddenly stiffened. This was the first time Miss Allison had ever called her mother, or at least the first time her mother had told her about it. The horri-

fyng thought occurred to her that they might talk about her together, that all of those afternoons she spent in Miss Allison's office this school year have been meticulously replicated for her mother. She had started going to see Miss Allison because of her parents' divorce, but they didn't ever really even talk about that anymore.

Her mother said, "That's a good thing, right, that you haven't need to see her? You're feeling better?" Her eyes were soft and shiny in the light, and her eyebrows were drawn up in the middle, like Sadie when she was begging for scraps.

Maddie wanted to say yes. It would've been the kind thing to do, but she didn't say anything, smoothing the training bra in her lap until all the wrinkles were gone, like running her thumbnail over a piece of aluminum foil over and over until it was like brushed chrome. She mumbled, "I don't know. I don't ever know why you made me go see her in the first place."

Her mother put a cool hand on her forehead, which Maddie knew was supposed to be soothing, but it just made her want to scream. Her mother said, "I was worried about you. You took the news of the

divorce really hard."

"Whatever. Everyone gets divorced." She didn't even care about the divorce, not really. She just wanted her mother to get out of her room.

Her mother sighed. "Maddie..."

"God, why'd you even name me Madison if you were just going to call me Maddie all the time?"

She blinked. "Is that what this is all about? You want me to call you Madison?"

Maddie wanted to scream. She felt everything turning to water inside her—it threatened to overflow, pressing at the space behind her eyes, in her nostrils, filling the soft tissue of her throat—and she tried to harden herself, to turn it all to ice. She swallowed hard and said, "Yeah. I wish you would call me Madison."

Her mother's face softened, and she smiled, relieved. "Well, you could've just said that, honey. Of course, if that's what you want." She got up, leaving the training bras on the bed beside Maddie, and walked to the door. "I'll be downstairs if you need anything."

Maddie nodded tightly, and the door clicked closed. One day, when she was older, she'd take off her Maddie skin—cut herself open, right down the middle like undoing the zipper of a jacket, and Madison would step out, shiny and new.

Acknowledgments

“Meet Me at the Fountain in Caras Galadhon” by Berit Ellingsen originally appeared in *Atticus Review*.

“Ten Green Bottles” by Kirsten Irving was originally published in *Coin Opera II: Fulminare's Revenge*, a collection of video game poems published by Sidekick Books.

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etry Review. Once upon a time she worked at The New Yorker. She now lives in Austin, TX where she is currently working on a full-length collection of erasure poems from women's and teen magazines. She blogs at EKristinAnderson.com and enjoys playing Donkey Kong Kingdom, yes, with her grandmother, when she visits Maine.

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Hanna Rajs Lundström (Cover/ToC images)

My name is Hanna and I live in Stockholm, Sweden where I study art and work at a cafe and at a flea market. I've published one book, *fler positioner* ("more positions" (I guess lol)), and two collaboration books of poetry: one about Beyonce (*addicted to you light*), and one about Buffy the vampire slayer (*out for a walk. bitch*).

Emily Edmunds (Title page image) is an artist and video game enthusiast currently living in Grand Rapids, MI. She firmly believes that if *Animal Crossing: New Leaf* were a competition, she would be winning. When she's not busy being a multimillionaire mayor in the virtual town of Tiny Hat, she enjoys watercolor painting, cooking, and taking pictures of her cat.

Kayla Karaszewski (Cover design)- A printmaker and artist who loves plants, dogs, and the sound of a squeegee pushing ink through a screen. Also, ice cream. Instagram: @kayla.karaszewski

Primarily self-taught, **Nessie B.** (Bio background images) dabbles in illustration, crochet, and polymer clay creations. When

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Editors

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August Smith runs Cool Skull Press and currently attends University of Massachusetts Boston. He’s released five chapbooks and has been published in many venues, including the *Newer York!*, *Banango Street*, and *Electric Cereal*, among others. You can read more of his work at his website: august.mostlymidwest.com.

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Goddessmode was made possible by the collective effort of the volunteer editors, by the contributions from women and non-binary artists from all over the world, and by those who have supported Cool Skull Press in the past and continue to do so. Thank you all.

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