NERDS OF A FEATHER FLOCK TOGETHER

BEST FANZINE

2023 Hugo Award

Voters Packet

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Introduction

Roseanna Pendlebury

When I joined **Nerds of a Feather, Flock Together** back in 2021, they had not long received a Hugo nomination, and were waiting (presumably with at least somewhat baited breath) for the results. Two days after my first review went up on the site, the breath was unbaited, and they found out they were Hugo winners. I'd already been excited to just get my own reviewing shared on this site full of critique and analysis and thought and opinion and altogether just really interesting discussion of all things SFF media - that excitement was only increased when it became a Hugo-winning fanzine. Now, two years later, and **Nerds of a Feather** get to relive that excitement - but this time, I get to be a part of it, rather than just a (very enthusiastic) newcomer on the sidelines - and I have to say I was somewhat unprepared for how utterly proud I am of it, and to be part of a team whose combined works were interesting enough, engaging enough that a number of people felt compelled to write out name in the little box.

To those people - thank you. Truly.

With all the changes we're seeing in the online landscape at the moment, sometimes by the minute on certain bird-shaped websites, the thing that really stands out to me and that keeps bringing me back online is the community, the people whose words get put out there on the internet, full of feeling about the things that matter to them. It's a vulnerable thing, putting an essay out into the virtual world, especially when your opinions touch on personal themes, your own experiences, how the media you're discussing intersects with your identity and worldview. You're opening yourself up for comment and criticism alike, and even the compliments can sometimes feel A Lot. That so many people keep doing it, keep making these beautiful, thoughtful pieces on media of all kinds, is part of what makes it worth celebrating. Whether that be fanzines, fancasts, published essays, Twitter threads or whatever else, there's always someone willing to put their soul out there to say "this is why this story means something to me."

The team here at **Nerds of a Feather** has changed in the last two years, but the commitment to being part of that community hasn't. Though we've said goodbye to beloved colleagues off to newer challenges, and welcomed in keen new faces, the core of what we do has remained the same: we are still here to share, discuss and dissect the works of SFF media that we think are worth that discussion, and to try to be a great place of genuinely insightful commentary, as part of that wider community of reviewers, fan and creators.

However, with such a vast well of media to draw on - now more than ever - there are only so many hours in the day and nerds of the proverbial feather and we simply cannot cover them all. But we hope - we intend - to cover the ones we truly think merit the conversation. Some of these are works everyone will have heard of, the ones that form the bigger discussions across fandom spaces. Some of these are lesser known works, ones close to our various hearts, that we think more people would love like we do, if only they knew they existed in the first place.

As such, we've provided here a curated selection of works from all our contributors in 2022, covering at least some of the various things we do. From Adri Joy, Arturo Serrano, Dean E. S. Richard, Elizabeth Fitzgerald, The G, Joe DelFranco, Joe Sherry, Paul Weimer, Phoebe Wagner, Roseanna Pendlebury, Sean Dowie and Vance Kotrla, here is what we hope is an enticing insight into what **Nerds of a Feather** was all about in 2022, and I'm both grateful and proud to have the opportunity to share it with you. We hope you enjoy reading them as much as we enjoyed creating them.

We would also like to take this time to congratulate Haley Zapal for being a second-time finalist for Best Fancast as part of **Hugo, Girl**. It is well-deserved and we are so happy for her as well as for Lori, Amy, and Kevin. Likewise, congratulations to Chris Garcia and our friends at **Journey Planet** for their fanzine nomination - as always, we are honoured to share a category with you all.

LITERATURE REVIEWS

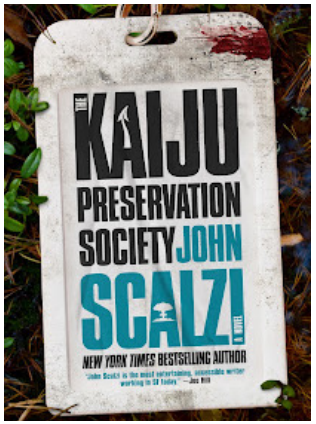
SECTION.01

Section I: Literature Reviews

Microreview [book]: The Kaiju Preservation Society, by John Scalzi

Joe Sherry

Jurassic Park by way of John Scalzi.



If you've ever wondered what it would have looked like if John Scalzi wrote Jurassic Park instead of Michael Chrichton, you don't have to wonder any longer because that's the best comparison I'm going to come up with for The Kaiju Preservation Society. The only thing we don't have (yet) is Richard Attenborough kindly reciting his iconic lines over sweeping camera shots showing the scope of what this new world looks like while the music swells and soars.

Very briefly, Jamie is a delivery driver after losing a much higher paying job, and after one particular delivery to a former acquaintance ends up receiving an offer to work for an "Animal Rights Organization" that needs extra grunt labor at the last minute and Jamie takes the job which turns out to be in a very remote location with no contact with the outside world for months. Everything about the context of the offer is incredibly sketchy but the money is transformatively good and jobs are becoming scarce.

That Animal Rights Organization happens to operate on an alternate Earth where giant monsters roam the land and everything on the planet is designed to kill a human - or it would be so designed if this was a world humanity was native to. The Kaiju Preservation Society is exactly that, an organization built around the preservation and conservation of these giant creatures that are not native to our world but can sometimes cross over. That's where KPS comes in - both to respond, but also to prevent.

We're pulled along the story of The Kaiju Preservation Society by new recruit Jamie and the other new recruits on their team - because everything is new to them there is opportunity to have natural info dumps for the reader and it works. Everything is discovery and the sense of wonder is enormous. I can't wait for the movie version of The Kaiju Preservation Society (it's been optioned for television, which means maybe sometime in the next ten years and maybe not). I can almost see the sweeping introduction of a lush, verdant world as Jamie and company get that moment of whoa.

I went a bit overboard last year watching kaiju movies. I didn't expect the obsession, but there it was just waiting for me. I watched 30 Godzilla movies, another 3 Kong movies, and this year is fixing to have more of those giant monsters. What I'm saying, though, is that The Kaiju Preservation Society is hitting me right in the sweet spot just when I am most set up to appreciate it. It is a FUN book and, frankly, after two years into a pandemic that is not relenting - I absolutely needed this book. The Kaiju Preservation Society has all of the big monster goodness that readers could ask for and it is chock full of the goodness we've come to expect from John Scalzi.

It's hard to really figure out how to consider a book in the context of others when you're not quite the same person you were some fifteen years ago when you first discovered a particular author - John Scalzi in this instance. Thinking back to Old Man's War, that novel became an absolutely iconic science fiction novel that set up this idea of SCALZI as a writer and really defined more than a decade of expectations.

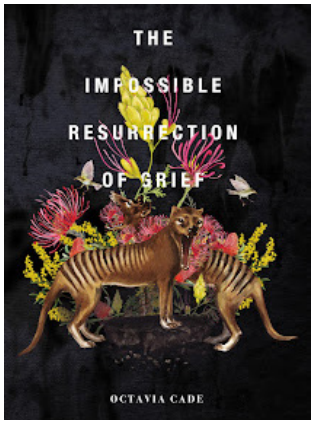
If I have the story correct, Scalzi once sold a novel with the elevator pitch of "Man solves diplomatic crisis through action scenes and snappy dialogue" and minus the diplomatic crisis, that's generally been a hallmark of his fiction. The Kaiju Preservation Society is not Old Man's War, nor is it The Android's Dream or The Collapsing Empire - it's a different sort of novel, but it also has those hallmarks of classic and top notch Scalzi. There is plenty of snappy dialogue and legitimate laugh out loud moments mixed into discovery and adventure.

The Kaiju Preservation Society moves fast and is just the damned delight that I needed this year.

Microreview: The Impossible Resurrection of Grief by Octavia Cade

Elizabeth Fitzgerald

Octavia Cade offers a short but brilliant meditation on humanity's relationship to nature in The Impossible Resurrection of Grief.



In the near future, ecosystem collapse is endemic. This has brought with it Grief, a kind of severe depression in humans that leads to madness and, ultimately, suicide. Once it has infected a person, the decline into death is inevitable.

Although Ruby is a marine biologist working in conservation, she has so far managed to escape Grief's grasp. This is in part because her beloved jellyfish are thriving in the warming oceans. Her friend and colleague Marjorie hasn't been so lucky. After Marjorie commits suicide, a bundle of her letters is delivered to Ruby, kicking off a series of encounters with other Grief-stricken individuals.

The Impossible Resurrection of Grief packs in a lot in under a hundred pages. There is, of course, the climate change aspects and humanity's relationship to nature. Grief is the central expression of this: the exhaustion and despair of watching the Earth die around you (especially that element you are particularly attached to -- be it a species of small bird or the Great Barrier Reef) and not being able to do anything about it, seeing only the futility of your efforts. Anyone with a background in ecology or conservation, or with even the smallest interest in the natural world, will find this relatable.

However, Cade is not interested in presenting uncomplicated pictures. Throughout the story, she reminds us of humanity's capacity to compartmentalise. We ignore what doesn't directly affect us -- or even what affects us only indirectly. It allows us to continue on more or less as normal while the world slowly dies around us. Ruby is a prime example of this. On an intellectual level, she understands that things are dire -- which is why she has elected not to have children. She works hard on helping her colleagues obtain vital research grants to support species that are rapidly disappearing. However, on an emotional level she remains unaffected, caught up in the wonder of her jellyfish and a worldview that could be seeing the silver lining or could be toxic positivity.

The concept of Grief also acknowledges the colonialist aspects of ecological disaster. We're told that rates of Grief are higher amongst indigenous and First Nations people, reflecting their deeper ties to land. The story also discusses the near extinction of the Indigenous populations of Tasmania. While it is in many respects deeply problematic to put Indigenous people on the level of animals (a troublesome pattern that continues to crop up particularly in Western SFF), the author is at pains to show how rhetoric of white settlement equated them and used the same tactics to achieve annihilation.

But again, this perspective is not allowed to be uncomplicated; indigenous people are not a monolith. In this case, Ruby's husband George provides a counter example. Of Maori descent, George left behind his homeland in Aoteroa to immigrate to Australia. Like Ruby, George is good at compartmentalising and is untouched by Grief. In fact, he still hopes to have children, which is why he and Ruby are undergoing a very amicable divorce.

The relationship between Ruby and George may strike some as a little underdeveloped, but that seems to me to be a very intentional decision. In fact, many apparent flaws of The Impossible Resurrection of Grief are, on closer inspection, actually features. Ruby and George's relationship is a microcosm of humanity's position in the world: a comfortable habit lacking in deep affection that will have to be let go in order to move on to something truly worthwhile.

The structure of the story is another example. The opening and ending focus on Ruby's relationship with her friend Marjorie, and these bookend three encounters Ruby has with other Grief-afflicted characters. The transitions between these sections can be a little jarring, particularly as Ruby travels from Tasmania to New Zealand. However once again, I feel this is by design. After all, it so aptly reflects the compartmentalisation that is an important central theme of the story.

Criticisms of the story as needing to be longer are patently ridiculous. What more is needed? Certainly not worldbuilding. The world of the story is just a breath away from our own, where crown-of-thorns starfish plague the Great Barrier Reef and species extinction and endangerment are rising rapidly in Australia after a record summer of bushfires.

This is a difficult story to discuss without spoilers, and the ending especially so. Consider this your warning and feel free to skip to the end of the review.

The ambiguity of the ending may not be to everyone's taste, but fits the Little Mermaid motif that runs through the story, stealing away Ruby's voice just as Anderson's Sea Witch does. It also serves to make Ruby's choice our own. Are we going to compartmentalise this as just a story and continue on our usual way? Are we going to succumb to despair? Or are we going to take our grief and anger and forge it into a weapon to fight back for nature?

The writing style was excellent and the uneasy atmosphere it invoked reminded me of Kaaron Warren at her finest. This was particularly the case during Ruby's encounter with Granny, a scientist who has managed to resurrect the extinct thylacine or Tasmanian Tiger. It was also particularly present in Ruby's final encounter with the Sea Witch, as her friend Marjorie has become. It gave a real sense of humans as

predators, giving a glimpse into a world where any separation that might have existed between humans and nature has been obliterated, allowing the use of human technology to help nature fight back against humans. The veil is pulled back and we see how these predators have camoflaged themselves, preying on the humans who have ruined the world and setting a trap for Ruby.

I find myself wanting to give this book to everyone but aware that, like Marjorie, I have to pick my targets carefully.

The Impossible Resurrection of Grief is on the shortlist for the Sir Julius Vogel Awards, Aoteora's premier award for speculative fiction -- and where it will go up against Cade's own Scales, Tails and Hagfish in the category of Best Novella/Novelette. While I'm pleased to see it being recognised in the author's home country, it seems an oversight that it hasn't received the same recognition on international stages.

The Math

Baseline Assessment: 8/10

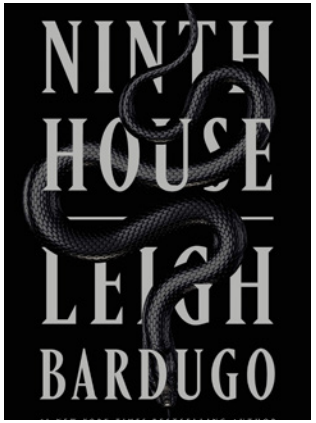
Bonuses: +1 for managing a nuanced perspective of a complicated topic in such a short story

Nerd Coefficient: 9/10

Microreview [book]: Ninth House by Leigh Bardugo

Phoebe Wagner

In Ninth House, Leigh Bardugo puts her own spin on the dark academia genre in her first adult novel.



Note: While Bardugo is known for her young adult fiction, this novel is definitely adult. Content warnings include: sexual assault, rape, drug use without consent, gore.

Alex Stern is only at Yale because she has a secret: she can see dead people. People who can actually see ghosts are rare in the magical underworld of New Haven. After a brutal murder that should have been the end of her future, instead, Alex is offered a new opportunity: serve as the Dante of Lethe House, which oversees the other hidden, magical houses that have graduated some of the rich and powerful, their fame and fortune protected by the spells performed by the underclassmen.

The novel opens with a prognostication, where Alex must serve as Dante, alone, in observing the ghostly underworld while one of the Yale houses, the Bonesmen, produce their magic from a living sacrifice. With a living body splayed open on an operating table, Alex realizes the usually quiet-enough ghosts are not being quiet, but trying to break through her wards. Usually, her Virgil would be here to guide her through this prognostication until she learned all the ins and outs of magic, but her Virgil, Darlington, has gone missing. On top of all that, a young woman that reminds Alex of just where her life was heading shows up murdered on the same night the ghosts misbehaved. The cops, even Detective Abel Turner who is on Lethe's payroll, want to brush it off as just a girl from Town murdered over drugs. Alex suspects something more.

In learning to navigate this unfamiliar world of both magic and ivy league "protocols," Alex is shepherded by Darlington, the charming, rich, and smart senior who she will replace. The only problem: Darlington has disappeared, and Alex has to find out why—or she just might not survive finals, let alone killer demons.

A young woman from New Haven murdered on a magical night, her mentor Darlington gone missing, and her grades are slipping--Alex has her work cut out for her, but what makes everything harder is her status as an outsider. She's from California, grew up in poverty, has severe trauma from seeing ghosts but also from how that horrific ability impacted her mentally, leading her to drug usage. Now, she's dropped into not only the magical societies that influence Yale (and most of the rich and famous) but also has adjust to Ivy League classism, which Darlington--the educational superstar--struggles to understand.

Told in alternating chapters from the points-of-view of Alex and Darlington, Bardugo develops not just the world and magic systems, but also what it means to be an outsider in a place like Yale. It's not all magic and ghosts--Alex still has to pass her English class with its ungodly amount of reading. Importantly, the hierarchy inherent in academia is on full display, as different professors and deans play favorites with students, placing them in deadly situations, Alex included. But, those same people in power are unwilling to work to protect the students, even when Alex finds out certain students are using magic to drug others. Through this magical hierarchy, Bardugo is able to explore the toxic power dynamics of higher education, whether it's a hidden society, a frat house, or a sports team.

Part of what makes this first novel a great addition to the dark academia subgenre is the focus on Yale lore. The ghosts, murderers, architects, and locations of Yale aren't just included to spice up the story but actively tell the tale. In addition to critiquing the power Yale holds as an institution, the historical aspects balance out the magic, just as Bardugo confronts both magical obstacles and problems realistic to academia (such as scheduling appointments with your bougie advisor). Thus, the novel's alternating point-of-view, alternating chronology, and balancing of magic and reality come together to serve each other in a larger critique of institutionalized power.

While Leigh Bardugo's popularity comes from her Grishaverse novels (two of which I reviewed here), Ninth House represents a welcome change. Bardugo demonstrates her strength as a writer to capture reality and fantasy her exploration of a magical Yale with the same entertaining style that she brings to her young adult novels.

The Math

Baseline Assessment: 7/10

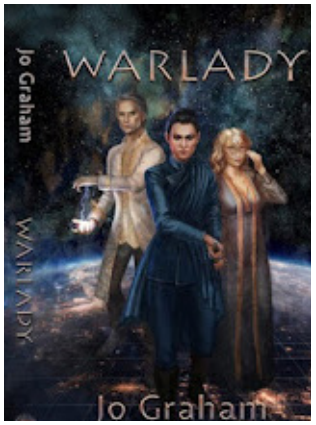
Bonuses: +1 for the inclusion of Yale lore as well as ivy-league imposter syndrome

Nerd Coefficient: 8/10: well worth your time and attention

Microreview: Warlady by Jo Graham

Paul Weimer

Jo Graham's Warlady, second in her Calpurnian Wars series, deftly moves the action to the planet of Morrigan, where politics, intrigue and ancient secrets threaten not only the future of Sandrine, bodyguard to the titular Warlady, but the fate of the entire planet as well.



Jo Graham's Warlady deftly moves the action in her series to the planet of Morrigan, where politics, intrigue, the threat of war, and ancient secrets threaten not only the future of Satyrine, bodyguard to the titular Warlady, but the fate of the entire planet as well. Graham expertly weaves the personal with the political, making the fate and stakes of Satyrine's old relationship with the electromancer Jauffre as important and grounded for the reader as the fate of their entire world.]

The avaricious and expansionist Calpurnians, last seen in Jo Graham's Sounding Dark, are a looming threat to another of their interstellar neighbors. This time it is the small planet of Morrigan. Like the republic of Eresh, Morrigan has an ace up its sleeve, if it can only turn it to bear--the artificial intelligence based upon,, or perhaps it is the holy spirit of a long ago hero of Morrigan. That entity has guided the war leaders of Morrigan, and such advice would be invaluable for an upcoming conflict.

But when the titular Warlady dies, almost certainly assassinated, the political convulsions and the gap in leadership may yet leave Morrigan dangerously open to the predations of the rapacious Calpurnians. Can Sandrine, bodyguard to the dead Warlady, help keep her planet free? And what will the costs be? This is the story of Jo Graham's Warlady, second in her Calpurnian Wars series.

If Sounding Dark, first in the series, relied heavily on Sumerian motifs and legends to weave its story of a mysterious ancient ship as the possible salvation of the planet Eresh, Warlady goes for a different motif entirely. With a planet named Morrigan, and a leader of the people called a Warlord (or in this cycle, a Warlady), I was expecting something more along the lines of Celtic mythology in comparison to the Sumerian. My expectations were not met, as Graham goes in a couple of different directions instead.

First off, let's talk about the Electromancers and Dreamers, especially since Jauffre, the former lover of Sandrine, is one of the three main characters of the piece and is an Electronmancer. Just as Sounding Dark blended notes of fantasy and myth into the space opera, the Electronmancers and Dreamers add a science fantasy component to the space opera by positing people who have the bloodlines and abilities to manifest electricity, or to walk and manipulate dreams. Morrigan, though, especially distrusts the power of Electronmancers, and what they can do.

In a real sense, seeing the past, present and the potential future of the Electronmancers through Jaffure's story, the property that comes to mind is Dragon Age, and in particular the second game in the series, Dragon Age II. In that game, the bounds and strictures on Mages, while we saw it in the first game, really come to a head and to violent revolt. Mages are a dangerous force, unpredictable, controlled for their own good and the good of society, but valuable resources all the same. The Electronmancers in this book fit a very similar niche, and have similar desires for freedom and autonomy.

Graham goes for the personal, though. Rather than having a wide ranging revolt and revolution in the midst of what else is going on, Jauffre's desires for a better life for those of his blood come through in the former lovers reunited strand of the novel with Sandrine. We get the sense right away that the two have a past, but it takes a bit to tell the entire story of how they originally met and just what that entailed, because it does nicely set up the two working together again when the Calpurnians come knocking.

As far as the Dreamers, the other "magic users", we get a lot less detail and less development. True, the third of our main characters, Leonie, is one, and is also Hierophant, and a possible successor to the Warlady, but her story, her development and her strand of the story frankly felt a little shallow than the attention that Graham lavishes so luxuriously on Sandrine and Jauffre. It is a pity, because Graham plays with the role of the Hierophant and also the election of the Warlady in terms that reminded me a bit of the College of Cardinals and the election of a Pope. There is a lot of potential here, and we do get to see Leonie try and dance on a knife's edge as she realizes the implications of who might be elected the next Warlady and what that means, but it does feel a little underdone compared to the mainline of the plot. But Leonie's dreaming power is definitely less engaged with than the electromancers and I would have liked to have learned more. Too, Leonie's behind the scenes actions, which don't quite make the page or get attention as much as Sandrine and Jauffre's actions, turn out to be crucial to solving the original problem, but it feels more than a bit off camera.

In the end, Leonie is a bit of a third wheel to SAndrine and Jauffre but now let us focus on Sandrine. Given the flashback we get from when she meets Jauffre, Sandrine is an ambitious and determined young woman who grows into the right arm, the aide and bodyguard, to the titular Warlady. She makes a strong two-handed team with Jauffre both in the past and in the present, and the strength and depth of their former relationship, coming back up again, complete with a deliberate use of tropes, shows how much Graham knows what she is playing with here, and is being deliberately playful in their story. In the end I found myself reading for their book for their relationship as much as the main plot of who was to be the next Warlady, who assassinated the prior one,

and what the perfidious Calpurnians were up to.

Unlike the previous novel and Eresh and its space station, Graham spreads her wings a little bit with Morrigan as a setting. This was previewed in the world guide at the end of Sounding Dark, that Morrigan is a tidally locked planet. The light side is too hot for life, so the terminator line and the dark side are where Morriganians live. I am not sure that planetary geophysics would make the dark side in the end any more viable as a place to live on a tidally locked planet than the light side (see Charlie Jane Anders' The City in the Middle of the Night for a different treatment of a tidally locked planet). The impression that Graham gives is as the Morrigans as a relatively small colony (especially compared to the vast Calpurnians) using technology as best they can on a marginal world.

This gets to the last bit of the book I want to discuss and that is Khreesos the deified eidolon who might be divine, an AI, a memory of the last leader, or all of the above. He was an early Warlord who helped ensure Morrigan independence against an early Calpurnian attempt at conquest, that much everyone agrees on. But what he is beyond that, what the Presence inside of the ancient machinery the Warlord (or Warlady) connects to, is a matter that is not clear--and the richly different interpretations of who and what he is to the people of Morrigan show a nuanced understanding that a people, a culture, can have very different views on what is ostensibly the same founding myth or belief. Even as the answer to that question matters for the plot, Graham is careful with the revelations to leave room for the numinous, for doubt, for belief. This is Graham at her best, I think, exploring the numinous, the divine, the metaphysical within a future technological world, and finding room for both there.

Overall, Warlady shows the strengths of the author's writing, and continues to build and deepen the Calpurnian Wars universe. Graham has a vision for where this is going, as the appendix to this novel is a Morriganian guide to Menaechmi, which is the setting of the projected next book in the series. The culture shifts and differences among the worlds are clear and wide and I look forward to seeing more of Graham's verse.

The Math

Baseline Assessment: 7/10

Bonuses: +1 for a rich exploration of faith, belief and deep culture in Spaaaace. +1 for a strong two hander of Sandrine and Jauffre as characters

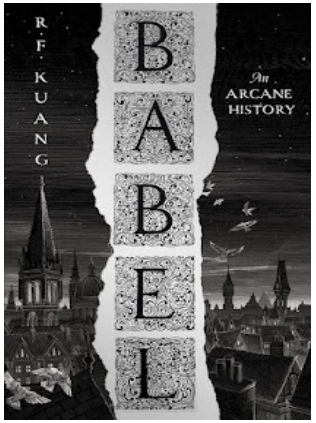
Penalties: -1 Other aspects of the plot and character building to the top two seem a little sketched in and not as fully fleshed out.

Nerd Coefficient: 8/10

Microreview [Book]: Babel by R. F. Kuang

Roseanna Pendlebury

It's definitely dark, it's definitely set in academia, but this is far more powerful and far less aesthetic than that label implies.



Babel: Or the Necessity of Violence: an Arcane History of the Oxford Translators' Revolution, to give it its full title, is not a gentle book. It is not a book inclined to mince words about its topics. It is about a lot of things - colonialism, both physical and cultural, racism and classism, white fragility, love, linguistics and the power of belonging, and of not belonging. To quote the author, it is a "love letter and break up letter to Oxford". It is a story of how a small group of people try to find a way to fight against the seemingly insurmountable force of the British Empire in the early 19th century, in a world where we imagine magic powered by silver and language exacerbates the technology and various societal effects of the industrial revolution. It is unflinchingly critical and honest about history, academic culture, and the untrammeled self-interest of those in charge.

In the world of Babel, languages can make magic - by inscribing words that translate, but with some meaning lost in the process, onto a bar of silver, the linguistic dissonance can cause some thematically similar effects in the real world, when the match pair of words is spoken by someone fluent in the languages. Collecting more words, more translations, more languages, allows the translators of Oxford to find more effects, which in turn are sold for exorbitant profit, or used to fuel the expansion of the British Empire. This in turn brings in more silver to inscribe, more languages to plunder and more speakers of those languages to exploit - because native speakers of the more "foreign" languages, ones who have had less cross-pollination with English, are particularly prized by the Translation Institute, and what better way to get those speakers than when they are young and can be moulded to fit an English lifestyle?

Our protagonist Robin is one such, taken from his home in Canton after the rest of his family died of cholera, himself on the brink of succumbing, healed by the English Professor Lovell, then raised in his house on a diet of languages until he was ready to take a place in Oxford.

By getting Robin's perspective, raised to think of Lovell with gratitude for saving him, to focus on nothing but language, starved of affection and people his own age, Kuang is in a position to give us the authentic feeling of coming up to Oxford as an undergraduate but on overdrive. And at this, she is devastatingly effective. The passages of the first years having their first tutes, discovering their intellectual curiosity, the sparkling feelings of joy talking to other people their age about the things they've all been raised to hold most dear, they feel so palpable, so painfully real. The bond between Robin and his three cohort-mates is immediate and vivid and so earnest, and all of their bond together with Oxford as a place and a feeling is so instantly, intensely passionate, a sense of sudden belonging after a childhood of various hardships.

Which makes the rest of the book all the more bittersweet. Because the thesis of the book is about how that belonging is false, an impossible dream none of them could ever realise. The carrot dangled before them to lure them along, alongside the stick of what would happen, what their lives would be, if they didn't give in to the temptation. And watching them realise this in slow motion, as events unfold that force them to see what was there all along, force them to realise they can't shut their eyes to it all, is devastating. It is a story of the shattering of pleasant illusions by bitter realities, and it is impossible not to grieve with the characters for the lost dreams, even as we and they know those dreams were never going to actually happen. The whole thing builds slowly through the course of the book, but by the end it is entirely gut-wrenching.

As an emotional journey, the story is pretty flawless. Robin's slow progression from childhood ignorance to youthful academic zeal to disillusionment is beautifully, poignantly told, as are his relationships to both England and Canton, and China more broadly, and his own sense of nationality and identity. We move from mood to mood in smooth progression, and it is incredibly easy to latch onto his changing feelings, and slip from one to another as events dictate.

On the flip side, some of the early parts are a little repetitive in their world building and exposition. The beginning of the book has a lot of telling us about slavery, oppression and exploitation in the world of the early 1800s. All of what it tells us is true, clear, unambiguous and necessary, but is occasionally undercut by some of the footnotes - where the text will give us a pretty well-drawn picture of the world, the footnote spells it out so basically that it feels almost as if it doesn't trust the reader to have understood what it was telling them, which is occasionally a little grating. However, this mostly clears up once Robin reaches university, so it's possibly some of the tone is meant to be through the lens of his understanding of the world (or lack thereof), and if so, some of that heavy underscoring makes a little more sense. There are also so many delightful bits of historical accuracy, in the details. For instance, Robin once asks the Professor "what do I need Latin and Greek for?" and is met with "to understand English", which is such a 19th century view, and there are enough nuggets like this hidden among the childhood parts that it becomes relatively easy to forgive some of the overemphasis where it crops up.

Once we reach his time at university, there is a definite shift in the way the narrative moves - we speed up, steadily at first, matching the pace of his own growing understanding of the world and his place in

it, and this match of prose and tone to content is both subtly and skillfully done. By the time the book reaches full flow, it feels impossible to put down, and utterly immersive in its worldbuilding.

We also go from his limited character interactions as a child - seeing really only Professor Lovell, his tutors and the cook - to a more richly peopled world. The sparseness of the childhood parts again mirror in the reader Robin's experience of his narrow world, and emphasise again the sheer emotional intensity of his coming up to Oxford, and the friends he meets and makes in his cohort.

And what a cohort they are. The four characters, who comprise most of the books main social and emotional interactions (alongside the Professor and one other), have a beautiful web of love and hate and co-dependency, understanding and ignorance, between them. There is the tension between the two boys and the two girls (who have their own struggles in an Oxford that barely accepts women might be capable of study), between white Letty and the other three, and then between Victoire and Ramy, and the sometimes-white-passing Robin. It is a book, encapsulated in these four, that really wants us to see the many, many different ways the world chose to oppress people, and how difficult it could sometimes be for people to see outside of their own struggle to those of others, even those nearest and dearest to us. The progression of the four way relationship in the Babel cohort is one of best written parts of the book (which is saying something), and it is just so, so good. It's "emphatic hand gestures while failing to find the right words to tell people how good it is" good.

It is also to some extent the tension of the main plotline writ small - because when we come to the events of the latter half of the book, Kuang manages to encompass so much of what was going on in the world of the 1830s, and so well, and it is brilliant. She draws in threads of the social and economic harms of industrialisation, the struggle of the working class, sexism, racism, the self-serving nature of apparent philanthropism, the intersections of religion with both liberation and oppression, the sheer hubris of empire, the self-sabotaging nature of colonialism, the blindness of people to the harms around them, and so, so much more, and connects and contextualises them with each other. And she manages to do this without flooding us with extraneous information that the reader might juggle to hold in their head all together. We don't need to know every single piece and part of every struggle that forms a part of the whole - she gives us what we need for the narrative to work, and for it to feel immersive, coherent and natural as a world, and this is absolutely critical for both allowing the story to move along at the speed it does, and for it to balance so well with the arc of the character relationships. This is, of course, to some extent helped by the fact we view the world through the lens of sheltered academics, and so can be presented information as somewhat new that many outside of the Oxford bubble would have been well aware of, but even so, it is extremely well-handled.

As is the magic system, and the necessary smattering of linguistics that gets thrown in as part of it. Because the silverwork relies on translation, and understanding words and how they come to be as they are, it is necessary to explain some various bits and bobs of philology to move the story along. And obviously, these are all factually good and sound, but more critically, what is included, the real and fake scholars' works that are quoted, work together to build such a perfect vibe of linguistics as a discipline in the early 1800s (with some tweaks for the story, of course). The ubiquity of Latin and Ancient Greek, as well as the abundance of German scholarship, the insistence on biblical underpinnings, the inter-country feuding and prides at stake, all builds together to create a great pastiche of the linguistics discipline as it did, or could have, looked.

And then, of course, the brutal honesty of the end thesis - on the necessity of violence. The crux of the novel. It is an inexorable, powerful, sophisticated and sharp conclusion to an argument we've been led along through the book. It is devastating and it is brilliant, and that is all I can really say about it.

As I was reading, several other books came to mind as drawing on similar themes in different ways, but the one I would most pick up is how the portrayal of the poisoned-fruit lure of Oxford in Babel is extremely resonant with Mahit's infatuation with the Teixcalaanli culture in A Memory Called Empire. Both manage to capture exactly the feel, the siren song of that beautiful, cursed and toxic coloniser culture, through the eyes of someone immersed but othered, whose highest possible aspiration in the eyes of that culture will be "one of the good foreigners", as though that were the best compliment that could be paid. And both manage to capture the impossible position it puts those who live between the worlds in, and how, whatever they pick, whatever path they walk, whatever life they lead, they will never win.

The Math

Baseline Assessment: 8/10

Bonuses: +1 I very nearly cried at the end. God, the ending. +1 Almost painfully accurate in the portrayal of the allure and awfulness of academic culture

Penalties: -1 some of the early parts feel a little repetitive

Nerd Coefficient: 9/10

Microreview [Novella]: Uncommon Charm by Emily Bergslien and Kat Weaver

Roseanna Pendlebury

A magical slice of life in 1920s London that's surprisingly substantial for its small size.

Uncommon Charm packs an awful lot into a very (very) tiny package - looking at race, gender, sexuality, class, magic, ghosts, religion, murder… the whole gamut. And how does it manage to cram all that in to its 94 pages? It has approximately no plot at all. Which sounds like a problem, but somehow really isn't.

The story follows Julia, a bright young socialite recently expelled from her elite school, and her mother's new student Simon, a young Jewish magician of complicated parentage, as they become friends and adults together. They explore their families' tangled and troubled relationship, past and present, while each begins to stumble towards the path they may follow in their life, if not the one they necessarily always expected.

Simon is a very easy to love character – shy and earnest, someone with a working class upbringing suddenly thrust into privilege, and not really knowing what to do with himself while there. He sees ghost, studies magic, umms gently when spoken to unexpectedly and cares very much about impressing Lady Aloysia, the foremost magician of England, it appears, and also Julia's somewhat eccentric mother.

He becomes all of this more prominently through the narration of his complete opposite, Julia, bubbly, vivacious and brimming with confident entitlement, someone who very much expects the world to right itself beneath her feet. And yet despite that, she manages to be an entirely engaging and sympathetic narrator. Her narration never stays on one line of thought for very long, but somehow never irritates while doing so, and instead propels the book along at a raring pace, furnishing us very naturally with tidbits of information and snippets of gossip that would otherwise be difficult to drop into the narrative smoothly. She has an incredibly distinctive voice through the text – I feel like if you gave me a snippet of something else the author wrote from her viewpoint I'd be able to spot it immediately – and this feels extremely critical to setting the story in its time. She sounds so perfectly, precisely like a posh 1920s London girl, right from the first moment. Possibly the critical saving grace of Julia's personality though is that despite her poshness, her obvious delight in herself and how terribly amusing she is, is that she's fundamentally nice. She behaves instantly with kindness to the strange boy who's come to live in her house, and it is through her encouragement that he comes, little by little, out of his shell.

She's also a perfect foil for her quiet, serious and contemplative mother, lurking in the corners of the story, swooping in occasionally to deliver us intriguing insights into the magic of the world, before disappearing back off to study in her own, particular way.

Such as it is, the plot centres around uncovering what exactly happened to Lady Aloysia's long-dead fiancé, the brother of Simon's recently revealed father, a Russian prince in exile of some form. The two families' stories link up and back together before the birth of either protagonist, and it is a story about searching back through those tangles, trying to understand where things came from and why they are as they are.

But the process of that searching is more a backdrop than the point. What it allows the book to do is show us a world in flux, where a woman can be a prominent magician (but perhaps only because she's aristocracy), where an illegitimate, working-class son can maybe make a name for himself, where a girl can carve her own path away from her mother and assumed life of society and marriage, and where they can be friends through this. It is a book of quiet queerness, of bending the rules and making new ones, of exploring the boundaries, set in the perfect time period for it.

It is also a book of family trauma, of acknowledging the past so you can meet the future. Of the quiet nastiness that can lurk behind the smile of the most charming people. Of literal, and figurative, ghosts, who can only be really understood once confronted.

It is also a book of neurodivergence, of looking at the world in the way that works best for you, and learning to create the framework that suits yourself and your needs.

Reading it felt like watching an episode in an ongoing series, seeing a snippet of something longer, with richer, deeper themes than one episode can convey, but because the framework was doing such a good job, you don't need to have seen the rest for it all to make sense. It is the most slice of life slice of life you can read, an excerpt that doesn't feel beholden to structuring itself as if it's a whole novel, and is instead content to be that slice, to pick up in the middle of a story and end with all the endings still possibilities (though with enough resolution to know you've finished the episode).

A lot of novellas feel like short novels – structurally the same, just abbreviated. But this feels like something else, and I think part of its plentiful charm arises from that. It's not trying to be anything other than itself, and it succeeds marvelously.

The Math

Baseline Assessment: 8/10

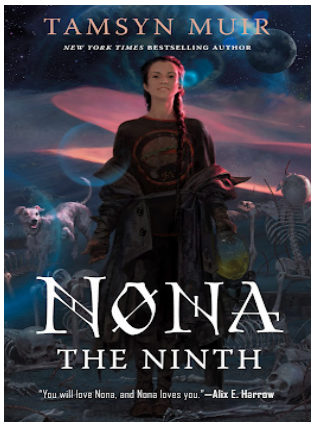
Bonuses: +1 perfect encapsulation of a period of history not often done in fantasy

Nerd Coefficient: 9/10

Microreview [book]: Nona the Ninth by Tamsyn Muir

Adri Joy

Its plot is thinner and its protagonist less vibrant, but Nona the Ninth still delivers the full Locked Tomb experience



So, unless you've been locked in a tomb (with no wifi signal) since 2020, I'm going to assume you know about Tamsyn Muir's Locked Tomb series. Starting with Gideon the Ninth and continuing into Harrow the Ninth, the Locked Tomb is a series of (obligatory "spoilers start here" warning) wisecracking cosmic cultists, of necromancers and their swordhands and the (literally) soul destroying things they've done to keep their cursed empire safe from the vengeful ghosts of its own planets, and of the absurd number of poor emotional choices they have made while doing so. As far as we all knew, the Locked Tomb was to be a trilogy, ending this year with Alecto the Ninth. And yet, we were all of us deceived, for another book was made. Before we get to hang out with Alecto, first we must make time… TO MEET NONA.

…Nona? Who the fuck is Nona?

Well, yes. That's the question, first asked in the epilogue of Harrow the Ninth and which provides much of Nona the Ninth's central mystery. Six months after the dramatic climax of the previous book, Muir introduces us to the six-month old consciousness inhabiting Harrow's body, by all accounts enjoying her life in a wartorn city in the apartment she shares with Camilla Hect, Palamedes Sextus (different person, same body) and Pyrrha Dve. Aside from being a six-month-old consciousness in a nineteen-year-old's body, Nona has a whole bunch of other things going on. She heals absurdly fast, she's completely incapable of reading or writing but can inherently understand all spoken languages, she detests eating human food but sometimes thinks about how nice it would be to eat sand - and her hair grows really, really fast. Oh, and she's also relentlessly chipper and optimistic, exuding a vibe that is somewhere between "born sexy yesterday" and "live laugh love" in the face of the pretty relentless misery of her surroundings. After the edginess of Gideon and Harrow, it's a bold move to centre book three around a protagonist who could be outperformed on the edginess stakes by a Minions meme, but it's the kind of bold move that The Locked Tomb is all about, and here we are.

Speaking of bold moves, Nona the Ninth plunges the reader into a story that jumps off from a fundamentally different place to its predecessor, and while it doesn't use the reader's likely confusion as a plot point in the same way Harrow the Ninth does, there's still zero contextual hand holding if you don't remember the finer details of that book. (Note: if you do need a refresher, this is a fantastic video recap which covers the key points and some of the meme highlights). The vibes of the setting are different: rather than being at the heart of the empire's elite, Nona the Ninth's city setting is – on first glance, at least – full of the ordinary people who make up the world of the Locked Tomb, albeit those living under the threat of annihilation. Even the book's divisions lean into a more "slice of life" feeling: instead of acts, we have days, and the events of those days are summarised with a combination of whimsical and ominous statements: "Regarding Nona – Hot Sauce Is Watchful – the City Has a Bad Day – Nona Gets a Bedtime Story – Five Days until The Tomb Opens." To hear Nona tell it, the blue light in the sky threatening planetary destruction is noteworthy but still less interesting than her day at school, where she looks after the teacher's six-legged dog and is a tolerated low status member of the "cool kid" gang. Of course, plenty of things that happen to Nona which serve to give the reader information: not least her dreams, which we experience as intermissions where Harrowhark and John wander an empty post-apocalyptic environment and John talks about the world before the Nine Houses. She also has an extended family beyond Cam, Pal and Pyrrha which includes Coronabeth Tridentarius, now a high ranking member of the local Blood of Eden group, and while Nona doesn't have many insights into "Crown" beyond how hot she is, she is at least in the room where more interesting discussions happen between the characters who are more than six months old.

Nona, if it wasn't clear already, is a source of frustration for me as a character. It's not that her characterisation is bad: she is perfectly designed to be loveable, the ultimate cinnamon roll doling out affection to characters like Camilla and Palamedes who, frankly, deserve to have someone telling them she loves them on a regular basis. And her role as an innocent sacrifice, happy to live for as long as possible while accepting that ultimately she will die for someone more "important" to return, fits perfectly and heartbreakingly within the broader religious symbolism of the series, and is especially well balanced with John's sinister personal story and the reprehensible actions he has taken as a self-proclaimed God. On the other hand, Nona is passive, has very little critical insight and because her personal mystery is heavily implied to be tied up with her death, her presence feels like it serves as a brake on the story, rather than helping it to progress. We won't get back to the main events until we solve whether Nona is Person A or Person B, and once that happens, it'll be very sad that we no longer have the cinnamon roll, but we can get on with all this tomb unlocking business and maybe kill some more resurrection beasts, so what are we waiting for?

This serves to make the first half of Nona the Ninth feel slow, with a niggling sense that this is a narrative originally conceived as a single act of a bigger book, now stretched over a whole book by itself. Perhaps the reason that wasn't originally the plan is because there wasn't quite enough material here to go "oh, yeah, this is a whole book", especially when shoved between a big Act 2 showdown and a hopefully even bigger finale? It's nowhere near Victor Hugo levels of "let

me stop the plot to tell you about day-to-day life in a nunnery", but somehow even with the countdown to the opening of the tomb, the physical reminder of destruction hanging over the city, and Nona's constant references to her own mortality, Nona the Ninth is missing some of the urgency and momentum that made Gideon the Ninth and Harrow the Ninth so utterly irresistible. Things do pick up significantly in the second half, as events around the war and the Blood of Eden presence on the planet come to a head and more familiar faces re-emerge (like, you'll NEVER GUESS WHO – actually, no, you'll find out in good time). By the end of the book, I was absolutely raring to go for Alecto the Ninth, but I was also missing the sense of pure emotional turmoil that I got from the previous books, especially Harrow the Ninth.

Regardless, the weakest of the Locked Tomb series is still a spectacular book, and as a piece of serial storytelling, I suspect Nona is going to look more impressive as part of the whole. While Nona's saccharine sweetness is no substitute for the, uh, spice of Gideon and Harrow, it's nothing short of an expert move to make a tonal shift work like this at all, and Nona's story expands the world of the Locked Tomb in ways which I am excited to see pay off. Now it's time to sit tight, scan the horizon, and wait to see how one or more fleshes might meet one or more ends in the final volume.

Questing in Shorts, December 2022

Adri Joy

The Magazine of Fantasy and Science Fiction, Jul/Aug 22

There's nothing that stands out particularly strongly in this issue of Fantasy and Science Fiction, but its an intriguingly wide ranging read nonetheless, starting with the surreal religious journey of Starblind, Booklost and Hearing the Songs of True Birds by Rudi Dornemann, and ending with Ciccio and the Wood Sprite, an original Italian folk story which takes folkloric elements like wishes and fairyland time weirdness and creating something timeless and intriguing. I felt The Garbage Girls by Nick Wolven slept on the most intriguing element of its premise: its set in a refugee camp in the USA taking in both climate refugees and homeless and vulnerable folks from the local community, but the story centres a group of privileged teenage girls volunteering to look good on college applications and resenting another girl who has had her emotions techologically altered to make her better at crisis response. The sociopolitical ramifications of this migration are ignored, and the camp residents are nothing more than set dressing against which the story of these privileged teens unfolds, but the dynamics between the girls is fun to read and raises interesting questions about philanthropy and our motives for doing the right thing. (Also, not to go too hard on faint praise but both this and "Ceremonials" by Robert Levy were both surprisingly good stories about teenage girls coming from men.)

Elsewhere in the issue, we've got The Collection by Charlie Hughes, a chilling and suspenseful intergenerational horror where a set of stories centred around a church heralds the end of a long-incomplete ritual, and protagonist Layla has to make choices about how to take up this legacy. The main story is interspersed with police interview tapes, giving that satisfying "I know this ends badly, I just don't know exactly how" narrative feeling that works great with this kind of bleak horror. Pair it with The Monster I Found In Third Grade by James Sutter, later in the issue for a one-two horror punch. A solid issue.

Africa Risen: A New Era of Speculative Fiction. ed. Sheree Renée Thomas, Oghenechovwe Donald Ekpeki and Zelda Knight (Tor dot com, 2022)

Africa Risen pulls together a massive 500 pages of original fiction from a range of established and rising star authors from both the African continent and the diaspora. 32 original stories is a lot to pull together for an anthology, and there were more ups and downs than I was expecting during the first half of the anthology, where a lot of stories end with the results of their climactic actions left uncertain and often with their protagonist's journeys feeling incomplete. I have complained before about stories that specifically end with the line "there was so much work to do", and there aren't any here that actually do that (unless I've blocked them from my memory), but going from the post-climate-catastrophe water prophecies of "Mami Wataworks" by Russell Nichols to the time travel technothriller of "Door Crashers" by Franka Zeph and into the intergenerational magic of "The Soul Would Have No Rainbow" by Yvette Lisa Ndlovu, I found myself getting pulled out of intriguing story worlds faster than I felt ready to leave them. I don't know whether any of the authors have longer stories to tell within these worlds, and if so I hope that this anthology provides the springboard for opportunities to do so - but as a reader it made for a bumpier ride than expected, one which I think a different story ordering would have mitigated.

Still, there's a lot of great stuff throughout, and the stories that left me unsatisfied mostly did so in a good way. I really liked Steven Barnes' "IRL", which sets out a future in which the reality and an online "game" world intertwine and people can be tried online for real-life crimes. When Shango, an extremely successful teenager gamer whose real life is falling apart, has his father targeted by a rival intent on taking him down, he has to confront the inequalities of the system and decide what actually matters to him. Continuing the theme of satisfying horror, "The Lady of the Yellow-Painted Library" by Tobi Ogundiran tells a suspenseful, claustrophobic story of a man whose lost library book turns out to be from no ordinary library, and "A Soul of Small Places" by Mame Bougouma Diene and Woppa Diallo is an outstanding monstrous coming-of-age about a girl (also called Woppa Diallo) who is sexually assaulted on her way to school and comes out of the experience with a taste for flesh that she uses to try and keep the other predators at bay. I also really enjoyed "Peeling Time (Deluxe Edition)" by Tlotlo Tsamaase, which takes on musical misogyny through the concept of a struggling music artist who gains the power to bring real women into his "dream videos". I love a good chapter heading conceit and the track titles on this fictional album really do it for me, as does the satisfying comeuppance of this asshole musician.

Shoreline of Infinity 32, Autumn 22

This is a special themed issue of Shoreline of Infinity, guest edited by Teika Bellamy and featuring science fiction fairy tales. We open with an Adam Roberts story which appears to be a woman, with no memory of herself or where she came from having a dialogue with a mysterious stranger about stories that involve bargains with the devil. Through the story, we learn more about the world she has come from and who, exactly, she is talking to, and it leads into an intriguing, Thousand Nights-esque bargain. Mary Berman's Cassandra Takes The Plunge features mermaids and an extreme detox from the modern world, as its protagonist "wins" a year in a submarine unplugged from modern conveniences in exchange for a significant (but not that significant) prize from a global megacorp on her return. After a fishing mishap leads to her meeting, and saving, said mermaid, Cassandra

becomes enamoured and starts rethinking her life on the surface. Cassandra's adjustment to submarine life feels a little too easy, but her sense of helplessness at her situation, and the realisation that the only sense of agency she has is with her mermaid, are powerfully done.

Also worthy of note are A Good Morsel of Clay by Woody Dismukes, a myth about a mother and daughter whose job is to create worlds, and the lengthy reprint (so long that it's not even fully included in the print edition) of Fairy Tales for Robots by Sofia Samatar, which features a creator clandestinely telling an as yet unawakened robot the stories she thinks will be useful for its growth, interspersed with moments from her life. There's also a lovely Little Match Girl retelling, by Laura Scotland and a great three-paragraph flash piece, The Golden Circle Tour by Edmund Fines

Uncanny Magazine Issue 49, November/December 2022

This issue of Uncanny features Rabbit Test, one of the buzziest stories I've seen in 2022 so far. It's picking up attention for good reason, as a topical take on reproductive justice and forced birth with a focus on a late 21st century future in the USA, presenting echoes of historical resonance through the ages. At the story's centre is Grace, a teenager who has grown up in an evangelical anti-choice family where technological surveillance of people with uteruses has been normalised. When Grace becomes pregnant, she tries to find a way to abort the pregnancy, and the story follows her through thirty years of attempts to live her own life and help others to live theirs, without the threat of forced birth hanging over them after every sexual encounter. By interspersing Grace's story with vignettes of others (mostly women, but with recognition of men and non-binary folk who face the same challenges, as well as the way that options have historically differed for white, Black and indigenous people in the USA), Mills presents reproductive freedom as a struggle that has always involved choices and where the battle is never definitively won. It's timely, given the repeal of Roe in the USA and the rollback of reproductive freedoms elsewhere, and very well crafted.

I also dug "can i offer you a nice egg in this trying time", by Iori Kusano: the meme title is fun (she says, as an egg averse person) but it overlays a really heartfelt story about Matt, a young man who keeps getting in violent fights with a Waffle House chef who makes his egg order wrong every time. Except, it's not about the eggs at all, it's about Matt trying to process the emotions that Gary evokes in him, and the grief of losing his life and status in the fantasy world of Hirekkyo, a world which he'll never be able to return to. It's impressive to write a compelling emotional epilogue to a main story we've never seen, and the denoument between Matt and Gary does just that. The grief of "Earth Dragon, Turning" by Anya Ow is also beautifully realised, and "The Other Side of Mictlan" by Matthew Olivas offers up even more grief with a side of magical underworld legacy and familial acceptance, with three brothers journeying to save their mother from the underworld while also trying to talk through their own differences.

Questing Elsewhere:

It's been a long time since my last column, and there are things I fully intended to review during that time which are now too fuzzy in my memory to dive into in depth. For now, the things I want to highlight from that list are a pair of issues from different magazines: Mithila Review Issue 16 and Omenana Magazine issue 22. The theme of both of these issues is Democracy - they are both part of the same project by the National Democratic Institute - and both present intriguing sets of possibilities about the future of the world. Interestingly, both issues also hit on "hopepunk" as an overriding theme, and while there are a few stories, like Harefoot Express by paolo de costa in Mithila, that aren't particularly positive in their depictions of humanity, most of the time these are stories about people struggling to make the world a better place, even in the face of challenging odds. There are some rough edges here and there (Omenana in particular is run on very few resources, and sometimes it shows in the editing), but I really enjoyed both of these issues and what they represent, and I'd love to see more globally-minded publications taking this topic on.

SECTION.02

AV Media Reviews

Section II: AV Media Reviews

In 'Station Eleven,' you don't give up just because the world has ended

Arturo Serrano

You'd think lethal virus stories are in bad taste these days, but Station Eleven is the triumphant cathartic release we didn't know we needed

Station Eleven, the miniseries adaptation of the 2014 novel by Emily St. John Mandel, follows the lives of a handful of survivors of a global pandemic that ended civilization. That sounds exactly like the last thing we'd want to see on TV during a real global pandemic that might, perhaps, really end civilization. But what this story has to offer is completely different from your standard post-apocalyptic drama. Except for news reports in the background of a scene, we don't see the masses out of control, fighting over scraps and forming unstable factions, or the desperate horror of watching passersby drop like flies. The incalculable toll of death is implied.

What this story is interested in showing is how life persists after so much death. Showrunner Patrick Somerville famously pitched the series as "a postapocalyptic show about joy." We follow Kirsten, a young actress randomly paired with a stranger who shelters her during the first weeks of the pandemic, and whose sudden brush with tragedy makes her so hypervigilant that she casually carries a knife with her at all times. We follow Clark, a gentle but bitter middle-aged man who ends up leading a community of survivors permanently stranded at an airport, and whose unlikely ascent to power eventually changes him from conservator to conservative. We follow Tyler, a neglected child of self-absorbed parents, whose repeated experiences of rejection and mistreatment mold him into an emotionally stunted manchild with a vendetta against the past. What connects their journeys is how they were touched by the death of narcissist womanizer and movie star Arthur, as well as the graphic novel Station Eleven, self-published by Arthur's ex-wife Miranda. In particular, the twin trajectories of Kirsten and Tyler will be shaped by their drastically differing readings of the same text.

You don't need the backdrop of a lethal pandemic to tell a story about the power of stories. In fact, Mandel's original intention wasn't even to write a novel about the end of the world; she just liked the image of wandering actors bringing joy to village after village. You may as well remove the whole pandemic plot from Station Eleven and see it for what lies at its core: the double-edged power of performance. Both Kirsten and Tyler have been deeply moved by a story, and both will reenact it at key moments of their lives. However, Kirsten uses performance as a balm (at one point a spectator remarks that the troupe of actors brought "new life" to their town), while Tyler uses performance as a weapon. As for Clark, his fear of things decaying makes him keep them stuck in place, where he continues to tell stories about them but doesn't let the story around them move forward.

To explore this theme it doesn't really matter that the plot happens in a setting where almost everyone is dead, because those who are left alive still face the same old question of how to live. What should we do about the things that time takes from us? Make beauty from them, like Kirsten? Lock them inside a display case, like Clark? Or burn them, like Tyler? This is not a story about finding meaning after the apocalypse; it's a story about finding meaning, period. The trappings of world-ending catastrophe are only there to enhance the emotional content, to make the implicit explicit.

This is why it doesn't feel distracting when the plot of Station Eleven jumps between time periods. The path of things from A to B can find more useful routes than a straight line. It doesn't feel like a different world when we see the scenes before the mass death. It's all the same story. It's always the same story. That the world has ended does not change the fundamental questions of life.

However, the path of things from novel to TV series did meet with some bumps. The character of Tyler is made much more ambiguous in the adaptation, but without the benefit of added nuance. Whereas he was unmistakably a monster in the novel, here he is given a tentative chance of redemption. This defuses the tension that sustained the story before it's given a proper answer. Once Kirsten and Tyler realize that their lives have been shaped by their love for the same book, the main conflict of the series becomes about which relationship to art (and which relationship to the dear deceased Art) will prevail. Kirsten takes a page from Hamlet and orchestrates a session of psychodrama where Tyler's moment of growth is to achieve the basic human decency of not slitting Clark's throat. In a way, this fits with their characterizations: once again, Kirsten gets to use performance to heal things, Tyler uses it to break things, while Clark stands still and describes the way things were. That works; that's who they are. However, in proportion to the significance of the conflict, it's rather anticlimactic. We spent plenty of time following Miranda's determination to preserve her artistic integrity and create her masterpiece, the only part of her that survives the death of all things, and the way in which the rival interpretations of her work are left not-quite-resolved leaves a deflated feel.

The actual resolution comes later, when Kirsten reunites with her old friend and rescuer Jeevan, and he says he's happy that his family will get to meet her in person, because for years all they've known of her are his stories, and this time they'll see the real her.

In this beautifully shot, movingly acted, sharply written, captivatingly edited, epically scored version of Station Eleven, that is the final victory over oblivion:

the moment when a story comes alive.

The Math

Baseline Assessment: 9/10.

Bonuses: +1 for Dan Romer's soundtrack, +1 for the power duo of Hiro Murai and Christian Sprenger, who together bring a flawless sense for shot composition.

Penalties: –3 for watering down Tyler's villainy.

Nerd Coefficient: 8/10.

Microreview [game]: Halo Infinite by 343 Industries

The G

Sometimes you just don't want to go home

After a year of failure, this December I finally managed to procure an Xbox Series X. As a longtime user of the platform, going all the way back to the original Xbox, I naturally had to get my hands on Halo Infinite - the latest entry in the venerable series.

Halo Infinite is in many ways the perfect launch vehicle for the new console. Featuring crisp, high-resolution graphics and excellent gameplay mechanics, you'd think this would be Microsoft's veritable ace in the hole. The reality, however, is more of a mixed bag - a mélange of good, bad and ugly.

First, the good. Halo Infinite is gorgeous to look at and looks amazing in 4k. The multiplayer is everything you want it to be, operating in the middle ground between Call of Duty's frenetic action and Battlefield's more languid pace. The maps are tight, the various modes fun to explore and the encounters as tactical as they were when Xbox first went online. I also appreciated the post-rock lobby music - a nice and unexpected touch. Matchmaking can be a little buggy, but once it gets going, the game is a lot of fun.

The campaign starts strong as well, setting you on an open world island where you can wander about, capture forward operating bases (FOBs), eliminate notorious enemies, free imprisoned marines and - when you feel like it - initiate and complete various missions that advance the story. You also have a series of special moves that you can level up with Spartan Points, which you find scattered across the island. There's a grappling hook, threat detector, thruster and drop shield, all of which are useful at various points in the game.

The open world dynamic is a lot of fun, particularly as you can approach the tasks in a number of different ways: going in guns blazing, using vehicles or picking enemies off from a distance with the sniper rifle or skewer. There are also enemy bases and bridges to capture, which are very tactical but still frenetic affairs. At this early stage in the game, I figured Halo infinite would end up one of my 2 or 3 favorites entries in the series.

Unfortunately, the denouement of the campaign is... well, calling it "forgettable"would be a kindness - because it's memorable for all the wrong reasons.

Let's start with design. As mentioned above, the open-world segment of Halo Infinite features tight gameplay mechanics and intriguing tactical battles, which force you to think as well as twitch. But once the game shifts into the more traditional linear corridor model, its weaknesses quickly become apparent. Throughout the game you are basically facing 4-5 enemy classes, each with a few variations. The lack of variety or evolution is masked by the openness of approach that you can take. However, once we're back in the corridors, you're struck by the fact that you're just doing the same thing over and over again, against the same baddies, in more or less the same environments.

Then there are the boss battles, which to a tee incentivize the "keep running in circles" tactic. Boss battles should feel epic and thrilling, not like a chore you just want to get over with so you can do something that's actually fun.

Finally, the story - which has to be one of the worst I've ever encountered in a game. First off, it's incoherent. The game starts with Master Chief almost dying at the hands of a Brute named Atriox, who leads a breakaway faction of the Covenant called the Banished. Then it turns out he's dead. The guy who replaced him? Completely indistinguishable from Atriox. And for the record, both come from the tired genre of "ME STRONG, YOU WEAK" barbarian baddies. Sleeping emoji. This villain, whose name I can't remember and don't especially feel like googling, shows up periodically to announce some variation on the "ME STRONG, YOU WEAK" line. Eventually you fight him by running around in a circle for what seems like years. What a game!

There's also something about Cortana, your erstwhile manic pixie dream girl AI companion, who has been replaced by "Weapon," your new manic pixie dream girl AI companion. Weapon is mostly notable for her facial expressions. Cortana is mostly notable for something about a Halo Ring and Atriox.

And then there's the pilot, who exists mainly to tell you that everything is useless and you should just give up - even when things are clearly going well for the Master Chief. When the pilot is captured and tortured by the Atriox clone, I wondered if there was a way to progress the game without rescuing him. Alas, there is not. Oh, and there's another villain who I guess is some kind of ancient alien and killing her is just as annoying as killing "ME STRONG, YOU WEAK."

To conclude, despite a strong multiplayer mode and an enticing open world dynamic, it's hard not to see Halo Infinite as a massive disappointment. This is supposed to be Microsoft's marquee franchise, one that is not only supposed to extol the virtues of the company's hardware, but provide a truly memorable experience. Halo Infinite fails to meet those standards, providing gamers instead with a glimpse of that, until it devolves into a tedious and repetitive slog.

The Math

Baseline Assessment: 7/10

Bonuses: +1 for the open world segments and tactical gameplay; +1 for a balanced and fun multiplayer experience

Penalties: -1 for such a godawful story; -1 for repetitive enemies, weapons and environments; -1 for the worst villains -1 really the story is as bad as I've ever seen in a video game

Nerd Coefficient: 6/10.

Microreview: The Adam Project

Dean Smith-Richard

Do you like Ryan Reynolds playing Ryan Reynolds? Boy, do I have a movie for you.

My favorite thing about Ryan Reynolds is probably his jawline. It's exquisite. Trailing that is how self-aware he is that he has an exquisite jawline, among several other physical features that I won't go into on a family-friendly website, as well as charm and charisma just... oozing (can I say oozing?), yet somehow manages to do that without coming off as egotistical.

My point is, Ryan Reynolds is who he is, he knows who he is, so every movie he is in right now (particularly ones he produces), is just him playing himself in a vareity of settings. you had video-game Ryan Reynolds in Free Guy (which was great, go watch it), superhero Ryan Reynolds in Deadpool, Indiana Jones Ryan Reynolds in Red Notice... you get the idea.

"But you forgot the OG superhero Ryan Reynolds," you say. "What about Green Lantern, you idiot? Do you think Ryan's cheerful-yet-brooding eyes could make us forget that atrocity?"

I mean, I hoped.

This is the redemption arc for that. Ol' RR plays Hal Jordan Ryan Reynolds Adam Reed, a pilot in the year 2050, which we don't see much of, because we get dropped in the middle of him stealing his own time-travelling jet while under hot pursuit and makes it to 2022, which isn't where he wanted to go.

Here we meet young Ryan Adam, who, my god, is Walker Scobell a dead ringer for Ryan Reynolds, at least in his voice and delivery. So for those of you who wanted more Ryan Reynolds, you get it, in the shape of a undersized*, asthmatic** 12-year-old. It's hilarious and I love everything about it.

Before we get to the meat of what happens, I want to refer back to Reynolds knowing who he is, which is nowhere more apparent than his acting and the characters who he portrays. He also, at least publicly-facing- is very heartfelt and caring. That really shines through in his movies - I should write about Free Guy, which honestly blew me away by being a lot more than the sum of its parts. I'm not sure that happens here, but he*** takes a time-travel popcorn flick and injects it with a lot of feeling, making it about relationships and choices.

Those relationships take center stage as the second act begins. Adam lost his father 2020-ish, so young Ryan Adam and his mom are still dealing with that trauma. We shortly learn that Ryan Adam had a wife, who was also a time-travel-pilot-person (they did not give them a cool name, like chrononauts or something) and she disappeared going to 2018, which is where he is trying to go.

Those of you who can subtract see where this is going.

But, like I said, at this point, those relationships are at center stage. The film does a great job of putting our protagonists in jeopardy, without feeling heavy. I wrote in this space about the need for healthy male relationships in media, and this film does a great job with that - The two Ryans Adams relationship, as he pleads with his younger self to, basically, not be 12. His younger self gives him perspective on their father, and how he managed his grief over losing him.

Mark Ruffalo is pretty great as well, as the dad, who is also asked to examine his own priorities and values, as well as what he is going to about being potentially gifted the ability to prevent his own death. Likewise, Zoe Saldaña is excellent as Laura (uh, spoiler, she's not actually dead), and both her and older-Ryan Adam have to decide between finding and keeping a lost love, or ya know, saving humanity.

Again - still a popcorn flick. None of this is, like, Sophie's Choice or whatever, but they did a good job of taking a fairly standard formula, and doing something other than the standard love interest and leaving it at that. Plus.... Ryan Reynolds.

The Math

Baseline Assessment: 7/10.

Bonuses: +1 for being tremendously heartfelt, +1 for a tight cast & plot

Penalties: –1 for making a big deal about the dad's jacket, and then jacket game being very weak. I care too much about jackets, I know, write your own review. -1 for basically sticking Guardians of the Galaxy and Back to the Future in a blender. Although that could also be a positive.

Nerd Coefficient: 7/10.

*He is very normal sized

**This just kinda... goes away

***I'm not sure it's him, but it's his production company, and a thread in these movies

Review [film]: Titane

Sean Dowie

Titane is an acquired taste, but it was just the kind I was looking for.

In the French film Titane, the protagonist Alexia is severe and rigid, just like titanium. Titanium also has a high melting point—just like Alexia's seemingly cold heart. Alexia might have titanium literally in her head, but the metaphors of what it represents extend to the entirety of her body. Titane asks the question: what would it take for a soul that neglects warmth to others and also in themselves to melt? The settings in many scenes within the film are literally fiery but fire doesn't quite seem to be doing the trick. Would a pregnancy prompt her to adopt a parental role? That doesn't seem likely either. The question is eventually answered, though. Titane starts out with some of the most brutal, unfeeling showcases of (in)humanity. I've seen in a while, then takes time to melt its titanium casing to show something still wholly grotesque but also wonderfully humane.

Alexia (Agatha Rouselle) – is a victim of a car crash when she's a child. To deal with a skull injury, she has a titanium plate placed in her head. It soon becomes evident that she has a penchant for cars. Years later, adult Alexia works as a showgirl at a motor show. She's also a serial killer. She also has sex with a car (I won't go into details) and becomes pregnant. Soon after, the authorities are on her tail, so she transforms herself to look like a man—specifically a man named Adrien who went missing as a child. She goes to live with Adrien's father, Vincent (Vincent Landon), and they develop a kinship. But secrets will divulge, psyches will be tortured, and things will unravel.

The best parts of Titane are in its latter half. The early goings would be rough for certain people that aren't enamored by murderous scenes portrayed in gruesome detail. I almost had a fight or flight response to those scenes in which I might have walked (or ran) away if I wasn't seeing the film with others. Despite my ambivalent response to those scenes, I do think they're necessary for establishing the brutality of Alexia, making her transformation more effective.

But the second half? Marvelous. Agatha Rouselle brings a bucket of pathos, but Vincent Landon brings a water fountain of it. His grief and willful dismissal of all who say Alexia isn't his son is so cutting. It's clear he knows almost right away that Alexia can't be him, but he charges head-on into the charade rather than into the heart-wrenching truth as his love for her burgeons rather than deflates. Alexia and Vincent's kinship has enough substance to carry a normal film, but this isn't a normal film—it's something better. Their bond is injected with tension as Alexia's quickly developing pregnancy threatens to divulge her identity to those waiting for something to validate their suspicions.

The film ends in the best way it can: with graphic imagery cocooned in something heartfelt and cathartic. Through all the fires that Alexia passed through in Titane, they never failed to melt her titanium plate. But something just as severe – a cold heart – could melt in another way. Yes, I'm talking about love. As cheesy as it is writing it in a review, it never felt that way while watching the film. Titane leverages its unique style that slowly gets less disorienting and brutal to convey its message just as much as through its text. When it arrives at its cathartic moment, don't be surprised if the closed off, hardened part of you melts down for just a moment. Maybe there will be a generation who won't have an environment that's so crude, where the severity won't be so prevalent. The hope of futurity can be heartening. It could happen one day to our grandchildren or to our car-grandchildren.

The Math

Baseline Assessment: 7/10.

Bonuses: +1 For knockout performances, +1 For an unforgettable second half

Negative: -1 For what almost felt like an unrelentingly grotesque beginning

Nerd Coefficient: 8/10

Review [Video Game]: Elden Ring by From Software

Joe DelFranco

Come now, ye tarnished, to the Lands Between and earn your place as Elden Lord.

Elden Ring is a vast, seemingly endless experience, that delivers wonders and death at every turn. A hit in all spheres of the industry, loved by fans and journalists both, not just for its generous amount of content but for its ability to transport the player firmly into the Lands Between without loosening its grip for hours on end. From Software has delivered a game that lets the player go on the adventure that they wish without holding their hand, a rarity in video games nowadays; a risk that paid off.

From the moment I exited the catacombs at the start of the game and stepped out into Limgrave, I got the sense that I was in for quite the escapade. The vastness of the world didn't quite hit until about twenty hours into the game when I realized that the world kept expanding and that there were massive levels hidden underneath the standard map. Sometimes I took a random teleportation device and ended up clear on the other side of the game world. In any other game, I would have marked down the location of the teleporter and come back at a later time after I was done with whatever I was doing before, but in Elden Ring, there isn't much of a forced incentive to keep you doing what you're doing. You create your incentive and carve your experience in whichever way you choose.

The idea is to explore and keep going. I may have had it in my mind to fight a certain boss, but along the way, I'd find a catacomb or legendary tomb to explore that brought me to another area of the map. Elden Ring's sense of discovery and ability to allow the player to lose themselves in its vast world is nearly unparalleled. They do this by severing the importance of a central narrative and instead ensuring that your choices, through the gameplay, are the primary story. Your discoveries and deeds are the impetus of Elden Ring, and any in-depth story would take away from that focus.

Though Elden Ring lets the player go on an adventure in any way they please, and though they give the player many tools to pave the way for an easier experience (compared to other games in the genre), this is still a From Software game through and through, and each enemy can still kill you with a few hits—even late in the game with a highly leveled character. This is not a game for everyone and should be researched before purchasing.

The primary difficulty differentiator between Elden Ring and every other From Software are the options given to the player at any given time, ensuring they get stuck less frequently. Instead of being beaten by the same few bosses over and over and unsure of what to do, Elden Ring allows the player to move on to something else until they are ready for that encounter. Pair that with spirit ashes and the game becomes manageable. If you are stuck on a boss and don't necessarily care about beating them by yourself, you can always summon a friend to help, making the game far less challenging.

The sheer amount of content is staggering. From the vast open plains of Limgrave, to the mystical Liurnia of the Lakes, each area in Elden Ring is well fleshed out and holds many secrets. It is rare to be unrewarded when dropping into a secret hole or tip-toeing around a thin ledge. From Software knows its audience and appropriately ensures a payoff for them when taking an explorative risk, no matter how large or how small. The reward, however, is not simply the item or weapon that you discover, but the sensation of the discovery itself. Elden Ring consistently delivers this feeling through its entire runtime, an impressive feat by the development team. If Breath of the Wild was the king of this before, it is no longer.

The combat feels a bit dated, but it works well enough to feel satisfying when you stun and land a critical blow. Considering Sekiro had pushed the combat mechanics of From Software's games forward, it was interesting to see them revert to the old Dark Souls formula. Though not the same, the game has the DNA of the slower moving From Software games (as opposed to Bloodborne and Sekiro). Some nice additions are the Ashes of War, which let you attach certain abilities to different weapons, as well the jump attack, which does heavy stagger damage to an opponent. These come in helpful for melee builds, so as a magic user, I didn't have a ton of use for them for most of the game.

Though the movement feels a bit slow at times, having your faithful steed-thing Torrent to bring you around the open world is a blessing. Combat on the horse doesn't feel fantastic when using melee, so I always resorted to switching to my staff. Unfortunately, I would always have to position my horse so it was facing forward or sideways (no backward spell casting for you!) while I cast, so it frequently felt uncomfortable, though not quite as bad as melee. Some of the fights on horseback were exhilarating though. Seeing a sword swipe miss me by inches would have my heart pounding as I pressed the sprint button to get to safety and reassess.

In addition to some mixed feelings about the combat, I felt similarly about the visuals. At some points, I came across sweeping vistas that looked like expressionist landscapes. Not quite clearly defined, but beautiful and eerie, as intended, and the developer had purposefully created a world that was meant to reflect its uncertainty in its messy, yet clearly defined art style. But then I would get closer to objects and NPCs and realize that some of them looked awful. It was like seeing a stunning painting, and then getting

closer and realizing it only looked good from afar. Patches, our favorite trickster, looks like his character model could easily have been found in an early PS3/360 game. That's not to say the whole game looks awful, but the juxtaposition between beauty and hideousness was quite jarring. Considering the Demon's Souls remake was a stunning achievement, I had hoped that Elden Ring would follow suit in some aspect, but unfortunately, it doesn't measure up.

And all this would be fine and well if the game ran as well or better than Demon's Souls on PS5, but it doesn't. I ran the native PS5 version of Elden Ring which frequently stuttered and dropped frame rates. A big no-no for a game that requires split-second input. I am aware that Demon's Souls is a PS5 exclusive remake and a smaller game than Elden Ring's cross-generation/multiplatform vast open world. But considering I just played the visually stunning Horizon Forbidden West, which is also open world and cross-gen, I don't consider that an excuse. A game should run well on each platform that it's released on.

In addition to the many frame rate dips, I ran into many bugs. Sometimes the game would ignore my input to heal, causing my death. Other times the game would glitch even after I had escaped a pit of scarlet rot, and instead of removing the rot, it would only increase the counter. I would become inflicted with a poison-like effect and die. This was earlier in the game when I was just trying to have fun exploring and didn't have the means to rid myself of the ailment. This rot (and also poison) buildup glitch happened many times throughout the game, including against bosses. In most games with simple checkpoint systems and no chance of currency loss, this would barely be a problem. This, however, is a From Software game where all the enemies respawn with every death and you have to make it back to where you last died to get your runes (currency) before you die again and lose them all.

And oh god, the platforming—Elden Ring has some of the worst platforming I've ever encountered. I can't count the number of times I became anxious when realizing I had to do a platforming segment. Not because I was nervous that I wasn't skilled enough, but because I didn't trust the game's mechanics. After a while, when I found a dungeon that required platforming, I would leave without even attempting it.

One of the things Elden Ring's best traits is its enemy variety. This includes not only the many smaller mobs you face but also the ridiculous amount of big baddies that you encounter throughout the massive adventure. From Software littered the map with bosses to the point where you'll find one almost everywhere you go. Again, impressive. Some of them are reused at different points in the game, but for the most part, their reuse is spread out and isn't a cause for stagnation. There's enough content here to feed lovers of boss battles from the first moment to the very last. Figuring out how to best the bosses in Elden Ring is one of the game's highlights and something that it exceeds in, and the variety allows the player a fresh combat puzzle on each new encounter. Most of these bosses are challenging and unique, but not impossible. Most.

Toward the end of the game, I ran into a bit of a hurdle when I faced off against the boss Malenia. As I watched Melania, Blade of Miquella path around my character's dead body chanting "I am Melenia, Blade of Miquella" for the fortieth time, I began to question my life choices, or at the least, my Elden Ring character build. As soon as I changed my character build, I was able to beat her within a few tries. The boss was poorly balanced for some builds and it was disappointing that I felt the need to change my entire character around to feel like I had a chance. In addition to Malenia, some of the enemies—both bosses and standard—attack as if you have more movement speed than you're allowed.

Nothing in the game caused me as much trouble as Malenia, that is, besides the game's camera. Some of the larger enemies make the camera go a bit wonky, never mind larger enemies in smaller rooms. Some of the quick-moving enemies would jerk the locked-on camera around, disorienting me. The camera led to much frustration and many unfair deaths. An issue I've had with every From Software game I've played. Unfortunately, it has yet to be addressed.

Elden Ring makes the final two areas separate from the open-world which makes for a very high difficulty spike. In the open-world segments, you regain some healing items for every group of enemies you kill and you're also able to access your steed, Torrent. But in these last two areas, you find yourself with neither of these boons and find that the enemies are quite vicious and quick. In these last two areas, it sometimes felt as if all my progress had gone out the window.

That's not to say most of the game is like that, just the end. Most of Elden Ring feels good when it comes to balancing (with a few outliers). Finding and upgrading a weapon or spirit ash you like has its intended effect of making you feel stronger, and finding a new, legendary spell makes you feel like a powerful sorcerer. There are so many weapons, ashes of war, sorceries, and sets of armor to try out that it's worth checking every nook and cranny for whatever may be hidden there.

I mentioned earlier that to offer the player freedom, the central narrative takes a backseat. If you want the narrative, you have to search for it, take down notes, and pay very close attention. Unfortunately, the game is so massive and the hints so subtle at times, that I failed to make connections between characters and significant events. That's not to say the lore isn't well fleshed out, it certainly is. I enjoyed my time reading the history of Elden Ring's world on the wiki, but when it came to delivering an engrossing and entrancing storyline within the game, Elden Ring failed miserably for me. I watched three of the game's multiple endings, and yet had barely any idea of what was happening in two of them. There's not much emphasis on what information is important and what isn't regarding the story, and most of the NPC characters felt flat and uninspired, so I found it difficult to invest emotionally. It didn't help that many of the characters' names started with a G, R, or M (thanks to George R.R. Martin being cheeky). A character or

item description may passively mention a character of relevance twenty hours of gameplay prior—which could equate to a few weeks in real-time for me—to my encounter with them, and I was expected to retain that information and piece it all together. I expected this, however, as this is how From Software games work, but I didn't enjoy it. The storytelling is not for everyone, but there is a story there if you're willing to do a bit of digging both in the game and on the Internet.

If Demon's Souls remake has the best visuals of a From Software game, Sekiro the most fine-tuned combat, Bloodborne the best atmosphere, and if Dark Souls is the game that put the genre on the map, where does that leave Elden Ring? Well, it's the game with the greatest volume of content, the grandest sense of freedom, the most massive scale, the best feeling of discovery, and the most immersive of them all, and it is quite possibly the best game from the studio.

Elden Ring is a great game. I will admit I was finished once I watched the credits roll—despite its incredible replay value—but my time with the game was worthwhile. I'd gladly recommend it to someone looking for a challenge, a sense of adventure without the need for a strong central narrative, and a yearning to feel like you're uncovering something new wherever you go. Elden Ring lands many of the things that From Software intended it to do and the things that it doesn't don't ruin the overall experience, even if they do tarnish them a bit. The game's flaws seem to melt away when you burrow into its depths. It's easy to get lost in this game for over a hundred hours, so make sure you have some snacks and a notebook handy. You may have a lot of late nights with this one.

The Math

Objective Assessment: 9/10

Bonus: +1 for its best-in-class sense of discovery and adventure. +1 for massive scale. +1 for endless options and character builds.

Penalties: -1 for not connecting with the story. -1 for end-game balancing. -1 for poor optimization. -1 for the camera/some mechanics.

Nerd Coefficient: 8/10

‘Puss in Boots: The Last Wish’ comes to terms with death

Arturo Serrano

Existential anguish has never been this funny

Your favorite fearless hero is back, and he’s going through a crisis. After eight feline lifetimes cultivating fame and glory as a daring bandit/swashbuckler/adventurer, Puss in Boots is suddenly confronted with the hard reality of death. He’s down to just one life, and for the first time, he’s terrified.

Puss in Boots: The Last Wish is a surprising entry in the Shrek franchise. After the end of a century of fantasy dominated by Disney, the first Shrek’s acerbic irony made it feel fresh—even if it soon became its own type of stale. Fortunately, The Last Wish doesn’t follow that formula. Snark and detachment are thrown out the window (and good riddance!), because this is a movie about death, and to deal with death, you can’t do less than open sincerity. With commendable transparency, the movie shows us a hero confronted with his vulnerability, stripped of the pretense that his popularity can keep saving him. The invincible monster slayer is finally afraid, and that makes him feel more real.

Of course, the fact that you’re making a movie that takes its theme seriously doesn’t mean you can’t also make a gut-burstingly funny movie. And here too, the writing deviates from Shrek’s juvenile style. The Last Wish goes through the usual repertoire of slapstick violence, but at key moments, it uses its comedy to enhance the point it’s making. Unusually for this franchise, in this movie the jokes do a big part of the telling of the story.

In the first act, once our protagonist has been forced to acknowledge his mortality and admit that his hedonistic lifestyle was nothing more than a denial mechanism, his first choice is to hide in a cat shelter. Everything is provided for him: he has a roof, abundant food, warm mittens. But, as he soon realizes, that’s no life worthy of the name. The answer to the dread of mortality cannot be to give up agency and let all your choices be made for you. In a joke that tells more than it seems on the first hearing, he’s forced to stop using the human toilet and promptly shown the litter box. His line at that moment is, “So this is where dignity goes to die.”

Dignity is the key idea here. When we’re faced with our state of cosmic abandonment, we may feel what Søren Kierkegaard called the dizziness of freedom, and owning it takes a degree of moral fortitude we’re not usually taught to build. When Puss in Boots retreats to the cat shelter, he’s taking one of the easy ways out: the abdication of choice. But you cannot cease to make your own choices without also ceasing to respect yourself. The prohibition of using the human toilet can be read as a snapshot of a bigger truth: if you renounce responsibility for your life, you’re also renouncing your humanity. An ideal place where you don’t have to make any effort is not a place suitable for humans. The safe, comforting refuge will not satisfy you.

This takes us to another key theme of the movie: satisfaction. The writers made the perfect choice of villains for this story: Goldilocks and Jack Horner, archetypes of perpetual insatisfaction. Goldilocks has enough, but she always finds something to criticize. Jack Horner has everything, but he’s always greedy for more. Both represent anomalous strategies for coping with the irresolvable insatisfaction of finite life. And both fall into the same mistake when they decide to chase after the wishing star. For Puss in Boots, this is an attempt to replace mundane hedonism with transcendent hedonism—to pray to the heavens for more chances. But it’s not a solution: there’s no magical fix that will make everything just right. The problem is not that you haven’t found your wishing star. Goldilocks is unsatisfied because she has impossible standards. Jack Horner is unsatisfied because he’s never needed to make an effort. Puss in Boots is unsatisfied because he can no longer keep telling himself that he’ll always have more time. The three of them are looking for the wrong remedy to a nonexistent problem.

I call it nonexistent because the finitude of life is not a new calamity that suddenly befell us; it is the way reality is. It is the normal. It is what is. As existentialist philosophers pointed out, mortality only becomes a problem if we delude ourselves into thinking we can change it. Try as you might, you can’t outrun the icy hand of death.

In his essay Summer in Algiers, Albert Camus spoke about the finitude of human life in these terms: “if there is a sin against life, it lies perhaps less in despairing of it than in hoping for another life and evading the implacable grandeur of the one we have.” Our protagonist’s quest to regain his nine lives with a miracle is a Quixotic impossible, a desperate last recourse to regain the ability to delude himself. But having his gaze fixed on a star has distracted him from the mundane beauty he already has. He has allowed his legend to supplant his facticity, and now he’s unhappy because he can’t live up to an idealized self-image that he knows is false.

A brilliant way Puss in Boots: The Last Wish integrates existentialism into humor for children is in the device of the map to the star. Each character sees a different map, with a different emotional tone. This is an effective way of symbolizing how, even if we have similar ideals of happiness, the road to get there is unique to each of us.

What our hero learns at the end of his personal journey is that the quest for perfect satisfaction cannot be completed in a finite world. Death only stops

being an adversary when you stop trying to deny it. That's the key to contentment when all you have is one life. And that's how you speak to children about death: with the maturity and honesty that the topic demands.

The Math

Baseline Assessment: 7/10.

Bonuses: +1 because we should celebrate every time a story targeted at children is unafraid to talk openly about death, +1 for the beautiful art style, designed with a resemblance to expressionist brushstrokes that enhance the emotion of each battle by making it feel intensely personal.

Nerd Coefficient: 9/10.

Review [Video Game]: God of War Ragnarök by Santa Monica Studio

Joe DelFranco

Godly. What a sequel should be.

As Kratos' snow-flecked fur sways in the Midgardian Fimbulwinter winds, he holds the pouch that once held his wife's ashes. The look of loss and longing, of deep undying love comes across in every crease of Kratos' face. I could feel his pain, his wistfulness at a glance. Upon hearing his son return, he puts the pouch away and regains his composure. This opening moment is but a sign of things to come. Through clever writing, phenomenal animation, and god-tier performances, God of War Ragnarök successfully executes all the themes it sets out to explore and more.

Atreus, no longer a boy, is obsessed with the prophecy of Loki and wishes to understand more about his heritage and the role he will play come Ragnarök. The character progressions of Kratos, Atreus, Mimir, and other characters remain here and are bolstered by situational dialogue carefully crafted by Santa Monica Studio. From the outset, God of War Ragnarök is fueled with adrenaline-inducing sequences balanced with grounding moments to build character relations that pull the player further into the narrative. It's an assault on two fronts, and both are handled exceptionally. You want the combat and the epic boss battles, but you also want more of the heartfelt story. The equilibrium is divine and is a prime example of Santa Monica Studio's quality and attention to video games and storytelling composition.

God of War and God of War Ragnarök are two parts of a whole. Each game has its own focus. While God of War focuses on the journey and growth between Kratos and Atreus, Ragnarök is about building trust and subverting prophecy. Both games have a similar core, but Ragnarök doubles down on what was introduced at the beginning of 2018—the game tasks the heroes to be better. To be better than what the world expects of them, and to be better than their history would reveal of them. This is not only for the main characters, but almost every supporting cast member from Kratos to Mimir, and from Birgir to Byggvir these characters set to right the wrongs of their past and make for a better future.

Sony Santa Monica achieved this (and excelled) by writing breathing characters with goals that fit within the narrative. Kratos would normally not help a wandering spirit, but once explained to, he may change his mind and sees the benefit or go along with a companion just to spend some time with them. Or, maybe he is trying to ingratiate himself with another character. In some cases, he sees the plight of another in himself and wishes to help. Character motivations are consistently present throughout the game, and it drives the phenomenal main story, but especially the side quests.

When it comes to side quests, God of War Ragnarök has some of the best around. They make sense and fit perfectly into the story. They feel natural and most content in the game feels well connected to the core—the task of being better. The side quest feels like primary content, creating a wonderful tapestry of game design. Even some of the side content feels anchored in the world. The draugr holes are optional but see the player continuously taking down a draugr that returns over and over again. With a few simple lines of dialogue from Mimir and a page of lore in the notebook, the game gives this side distraction some life, elevating it above the simple "go here, kill this". There's almost always a reason for it, and I loved that aspect of this game. There are a few things that seem superfluous—like the treasure maps and some realm tears—which feel like they were included because the prequel had them. But that's about it, everything else feels like a moving part that works together to drive the experience forward.

Every aspect of God of War Ragnarök is masterfully done, including the award-winning score, which represents each character perfectly. From the simplicity of Kratos' heavy, powerful theme to Atreus', which exudes a sense of adventure and questioning—each musical element seized my attention as it melded with the adventure at hand and the actions taking place within it. Bear McCreary's leitmotifs are implemented impeccably for an engrossing score that carries as much of the emotional heft as the character performances. Ragnarök's soundtrack is one of the few I've listened to after I completed the game.

Speaking of the character performances… Wow. Eric Williams (the game's director) ensured there were no tertiary characters. Each character has a purpose and backstory. Even those with minimal dialogue—especially those you find in a certain Vanir god's camp—are memorable and worth spending an extra moment with to listen to their optional dialogue. But where the game shines most is in its primary characters and their stunning performances. Christopher Judge's Kratos and Sunny Suljic's Atreus are both wonderful, powerful characters that play off of one another so well. Different performances that contrast, yet work in tandem with such grace that I was moved to the brink of tears on multiple occasions. But that isn't where the powerful performances stop. One scene involving a certain character (character name absent to avoid potential spoilers) left me hollow, the character's pain became my own and I almost broke down. The empty feeling of helplessness, of grief and misery, was so perfectly enacted that I could do nothing but put the controller down, reflect, and applaud Adam John Harrington for his line delivery. This isn't speaking of Freya and Mimir, who add to these delightful performances. The game is full of so many incredible,

affecting moments that it's difficult to pick the most memorable.

Considering this is a cinematic-heavy game, vocal and motion-capture performances are principal aspects of Ragnarök. The allies aren't the only characters that put on a dazzling display, but so too do the villains. Thor and Odin were both flawless casting choices. My initial impression of Odin was that of a used car salesman, which at first didn't mesh well with the Odin I had crafted in my mind. But Richard Schiff's Odin consistently pulled me into his lies, convincing me that he meant to do good, that he only sought knowledge, a way to make the world better. He was sly, slimy, and impeccable. The themes that apply to the heroes, specifically the task of being better, apply to the villains as well. It's brilliant to see these characters, while at odds, attempt these similar goals.

The beauty in the character arcs of these deities is in their humanization. It was difficult to empathize with Kratos from the original trilogy. He was a bloodthirsty savage that accidentally killed his own family. But the new Kratos practices restraint and tries to listen to others and understand their plight. He struggles with the fear that he may never truly change. Thor, verbally abused by his father and used only for his muscle, takes to drink to drown away his pain. Freya, coping with the death of her son reflects on her role in it. These human traits ground the experience, and how they affect others makes Ragnarök s tapestry all the more beautiful.

The characters and writing aren't where the beauty ends. Ragnarök's art direction is splendid. The visuals are crisp and each of the nine realms is realized with fastidious care. From the lush fauna and deadly flora of Vanaheim to the glistening waters surrounding Asgard, and through the rough deserts of Alfheim, no detail is spared. Some areas are massive, eclipsing the explorable areas of the prequel. Midgard, Vanaheim, Svartalfheim, and Alfheim all have explorable areas with optional quests and side activities to get lost in, making this the largest God of War game of all time. Despite that scope, however, the developers never sacrifice visual fidelity. All visuals are honed to a fine point and add to the absorbing nature of the title. This includes all of the character models and the animations that bring them to life. It doesn't hurt that Santa Monica Studio did their best to make the world of Ragnarök feel much more lived in, Svartalfheim being the prime example.

The expertly crafted animations are seen in every facet of this game, from the cinematic sequences to the combat, and from enemy movements to the boss battles. The animation team at Santa Monica Studios are experts in their field and are matched by very few in the industry. The fluidity with which the combat appears on the screen is sublime. The timing between combat combinations combined with the animation sequences that accompany them is an absolute joy to play around with. It's the most fluid and enjoyable combat system that has come out this year. The weapon play is a blast and kept me coming back for more. More crucible challenges, and more optional boss fights. The balancing between the multiple weapons in the game will be familiar to anyone who played the prequel. Ragnarök is an even better game mechanically and forces the players to familiarize themselves with the combos and controls, specifically the higher you go on the difficulty.

The challenge in the game is ever-persistent, though isn't unforgiving. Managing Kratos' multiple weapons at different distances maximizes the player's options, creating new fun ways to play, and constantly unlocking new abilities the more you level up. In 2018's God of War, pressing the triangle button simply recalled the axe. In Ragnarök, the triangle button uses a weapon's special ability that imbues the weapon with elemental capabilities. Playing around with these options was the most enjoyable aspect of the gameplay. But not the only good one.

I loved the puzzles. They were balanced and gave the pace of the game a constant flow. I was never stuck for too long and enjoyed trying to figure out what to do with the elemental effects of my weapons and how to time my axe throws. Combining the fire effects of Kratos' blades with Atreus' sigil arrows also created fun encounters of their own, both of the puzzle and enemy variety. I was delighted to see the Nornir puzzle chests make a return. I never found myself irritated with a puzzle, the game keeps them balanced. There were times when one of my companions would give me the occasional hint to solve a puzzle when I didn't want it, but those moments were few and far between.

The main complaint many had with the prequel was a lack of enemy types. Ragnarök addresses this and then some. So many enemy types have been added to this sequel that I constantly found myself engaging in new combat experiences. I enjoyed fighting enemies that challenged my gameplay style, forcing me to use a new weapon differently, or swapping out my shield type to help me deal with the type of attack that they delivered. The alligator-like dreki were enjoyable and challenging, quick and deadly. So too were the hunters and many of the other additions to the enemy variety. Ragnarök replaces the search for Valkyries with a different optional challenge quest: Berserkers. These enemies are the toughest in the game and present different challenges to Valkyrie counterparts. Some of them are capable of summoning more enemies into the match, while others have siblings to fight alongside them. While I enjoyed the splendid design and combat of the Valkyries more, I preferred the Berserker side quest that Kratos partakes in on behalf of Mimir.

It's difficult to pick issues out in this game. I ran into one bug in my fifty hours and it was purely aesthetic (and fixed itself within a moment). As mentioned, my companion gave me hints before I wanted them every so often. In a few instances, I discovered some lore that would trigger another codex unlock. I would then have to search through the codex to find what I was looking for; a slight inconvenience.

When the final lines of the main story are delivered, the characters' emotions became my own. Their intent and delivery set an example for any developers in the industry who want to create cinematic games with

strong, believable character arcs and a wide, emotional story. The visions of Cory Barlog and Eric Williams come to life over fifty hours and don't let go even after the credits finish rolling. The developers even go so far as to ensure that no big lore questions go unanswered. When I finished God of War in 2018, I thought that there was no way that it could be topped by its sequel. But once I finished Ragnarök, I realized that Santa Monica Studios did the incredible; they subverted my expectations and delivered a sequel that not only equaled its predecessor but surpassed it in many ways. God of War Ragnarök is the rare sequel that, like Kratos himself, strives to be better than its past iterations and deftly succeeds. Ragnarök is my favorite experience of this console cycle. It's a shame I'll have to wait another four years for another game from this sensational studio.

The Math

Objective Assessment: 10/10

Bonus: +1 for phenomenal animation and VO performances. +1 some of the best side quests in a video game. +1 for engaging, enjoyable gameplay. +1 for fantastic character development. +1 for vibrant, contrasting art style with high quality visuals.

Penalties: -1 for minor UI annoyances.

Nerd Coefficient: 10/10

Microreview [TV series]: Andor

Phoebe Wagner

Andor reaches beyond the Star Wars franchise to become a truly amazing feat of television and anti-fascist storytelling.

I like to start fights by saying Rogue One (2016) is the best Star Wars film (okay, okay, on par with The Empire Strikes Back [1980]). While hyperbolic, I did love Rogue One for taking the topic of revolution seriously, for the diverse cast, and for lines that live on in my memory: "Rebellions are built on hope." At the announcement of Andor, I was cautiously optimistic, but regardless, I was glad to see Diego Luna get more screentime. At best, I figured we might get something as fun as Mando. Andor is so much more.

Andor is a prequel series to Rogue One, following Cassian Andor (Diego Luna) as he becomes the Cassian willing to give it all for the rebellion. In the first arc of Andor, we meet a Cassian that is only a spark of the rebel leader he will one day become. His reputation in the working-class community on Ferrix is that he doesn't work enough, he should take better care of his adopted mother Marva (played brilliantly by Fiona Shaw), and he owes too many people too much money. Even so, his community takes care of him and helps him out, such as letting him borrow a ship to go look for his missing sister at a nearby club, where he has an altercation with two security officers, leading to Cassian killing both officers.

This altercation is only the first of many with different types of private and imperial security forces that drive much of the plot of Andor. The need to avoid detection leads Cassian to try to sell a piece of imperial technology to an off-world buyer arranged for by his friend, Bix (Adria Arjona). Unknown to Cassian, this buyer has connections to the emerging rebellion. Luthen Rael (played perfectly by Stellan Skarsgård) convinces Cassian to help a rebel mission on the occupied planet of Aldhani. Thus, the second arc of Andor begins as Cassian is the getaway driver for a heist against the Empire.

While there are two more arcs in this twelve episode series, I'm going to shift to broad strokes to avoid detailing too many spoilers. One reason Andor surpasses much of the more recent Star Wars offerings is due to the show's understanding of empire. For the first time since I watched the original trilogy, the Empire didn't feel like just an arch-villain but truly an empire. Throughout the show, the Empire is depicted as an imperial force occupying planets, oppressing indigenous people for resource extraction, policing working class communities, and controlling populations through the prison system. Without every using the F-word, showrunner Tony Gilroy demonstrates how imperialism and fascism go hand-in-hand. For once, the rebellion has real stakes for oppressed communities, not just a handful of characters we have come to love.

Another aspect I've been missing from current Star Wars properties are the visual masterpieces of the original trilogy. Andor not only tells a great story but does so with style. Some of my favorite aesthetics were the views of Coruscant and Senator Mothma's (Genevieve O'Reilly) house, though the cold, hard-edged Imperial Security Bureau set the tone for the imperial actions throughout the show. Similarly, I often found myself struck by the sweeping cinematography or the use of lighting to heighten a scene.

An early critique I heard floating around about the show was that the first episodes were slow. In the context of other Star Wars shows, the pacing is different in Andor, partially because it's a longer series of twelve episodes, with multiple mini-arcs and climaxes leading to a finale set on Ferrix. Additionally, Andor is, at its heart, a spy show. Showrunner Tony Gilroy, the original writer of Rogue One, is better known for being the writer of the original Bourne trilogy, and those beats and tropes certainly come into play through characters like Luthen Rael, essentially Cassian's handler. Andor is not just the story of Cassian's growth into a rebel leader, but also how the rebellion's network is created.

Finally, I can't wrap up this review without talking about the casts' amazing deliveries. Diego Luna is consistently strong throughout as Cassian grows into a leader. His delivery is only heightened by the award-worthy performances of the secondary characters, particularly Andy Serkis as Kino Loy, a prisoner, who gives what will be considered one of the greatest monologues in the Star Wars franchise, alongside monologues by Skarsgård and Shaw. The women of the show can't be forgotten, either, with Denise Gough playing the most interesting antagonist: Lieutenant Dedra Meero of the Imperial Security Bureau. Similarly, Genevieve O'Reilly reprises her role as Senator Mon Mothma in Andor and makes the political machinations of watching democracy die not just interesting but breathless. Both Gough and O'Reilly are tasked with many bureaucratic scenes but yet make them thrilling.

When I sat down to watch this latest Disney show, I didn't expect a near-perfect anti-fascist show that discusses everything from police brutality, incels, prison conditions, infighting among leftist groups, mutual aid, imperial infrastructure—and on. At the same time, Andor is an edge-of-your seat spy thriller with heists, battles, protests, and political machinations. With truly excellent acting from the entire cast, this show raises the bar for not just Star Wars or other Disney productions, but television streaming in general.

The Math

Baseline Assessment: 10/10

Bonuses: Not just an amazing Star Wars story, but an

incredible feat of storytelling.

Nerd Coefficient: 10/10 (very high quality/standout in its category)

Conversations

SECTION.03

Section III: Conversations

Mind Meld: Best Game or Interactive Fiction

Paul Weimer

Welcome back to the Mind Meld, where I ask a number of people in genre, fans, writers, podcasters, agents a single genre related question and collate the answers for you.

Today's Mind Meld question is the following...

The 2021 Hugos featured a special category for "Best Video Game", won by Supergiant Games' Hades. But despite proposals to make a permanent category for games and interactive work, there is no such category this year at the 2022 Hugos, to be held at Chicon. But what if there were? If there was a "Best Game or Interactive Experience" Hugo for 2022, for games released or substantially updated and modified in 2021, what would YOU want to see on the ballot, and why?

Mur Lafferty is an award winning podcaster and writer and "…one of the worst-kept secrets in science fiction and fantasy publishing."

2021 didn't fully exist for me. I couldn't even think of what came out last year, and had to look them up.

I played a lot of games in quarantine, of course, but most of them were continuations/replays from 2020 or earlier (Hades, Blaseball, Animal Crossing, Horizon Zero Dawn etc). However, I did watch a lot of gameplay on the Twitch platform, which is free, requires no skill, and you can distance yourself from emotional wear and tear, and got to see some incredible new games.

If there was a 2021 Hugo for Best Game, Life is Strange: True Colors would be a contender for the top. Life is Strange games famously feature real world problems (in this case, mine explosions and corporate cover-up and the heavy grief families suffer) with the main character having one special trait (time manipulation, telekinesis) to navigate the conflicts. In True Colors the main character Alex can see and absorb the emotions of others, and uses her power to figure out what happened in the mine explosion that killed her brother.

The game is gorgeous and the decisions are heart-wrenching. It was something I didn't want to play, but some folks enjoy depressing-as-hell stories and games (see last year's nominee, the laugh-riot The Last of Us 2) and watching the game narrative was enough to impress me.

The new Pokemon Snap was also fun to watch people play. It had much less emotional carnage. Seriously, who wants emotional carnage in these times?

Sharang Biswas is a writer, artist, and game-designer based in New York. He has won numerous awards for his games, while his writing has appeared in publications including Eurogamer, Dicebreaker, Lightspeed, and Strange Horizons. He currently teaches game design at Fordham University and the NYU Game Center.

I think Jason Cordova's The Between is one of the most interesting games of 2021. Cordova builds off of the system he designed for 2020's Brindlewood Bay: in both games, clues to a mystery are randomly selected by the game master, which players subsequently use to create rather than discover the solution to a mystery.

This time, the game is set in a supernatural, Victorian England, à la The League of Extraordinary Gentleman, and Cordova has introduced a heap of new mechanics and playable character types to immerse players in a seedy, macabre London filled with echoes of gothic horror.

Ira Alexandre is the primary campaigner behind the Games Hugo, a contributing editor at two-time Best Fanzine Hugo Award winning blog Lady Business, and a Co-Chair for WisCon for the second time. They live on Twitter at @itsjustira and, in the real world, with four cats and a corgi.

I have a confession to make: Even as I've been campaigning for a Games Hugo, 2021 was not a good year for me actually playing games. I know, it's weird — and bad — but one of the games that I did play actually gets at this very dilemma. Chicory: A Colorful Tale is a game about creativity, responsibility, depression, mental illness, burnout, and dismantling systems that no longer serve the communities they're meant to structure and support. But it's also a game about people who are so overwhelmed by a responsibility they've taken on that they don't get to enjoy what that work centers around. In Chicory, you play a (never gendered) dog who is the janitor for the titular Chicory. Chicory is current Wielder of the Brush, a powerful artifact that lets you bring colour to the otherwise colourless world. But Chicory buckles under the constant pressure to create art to serve those around her. She shuts herself away, at which point the player character, untrained and unchosen but eager, picks up the Brush — and discovers the darkness that has overtaken Chicory. The game looks like a digital colouring book, because it is one, and you can colour the world however you want, either for your own pleasure or to solve puzzles and deal with obstacles. The style, delivery, writing, and gameplay are all very gentle even as they grapple with truly dark and complex ideas. The game is not easy, with tricky puzzles and challenging boss battles. In the end, I found a lot of meaning in playing this game with my partners (it has a wonderful co-op mode) even as I worked on the Games Hugo campaign, getting a chance to actually enjoy the very sort of work I was championing. Now, working on the campaign in 2022, I'm learning to lean on my fellow campaigners and be gentle with myself to avoid burnout — and leave room for the very source of joy that I want our community to reward.

Anyone who's allowed me to talk about games for more than a minute will have heard that I love Outer Wilds, and the 2021 DLC for the game, Echoes of the Eye is... perfect. We're very lucky to have such a stellar example of what a Hugo-worthy "substantial modification" of a game could look like. Outer Wilds was a game so complete within itself that I could not imagine how a DLC could possibly work without undermining the structure and themes of the base game. And yet — Echoes of the Eye not only manages to preserve everything extraordinary and meaningful about the original game, but it actually builds on it and is even more clever and wonder-inducing. The environments are stunning, the

secrets surprising and fascinating, and the atmosphere spot-on. Much as with the original game, saying basically anything about it takes away some of the joy of discovery, but I can say that the developers seemed to ask themselves, "What mechanic have we not yet thoroughly explored?" and then built not just an entire new gameplay paradigm, but an entirely different genre onto the base game. Incredible.

Honourable mentions to titles I haven't played: Speaking of time loops, Deathloop looks fantastic! I'm replaying Psychonauts because (a) of all it's awesome and (b) of all Psychonauts 2 sounds GREAT. And I absolutely cannot wait to try Inscryption, because games about games, games that interrogate the nature of gameplay, of play, of narrative, like The Stanley Parable and Bioshock, are pure catnip to me. I am so excited to check out these great 2021 titles and the others recommended here!

Joe DelFranco is a Fiction writer and lover of most things video games. On most days you can find him writing at his favorite spot in the little state of Rhode Island.

Three games come to mind when I think of the best games of 2021: Returnal, Ratchet and Clank: Rift Apart, and It Takes Two. If I were to look at 2021 as a whole, I would say that I didn't see or experience anything that I would consider transcendental, but some great titles were released.

Returnal did a wonderful job with fast-paced, frenetic, high stakes gameplay in a procedurally generated sci-fi atmosphere that exuded beauty and danger in equal measure. It fell short of being phenomenal because of its lack of boss difficulty, and vague/unsatisfying story conclusion, but it was still a great game overall and something I'd like to see a sequel to in the future. A great foray for rogue-lites in the AAA gaming space.

Ratchet and Clank: Rift Apart was a great continuation of a two-decade-old series. Impressive visuals in cartoony sci-fi worlds have never looked better, and the game delivers fun gameplay with exciting new weapons and weapon upgrades. While the game never tries to reinvent the wheel, they do well with the formula they've become comfortable with. Rift Apart delivers a good story with fun characters and is more than worth checking out. It's also a great example of the power of the new generation of console hardware.

It Takes Two is a wonderful co-op title that spans all different kinds of genres during its 12-hour runtime, not only story genres but gameplay genres as well. By constantly changing things around, It Takes Two keeps things fresh for players. The game is a mandatory cooperative experience with a heavy emphasis on couch co-op. In a world so divided, it was nice to have a game that did its best to bring people together. Some bugs and weird story beats/characters, and over-simplicity kept it from being perfect, but it was a ton of fun with a partner and highly recommended to play with a partner or close friend.

There are some other games I missed out on like Deathloop and Psychonauts 2, but I intend to get to some of them when I have time, Deathloop in particular. It was a great year for games, even if there were no earthshattering releases. Looking forward, 2022 will be a significant year for video games with the releases of Horizon: Forbidden West, Elden Ring, God of War Ragnarok, Starfield, and The Legend of Zelda: Breath of the Wild 2.

Gregory A. Wilson is an author of speculative fiction and TTRPG adventures and supplements, a college professor of literature and creative writing, a lead singer and trumpet player in a progressive rock band, the lead writer of the video game Chosen Heart (currently in development), and a long time game master of TTRPGS of every type and description. You can find him at his own website, www.gregoryawilson.com, on his Twitch channel, www.twitch.tv/arvaneleron, on his actual play podcast Speculate!, www.speculatesf.com, and on Twitter at https://twitter.com/gregoryawilson, as he gears up to launch his new Grayshade IP (with novels, a TTRPG, and an audio book) in June.

Here's the thing about the current video game landscape: as opposed to the 1980s and 1990s, when games came out less frequently and were more universally played, in 2022 there are so many thousands of games produced every year, from one person indie studios to AAA studios with hundreds of employees and budgets to match, that it feels like an awful lot of hubris to think I can come up with one best game for the year. But I do play a fair number of games on both GOG.com's and my own Twitch channel, and I've interviewed a number of developers and writers for these games, and of all the work I played, saw, or read about in 2021, there's one game I'd want front and center in a Best Video Game Hugo for 2022: Metroid Dread.

The Metroid series has always had a special place in my heart, with its blend of exploration, wonder, revealed lore, and challenging play. (It's also got Samus, one of the most iconic protagonists in video game history, which doesn't hurt.) The brilliant thing about Metroid Dread is that it understands this history without being weighed down by it. The typical play conditions of Metroid games are all here: no weapons, and thus a very limited area of travel, followed by the gradual opening of more areas as more weapons and equipment are discovered. As usual, the satisfaction of seeing previously inaccessible areas become available to explore is unmatched by almost any other game, and the feeling of growing power--balanced by the growing threat of increasingly dangerous bosses and environments--is as enjoyable as always.

But Dread goes further, both by introducing the (almost) unkillable EMMIs, which can only be defeated by getting to the weapons which can break their defenses, and by giving further backstory information about the mysterious Chozo, the source of Samus's weaponry and training. This is a completely new game, not a remake in the style of the brilliant Final Fantasy VII Remake, which redefines how such projects should be done. But it understands its own history, and gives those who spent much of their childhood wondering about that history a reason to again become fascinated in its own lore. You don't need to have played previous Metroid games to enjoy Dread, of course…but if you have played others, this Metroid game will hit even more strongly.

Dread isn't completely perfect; there are a couple of difficulty spikes which seem to come out of nowhere, and the early experiences with the EMMIs can be frustrating. But it's extremely, extremely good, and reflects an understanding of both the past and present of Metroid games and fans. If this is any indication of the care with which Nintendo and its affiliated studios are managing the franchise, the series is in good hands, and the upcoming Metroid Prime 4 will be a true tour de force. In the meantime, Metroid Dread is an incredible game, and well worthy of a Hugo award.

Dr. Shaun Duke is an Assistant Professor of Digital Rhetoric and Writing at Bemidji State University. He received his M.A. and Ph.D in English from the University of Florida and a B.A. in Modern Literature from University of California, Santa Cruz. He studies science fiction, postcolonialism, Caribbean literature, spatial theory, fan cultures, and social media.

It figures you asked the guy who has been trying to play his entire Steam catalogue in alphabetical order, which has the effect of ensuring that I almost never play anything released after Biden became President... But here goes in no particular order:

Vampire Survivors (poncle): Released in March 2021, this action roguelite game has everything you could want in something designed to take away your entire evening: a fast-paced game with fairly simple mechanics but an easy-to-understand-but-kinda-complex strategy element. It's addicting and so much fun!

Riders Republic (Ubisoft): I am a sucker for any "racing, stunt, whatever you wanna do" game which gives me something other than a car or a motorcycle. Riders Republic is basically just Steep but with mountain bikes (same studio and all) and a lot more style. And it's a lot of fun. You can get competitive if you want, or you can just be a dork doing bonkers tricks for funsies. It's a good way to spend an afternoon!

Sable (Shedworks): What else am I a sucker for? STYLE, baby! And Sable is stylish as hell and absolutely beautiful to look at. In a lot of ways, Sable reminds me of AER: Memories of Old (Daedalic Entertainment) with its lowkey quests, emphasis on exploration and discovery in an open world, and a general chill (and stylish), non-linear play format. It well worth checking out.

And here are some games that probably would get nominated by people other than me: Metroid Dread, Monster Hunter Rise, It Takes Two, Hot Wheels Unleashed, Shin Megami Tensei V, Back 4 Blood, and Pokemon Brilliant Diamond and Shining Pearl.

Do with this knowledge what you will...

Michael R. Underwood is the author of over a dozen books across several series, from dimension-hopping story heists in Genrenauts to found family space opera Annihilation Aria. When not writing, Mike streams games at Twitch.tv/TurboTango and podcasts with the actual play show Speculate! and occasional appearances on The Skiffy & Fanty Show.

2021 gave me one game that stood head-and-shoulders above the others. Combining Roguelikes and Deckbuilders (a pairing that I've loved since 2017's Slay the Spire), Inscryption by Daniel Mullins games opens with incredible aesthetics - moody music, an evocative art style, and clear base mechanics. The game evolves as the story unfolds, revealing Inscryption to be much more than expected several times over. I had the great pleasure of playing the game entirely on-stream, sharing the twists and turns with friends, colleagues, and viewers.

Another surprising favorite was Eidos-Montreal's Marvel's Guardians of the Galaxy, which delivered solid combat and beautiful art stylings alongside very effective dialogue and character work. This version of the Guardians clearly draws from the James Gunn film versions without being fully constrained by the MCU versions. I'm very fond of single-player games with solid storytelling that don't overstay their welcome or pad out the game with endless busywork or uninspired side-quests, and thankfully, Guardians is as tight and propelling as a classic rock tune.

Adri Joy (she/her) is co-editor of Nerds of a Feather, Flock Together, a reviewer for Strange Horizons, and a dog owner. She lives in East London.

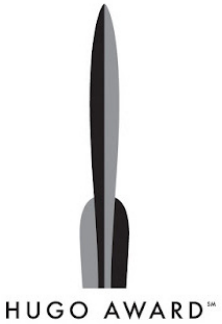
I've always been that person who fills half my Best Dramatic Presentation: Long ballot with video games (no I will not be getting into theoretical eligibility debates at this time), so last year's whole ballot of video games was a super exciting experience! That said, last year was more of a year for past favourites (i.e. Fire Emblem Three Houses) and catching up on the ballot with my shiny new Playstation than mainlining new game releases. Luckily, the 2021 game I sunk the most time into is one that would be perfect for a theoretical Hugo award ballot: ZA/UM's Disco Elysium: The Final Cut.

In Disco Elysium (which originally came out in 2019 but easily passes the substantial modification requirement with its 2021 content, which added full voice acting and several plot-relevant new quests), the player explores a tiny corner of a strange, epic world through the eyes of an amnesiac, addict detective on the brink of total mental collapse. Unfortunately for you, there's no time to wallow in the misery of your broken life: there's a dead body at the back of the hotel you're staying in, a simmering conflict between the local dockworkers' union and the international owners which is threatening to turn into a bloodbath, and your new partner Kim Kitsuragi keeps patiently but persistently expecting you to get your shit together and solve the case with him.

Disco Elysium does a great job giving the player just enough choice for each run to feel different - you make early choices about your detective's skill distribution and get to level it up accordingly, making some things trivially easy and others impossibly difficult depending on what kind of skillset you have - while telling a compelling, if sometimes deliberately anticlimactic, story about love, loss, and what humans cling to in the face of colonial destruction and a slow apocalypse. It balances humour with passionate political statements and some utterly haunting existential one-liners, all delivered through The Final Cut's excellent voice acting that brings all the weird denizens of Martinaise to life. That you get to do it alongside one of the best sidekicks in gaming history is the icing on the cake. Seriously, Kim is the best, and the alternate Hugo for Best Video Game or Interactive Experience should absolutely be his. No further questions.

Adri and Joe Read the Hugos: Novel

Adri Joy, Joe Sherry



Joe: Next up for our Hugo Award coverage is a chat about the six finalists for Best Novel and, in my opinion, it's another strong ballot. Arkady Martine is a former winner in this category for A Memory Called Empire, the previous novel in this series. Becky Chambers has multiple Best Novel nominations and has won Best Series for The Wayfarers (of which her nominated novel is a part of). P. Djeli Clark's novellas have thrice been nominated for Hugo Awards, as has one of his short stories (his novella Ring Shout won the Nebula, Locus, and British Fantasy Awards).

This is the first year on the Hugo ballot for Ryka Aoki, Shelley Parker-Chan, and Andy Weir and their three novels were some of the most talked about books of the year.

Adri: I've been pretty lukewarm on the categories we've gone through so far, but this ballot? This is a ballot I love. As you say, there's a split between returning Hugo finalists and ballot newcomers, and an intriguing mix of genres, from historical fantasy to space opera to maths-heavy first contact, and the full-on genre bender that is Light From Uncommon Stars. There's significantly more representation of authors of colour than in the shorter fiction categories too, and this is a better ballot for that.

That doesn't mean I love every story here, but five out of six isn't bad! Which is to say, shall we start by talking about Andy Weir?

Joe: So, I wouldn't have nominated Project Hail Mary (and didn't - my ballot included three finalists, as well as Louise Erdrich's The Sentence and Sarah Pinsker's We Are Satellites) but I absolutely see why a lot of people had it on their ballot. My wife and I picked up Project Hail Mary when it was included as a Book of the Month selection. I viewed it as sort of a make or break novel for Andy Weir. I loved The Martian, thought it was one hell of a debut, but Artemis left me absolutely cold and couldn't have been more disappointed with his second novel. So, this was the book that was going to tell me if Weir was likely to be a one hit wonder - or at least, I wasn't going back if Project Hail Mary was another Artemis.

It's been almost a full year since I read Project Hail Mary, so I really can't say for sure if I loved it but I know I had a great time reading it. Project Hail Mary is a bit of a throwback science fiction novel with some of the exploration of the space science fiction of a few decades ago but the novel is an incredibly smooth read. I don't put much stock in how I rate things on goodreads, but I'd say it was a solid 4 star novel.

With that said - it's not really the sort of novel I'd think about nominating for a Hugo Award, or any other major award if I happened to have nominating rights to anything else, but I'm really glad I read it and talked about the book with my generally non-science fiction reading wife. Solid book, doesn't really do anything to push or stretch the genre AND it doesn't really reflect the breadth of what science fiction and fantasy is being written today (with the obvious caveat that Project Hail Mary is part of the breadth of the science fiction being written today).

It's a heck of a good time, but this is a super strong ballot and Project Hail Mary just isn't going to be at the top of mine.

Adri: I feel much the same: I enjoyed Project Hail Mary, and thought it was a return to the quality that made the Martian such a big hit, but this is pretty far away from being the kind of science fiction that interests me when it comes to boundary-pushing awards stuff.

In fact, I wondered if my experience reading it, as someone with a very politically-adjacent background career, was similar to the experience that natural scientists seeking more physics in their science fiction have with stuff like Ann Leckie or Arkady Martine. To me, Andy Weir's self-proclaimed "apolitical" science fiction is like the written equivalent of that unfinished horse meme, where the butt is all beautifully supported with equations and chemistry experiments (all terribly clever and yet achievable by a smart high school science teacher, because we're firmly in wish fulfilment territory), but then on the front end you have a plot that's all about international cooperation yet can't name a single country in Africa. There's a deliberate choice here to gloss over everything that I find intellectually engaging, and I fully understand that it's done because other people find the numbers and the "man vs. laws of physics" plot intellectually engaging - but it's not for me. Sorry, unfinished horse book.

Going up my ballot, then, there's a big jump for me between Project Hail Mary and my fifth choice, which is The Galaxy and the Ground Within. This is the fourth and final book in Becky Chambers' Best Series-winning Wayfarers series, and it's about a group of aliens who get stranded at the interstellar equivalent of an airport B&B while the system they're in fixes a big error with one of its gates. Like all the Wayfarers books, there's some returning characters but the story stands alone, and it's very much focused on a small, kind corner of a big, difficult galaxy.

Joe: It's interesting that you have The Galaxy and the Ground Within so far down your ballot because I've felt like an outlier in my responses to the series as a whole, which is generally that I tend to enjoy each book but have very little overall passion for them as individual novels (A Long Way to A Small Lonely Planet notwithstanding.) I don't know which book is going to be fifth or sixth on my ballot, but it was always going to be this and Project Hail Mary.

Of course, the top four on both of our ballots are also just so exceptional that there isn't any shame on being lower on a really strong ballot.

Adri: Agreed. I like The Galaxy and the Ground Within a lot, just like I've really enjoyed all of the series (with Record of a Spaceborn Few being a bit of a low point for me). In my review I noted that it's a book that's also pretty clear about its assumptions and limitations, and like Project Hail Mary it sort of skips over the bits of this galaxy that I'd find most interesting - but I have a much bigger soft spot for sweet character interactions and pushing past cultural misunderstandings than I do for physics (Project Hail Mary also has cute character interactions and cultural misunderstandings

and that's why it's still a good sixth place!) In short it's just a book that I don't have a lot to say about, and I can't help but think about our feelings about Murderbot last year - Wayfarers has a best series win already, so a best novel here - even though this wasn't part of the series at the time - feels like a less interesting result than having a new work win.

Joe: I'd be pretty surprised to see The Galaxy and the Ground Within take home the Hugo and I think I'm fairly in line with your thoughts here - though I'm not inherently against a novel from a series that has already won the Series category getting a Best Novel nomination, I just wouldn't have given it to this particular book, which is perfectly lovely but in the ways that we talked about Project Hail Mary it doesn't jump out at me as "holy crap, awesome SFF!". But then, Wayfarers is a series that I like and appreciate, but they're not novels of my heart.

On the other hand, in this, our Year of Continued Awfulness - maybe the generally hopeful and sweet (sweet?) novels of Becky Chambers resonate all the more, which is perhaps reflected more strongly and more appropriately in her nominated novella A Psalm for the Wild-Built.

Where I think we are far more likely to see a winner come from is the four novels we have not yet talked about: A Desolation Called Peace, Light From Uncommon Stars, A Master of Djinn, and She Who Became the Sun.

I'm not prepared to predict the winner of the category, though. My predictive skills only go so far, which is sussing out the actual finalists. Any one of those four, though, would be a more than worthy winner.

Adri: Yeah, my prediction skills definitely don't stretch that far either - and for me it's a "but for one to win, three have to lose, ugh" sort of scenario because all of these are spectacular examples of SFF in their own right.

Joe: Since I really don't have a feel for how this category will shake out, I think we should talk about A Desolation Called Peace next. It's the second novel from Arkady Martine. Her first, A Memory Called Empire, won the Hugo for Best Novel in 2020 (beating out an intensely strong lineup of finalists) so I'm super interested in how this is going to shake out.

The category *does* have a history of repeat winners but N.K. Jemisin's recent three Hugos in three years is a bit of an aberration. Connie Willis and Vernor Vinge both had a decade between their most recent wins. Kim Stanley Robinson and Lois McMaster Bujold are probably the closest comps for tighter groupings of Hugo wins but now we're talking about the 1990's. More often we have repeat finalists than repeat winners this close together.

Regardless, A Desolation Called Peace is not just Martine's second novel but it is a sequel to A Memory Called Empire - though it is stylistically different from how the first novel dealt with diplomacy and political machinations and plots and colonization. A Desolation Called Peace does that, but rather than introducing us to the Teixcalaanli Empire through the lens of a much smaller station trying to maintain as much of its independence as possible, here the Empire itself is dealing with a potentially existential threat from the outside in the form of an alien invasion.

From that perspective, one thing that I appreciated about A Desolation Called Peace was that it wasn't just A Memory Called Empire 2.0 - Martine is stretching here and while I absolutely loved Desolation, readers who were looking for more of the same didn't quite get that.

Adri: Yeah, A Desolation Called Peace takes quite a few different turns to its predecessor, and at times it felt quite reminiscent of Yoon Ha Lee's Machineries of Empire - which is a good thing, I adored those books. I really enjoyed the focus being more on Lsel, and on the Teixcalaanli Empire's interactions with other cultures, although nothing grabbed me quite to the same extent as Mahit's culture shocks in A Memory Called Empire, as she tries to join a culture she adored from afar but which is still completely alien, and not interested in tolerating her differences. Still, Mahit and Three Seagrass are still great together, and there's a lot of other interesting dynamics here - including plenty of intrigue back in the empire (told through the eyes of the former emperor's clone, Eight Antidote) and on the Teixcalaanli fleet. It's fourth on my ballot, but that's more of a reflection of how strong everything else is than any critique of this fantastic story.

Joe: I wonder if there will be a third Teixcalaanli novel and if so, where in the Empire will Martine play. Really, I just want to see what she'll do next and I have no doubt that it will be excellent.

One of the most unexpected novels of the year is Light from Uncommon Stars, the second novel from Ryka Aoki and the first that is more traditionally SFF - though I have a difficult time describing Light from Uncommon Stars as "traditional" anything.

This is a novel that is a wild blend of science fiction and fantasy, featuring a deal with a devil and interstellar alien refugees running a donut shop. The result, which has nothing to do with those disparate elements and everything to do with the story Aoki is actually telling, is a novel that is nothing but heart and is so beautifully told that I just don't know.

Adri: Light from Uncommon Stars is, quite simply, something else. The concept of a pure genre mashup like this isn't new, but Aoki's particular blend of elements is wonderfully weird and fun while also telling a powerful, coherent story around human ambition and what makes a life worth living, even in challenging circumstances. While there are several strands here, the novel's main protagonist is Katrina, an Asian trans woman runaway whose story contains a lot of the trauma which the world throws at trans women - but she is also a fully rounded, quirky, brilliant person and ultimately the narrative puts her with people who recognise that, creating a powerful narrative around her talents and growth.

I hesitate to describe Light From Uncommon Stars as "cozy" fiction, because its subject matter involves so much real trauma, but in a way I think Aoki's story is the kind of speculative fiction that could only be here, published by Tor and on a Hugo ballot, because of the space created by authors like Becky Chambers. Aoki takes the idea that science fiction can be about a small group of people and the space they carve out for themselves and each other, and fills it out with so much powerful, complex stuff that it's impossible to reduce down into "aww, how nice". This is top of ballot stuff for me, and I'm so delighted to see it recognised by a Hugo audience.

Joe: Oh, absolutely. Katrina Nguyen is dealing with a whole

lot of significant trauma and that does pervade her experience and narrative - and yet, Light From Uncommon Stars is borderline cozy, for lack of a better term. Charlie Jane Anders referred to the novel as "soothing and kind and sweet" and it felt like that for me, too.

I never thought about the comparison to Becky Chambers and hAdri: Both of the other novels we haven't spoken about yet deal with genderfeels to some extent too, and it's a major part of the narrative in She Who Became the Sun by Shelley Parker-Chan. This is a really interesting Hugo nominee because it's only got a small fantasy element, but it sits very nicely on that genre border between historical fiction and epic fantasy where the amount of actual magical content doesn't really change the vibes of what you're reading. And She Who Became the Sun, with its queer protagonist who is hiding their female birth identity in order to literally assume the destiny of their older brother (who died in a famine before he could make use of any of the luck he was allegedly born with) feels very much at home in this 2022 Hugo ballot

Joe: I could absolutely see some voters knocking She Who Became the Sun down their ballots for "not being genre enough" and while on one hand it's a fair criticism because I kept forgetting what the genre element was in the book, I also 100% don't care because holy shit this is a spectacular novel. It's a hard novel, maybe a brutal novel at times - but it is damned good.

I also think that it's been marketed (or at least reviewed) in a wider variety of spaces than your average genre book because my wife read this before me and I'm not sure she knew it was technically a fantasy. It's also one of a couple books she read recently that she didn't realize was part of a series until she got late into the book and asked me if there was going to be more because she couldn't see how the story would wrap up in the final however many pages.

She Who Became the Sun is a novel that midway through I knew I was reading something special and that was completely validated by the end.

What I do think is interesting about this ballot as a collection of novels is, as you alluded to, that the 2022 Best Novel ballot is dealing with a myriad of ways of representing queerness. It's not something I talk about a lot because, well, it's not my identity or that of my family and immediate friends, and as such, I don't want my words to be hurtful when I'm talking about something I don't know much about. From that perspective, I do think that the ways each of these novels represent queerness is absolutely beautiful (and painful in their places) and because of that variety no single novel needs to be the only voice of representation. The novels get to stand for what they are - which are absolutely killer representations of the genre.

Adri: I couldn't agree more. I think it's particularly important that both Light from Uncommon Stars and She Who Became the Sun are quite challenging in terms of the queer stories they tell. Light from Uncommon Stars is challenging because its protagonist is put through sexual assault and misgendering and threats to her safety and Aoki expects us to be able to deal with these as part of regular life for a trans teenager. She Who Became the Sun is challenging because its protagonist is figuring out her queerness - particularly her gender identity - as she goes along, and because she's reaching for power during wartime with all the moral compromises that entails. And that's not even going into the secondary plot, which is also very queer, very interested in how a character reconciles a very narrow view of martial masculinity with his personal reality (as a eunuch), and contains a showdown which I didn't see coming but absolutely should have.

It's such a good book, is what I'm saying here. So very, very good. A killer book, as you say.

Joe: Our final killer representation of the genre is P. Djeli Clark's A Master of Djinn and is another novel that I just could not put down.

Adri: Yes! A Master of Djinn hit so many good notes for me: adventure, steampunk vibes, takedowns of colonialism, and at its heart a trio of very different, powerful, nuanced female characters. It's probably the story here that I had the most pure fun with, and while some of its mystery elements are signposted quite early, I still enjoyed watching the whole thing unfold.

Joe: I wanted to describe A Master of Djinn as an instance of P. Djeli Clark leveling up, but his last publication was 2020's Ring Shout so I think Clark taking that next step has already occurred. But, at novel length, A Master of Djinn fulfills a lot of promise for Clark's earlier Dead Djinn stories.

Reading A Master of Djinn was an absolute blast. I don't pick up on most telegraphed mystery elements - either because I don't want to actively do the work to figure things out or because I just don't see them, so I just enjoy the ride. A Master of Djinn was a hell of a ride and it's a super smart (without being overly heady). It's just a *good story*.

Adri: It is - and that might be why I'm struggling to say too much more about it (although I did review it here last year, along with four of the other five finalists, because I'm just that much of a tastemaker, apparently). There's such a perfect blend of fun and bite, with genteel but tense and unpleasant interactions between colonial forces and an Egyptian society with the resources to thwart their ambitions, and a nuanced take on what the different factions in that Egypt might look like. Plus, the presence of djinn themselves and the way they interact with broader society is great. "It's just awesome and you should read it" doesn't fill up the blog inches, but that's what I've got for A Master of Djinn.

Joe: I do believe that wraps up our conversation about the six finalists for Best Novel. As we mentioned before, this is a fantastic lineup of novels representing a wide range of science fiction and fantasy. Good stuff.

Assuming I don't make any changes to my Hugo ballot, this is what I have: A Master of Djinn, Light From Uncommon Stars, She Who Became the Sun, A Desolation Called Peace - and every one of those top four could be flipped without question to any other position and I'd feel really good about it. They are four outstanding novels and I'm so glad to have read every one of them.

Adri: As I said before, Light From Uncommon Stars is top of my ballot now, followed by She Who Became the Sun, A Master of Djinn and A Desolation Called Peace - but it's really, really close, and I wouldn't want to make any bets about what's going to win come September. Time will tell!

Fight, Magic, Items: A Conversation with Aidan Moher

Joe Sherry, Aiden Moher

Aidan Moher (he/him) is a Hugo award-winning writer and editor who has written about almost every niche facet of geek culture you can think of from Terry Brooks to Dungeons & Dragons. And whether he's penning wildly read essays on Lunar: Silver Star Story, the undeniable lasting power of Chrono Trigger (the best RPG ever made), or the forgotten history of Magic: the Gathering, he manages to infuse deep, personal, endearing hooks into every story he tells. He's written for outlets like Wired, Kotaku, Electronic Gaming Monthly, Uncanny Magazine, Fanbyte, Tor.com, and more.

Joe Sherry: We've known each other for a number of years, well before A Dribble of Ink won a well deserved Hugo Award, but I think at this point more of our readers will know you online from your video game writing than your book reviews or curated essays.

We share a love of old school, classic JRPGs and I'm pretty sure we have a fairly similar history in gaming, but what's your origin story? How and when did you first get into JRPGs?

Aidan Moher: I got way back with Japanese RPGs, but with a bit of an early plot twist: my first encounter with them left a bad taste in my mouth that lasted a few years.

I grew up as a big PC gamer as a kid—all the way back to the Commodore 64—and my first real game "console" was a Game Boy, which I absolutely adored. I was obsessed with Super Mario Land and Fall of the Foot Clan, and tore through batteries like nobody's business. One time, though, while visiting a friend's cousin's house, he showed me the game he was playing on his Game Boy: Final Fantasy Legend II. I tried it out, moving an abstract hero around a grid-based map, kind of like a board game, and then whisking off to a different screen for a slow, menu-based form of combat.

I handed the Game Boy back, unimpressed. Whatever this was? It was lame.

Fast forward a few years, though, and my cool babysitter—who regularly brought over games to play, and we often spent whole evenings blasting demons on the moons of Mars in Doom—popped a game into my newly acquired Super NES. It was a lot like the game I'd played on the Game Boy with its grid-based map and separate screen for combat, and it even shared a name: Final Fantasy III.

By the time we hit the first save point in Narshe Mines, I was obsessed. A little bit older, and now devouring epic fantasy novels, the idea of a big, sprawling fantasy story I could play was too cool to resist. After that, I hunted the pages of gaming magazines for anything related to Final Fantasy III and soon discovered the creator's follow-up game: Chrono Trigger.

It was game over after that. I've been a JRPG fanatic ever since.

Joe: The Super Nintendo really was a formative system for JRPGs. I got my start on the NES with the original Final Fantasy and Dragon Warrior, though my Dragon Warrior cartridge never could hold a save so I only finished that game a few years ago on my phone, interestingly enough, and thanks to quality of life improvements. But it was Final Fantasy II that really jump started my love of the genre.

With the wider RPG genre diversifying more and more (Western RPGs, Action RPGs, Japanese RPGs, Strategy RPGS, Tactical, etc) what has kept you coming back to the JRPG subgenre?

I ask this while I'm in the middle of Horizon Forbidden West, which is an action / adventure game with strong RPG elements. ARPG? Is that a descriptor that is used? But I also ask it while I'm incredibly excited about recently announced remasters of Suikoden I and II.

Aidan: I mean, what keeps us coming back to any of our favourite things? At 38, I'm still drawn to many of the same things I was as an eight year old: big stories, cool characters, epic encounters, scary monsters. From the moment JRPGs clicked for me, they latched onto the things that've inspired me as a consumer and creator of media my whole life. I just like stories about people overcoming obstacles by using fireballs and exploring worlds with lots of made up words. It's part of who I am.

JRPGs really had an ebb and flow to them, though, so if you rewind a decade to 2012, I was in a big console JRPG doldrums because the entire genre was having trouble transitioning to the HD era. I still played a ton of them on my DS and PSP, but the big, epic experiences in front of my TV were replaced by stuff like Deus Ex, World of Warcraft, and Skyrim. I wasn't even much into replaying retro favourites at that point, and all my old consoles/games were still buried away in a closet at my parents' house. It wasn't until a few years later, as JRPGs started to see a bit of a revival on consoles that they started to consume the majority of my living room gaming time again.

I think your last point is really interesting, though, because I credit a lot of the genre's revival on the way it started to adopt western game design ideas—with series like Final Fantasy taking on open world design elements from western hits like Skyrim and World of Warcraft—and the way western genres and games started to adopt some of the most popular JRPG mechanics—look no further than Assassin's Creed or Horizon and their adoption of JRPG-like systems. JRPGs and western games have always had a symbiotic inspirational relationship, and I don't think it's a coincidence that they saw a major resurgence right around the time they started more openly adopting each other's ideas.

Now, I think we're seeing the broad success of more mainstream JRPGs open the door for more traditional JRPGs. Stuff like the Suikoden remasters, Sea of Stars, or Eiyuden Chronicles probably would've have found a footing ten years ago, but there's a hungry audience for all of those games, and it's not just deep-down-the-rabbit-hole JRPG nerds. I think we're reaching a place where the kids who grew up playing Final Fantasy III, Chrono Trigger, and Xenogears are reaching the age where we're influential buyers, but also a gateway to a whole new generation of gamers: our kids. Reaching into the past to revive games like Suikoden and Final Fantasy VII is a great way to reinvigorate lapsed fans and get them reinvested in a genre they might've left behind—while still appealing to the hardcore audience who'll lap up all of these games.

Joe: Before we get to your book, do you have any recent JRPGs that you'd recommend? You and I chatted about Dragon Quest XI a few years back, which was just about a distilled experience of a classic JRPG could be while still having modern conveniences, but has anything else struck your interest?

Aidan: It's a great time for JRPG fans and, in many ways, feels like the next phase for the genre as we see new releases that focus on innovation and genre-blending (like, say, Xenoblade Chronicles 3 and Final Fantasy XVI) being released alongside more conventional titles (like Bravey Default 2 and Eiyuden Chronicles) that allows the genre to be in conversation with its past while still forging new territory. I've been enjoying Xenoblade Chronicles 3 a lot—its still way too system-heavy, but is generally an improvement over its predecessor in every way—and then I've been really enjoying other games that overlap with JRPGs on a Venn diagram, like 13 Sentinels: Aegis Rim, which is a great visual novel with a weird tower defense game built in, and, of course, Elden Ring, which fits the broadest possible definition of Japanese RPG, so I'm counting it.

I'm a very inclusive, big bucket kind of person when it comes to genre labels—I like to think of them as sets of inspiration, ideas, and themes, rather than constrictive, objective identities.

Joe: Now - about your book. I think to a point everything we've just discussed is a bit of "why this book" but what brought your love of JRPGs to book length?

Aidan: As mentioned earlier, I've been playing JRPGs for nearly my entire life, but it wasn't until five or six years ago that I made a conscious effort to start revisiting favourite games and earlier generations. I'd been keeping up with the genre, but started to wonder if I'd still enjoy the older style of JPRG that's less "immersive" and "realistic" and more interpretive and metaphorical in its presentation. Did I still have the imaginative chops (and patience) for that older style of game? So, I loaded up an emulator and visited two beloved Super NES JRPGs that I'd missed the first time around: Lufia II: Rise of the Sinistrals and Terranigma.

And adored them.

I missed Lufia II due to it being released near the end of the Super NES's life cycle, and Terranigma was never officially released in North America. So, I went into those experiences with nostalgia for the era and style, but not for the games themselves. Walking away enamoured with them, and suddenly in conversation with my younger self who'd grown up obsessed with Super NES and PlayStation JRPGs, I realized that if I felt this way, then lots of other people would feel this way, too. So, I started pitching freelance articles to gaming sites based around the idea of revisiting this nostalgia and examining these games as an adult and through the experience I'd acquired with the genre in the decades since.

On Kotaku, I examined how a whole generation of science fiction and fantasy authors were as inspired by Hironobu Sakguchi as they were by J.R.R. Tolkien, and looked at the lasting legacy of Lunar: Silver Star Story Complete for Electronic Gaming Monthly. Noted JRPG nerd and brilliant agent Eric Smith loved these pieces, and eventually we started chatting about a book based on these ideas. A lot of back and forth ensued, but we whipped together a great proposal, and here we are.

Specifically, I think the Japanese RPG is having a bit of a revival, especially with a more mainstream audience due to the Switch's popularity, and something I call "weaponized nostalgia" that explains why Square Enix and similar companies are bringing back all these classic games right at this moment. The idea is basically that all the kids and teens that grew up playing Final Fantasy VII, Chrono Cross, and Suikoden are now adults with purchasing power and, importantly, are gatekeepers to an untapped demographic of gamers: kids. I know I sure enjoy introducing my kids to my childhood favourites.

Joe: I dig it. I'm feeling likewise inspired by the JRPG renaissance. It's definitely rekindled my love of the genre, as has the nostalgia factor. So - high level because obviously everyone should drop what they are doing right this moment and order your book - what can readers expect from Fight, Magic, Items?

Aidan: My elevator pitch for the book is pretty simple: Fight, Magic, Items is the history of Japanese RPGs and the people who made them.

But, my goal for the book was also to go above and beyond a technical, linear history of the genre that just regurgitated Wikipedia factoids. The most appealing thing to me about these games are the people—the ones who made the games, the ones who played them, the ones who continue to make new games because they fell in love with the genre as kids and couldn't let go. So, Fight, Magic, Items isn't just a history, it's an examination of the creative process, of what drove people like Hironobu Sakaguchi and Yuji Horii to attempt something as bold as they did when they created the genre, and to understand how their similar beginnings and parallel ambitions ended up leading to two series that are now vastly different from each other.

And then there's the people who play the games, the fans, lapsed and current. JRPGs are a core memory for me, they're baked into me as a creator, and there's millions of other readers out there like me. They might not share the exact same memories as me, we might've played different games, have different favourites, but that core warmth of nostalgia and love for the genre is a shared experience. So, I put a lot of myself into the book—my experiences discovering the games and growing up alongside them. It's not quite a memoir, but readers will turn the last page feeling like they know me a bit better, and hopefully discover some new stories and facts about the games they love along the way.

Joe: Aidan, Thank you very much for taking the time to chat about some of your gaming history and about Fight, Magic, Items. I am excited to read it. Everything about it, from the nostalgia to the games I still like to play, is exactly what I'm here for.

I assume Fight, Magic, Items is available everywhere fine books are sold?

Aidan: Thank you for having me! It's been such a joy to connect with other people who love these games as much as I do, and to share the stories of the people who made and play them.You can, indeed, pick Fight, Magic, Items up at your local bookstore! If you want more information about the book, including an excerpt, links to coverage and interviews, etc. you can visit its official website: FightMagicItems.rocks

6 Books with Victor Manibo

Paul Weimer

Victor Manibo is a Filipino speculative fiction writer living in New York. As a queer immigrant and a person of color, he writes about people who live these identities and how they navigate imaginary worlds. He is a 2022 Lambda Literary Emerging Voices Fellow, and his debut science fiction noir novel, THE SLEEPLESS, came out in August 2022 from Erewhon Books. Find him online at victormanibo.com or on Twitter @victormanibo.

Today he tells us about his Six Books:

1. What book are you currently reading?

Lone Women by Victor LaValle. I was lucky enough to be given an advance reader copy (ARC) of this one, and as soon as I got it, I jumped right in. I had heard Mr. LaValle read its opening chapter at a KGB Fantastic Fiction event a few months back, and ever since then, I couldn't get it out of my mind. It's the story of Adelaide Henry, a black woman fleeing a dark past to be a pioneer homesteader in 1910s Montana, carrying with her only a single traveling bag and a mysterious steamer trunk. All throughout my read, I kept yelling, "What's in the trunk?" all Seven-style, because Mr. LaValle is so adept at layering complex characterization and a strong sense of place with ever-escalating tension. All that with the incisive social commentary, sharp attention to historical detail, and gorgeous prose–what more could I ask for?

2. What upcoming book are you really excited about?

Liberation Day by George Saunders. I have been waiting such a long time to get my hands on this, and luckily I only have a few more days to go. His Tenth of December was a real eye-opener for me on how a short story can portray the human experience with ferocity and tenderness, and I fully expect this new collection to do just that and more.

3. Is there a book you're currently itching to re-read?

Interview with the Vampire by Anne Rice. That book was an awakening of sorts for me; I read it in high school and I immediately imprinted on it. It's so lush and had such a grand scope, and of course, I could not get enough of Lestat de Lioncourt. He is such an unforgettable character. I haven't re-read it in the last twenty years, and I really never had the inclination to until the TV adaptation premiered in early October. The show altered much of the source material, and it made me wonder how well or how poorly the book has aged. I wondered too how my recollection and attachment to it would change, reading it now not only as an adult, but as someone who writes speculative fiction. So now the book is near the top of my TBR list.

4. How about a book you've changed your mind about – either positively or negatively?

Mrs. Dalloway by Virginia Woolf. I first attempted it in college (not as required reading), and at the time it was impenetrable to me. I simply could not get it. The postmodernist style was not something I had a lot of exposure in, and despite some affecting moments of pathos, the story felt disjointed. So I never finished it. Fast forward about a decade and a half later, I read Michael Cunningham's The Hours and absolutely loved it. Yet I felt I missed a lot of its layers because I skipped Mrs. Dalloway, so I revisited it. And wow, the re-read was a whole different experience. I'd become a different person, a different reader, since I last opened its pages, and this time I got it.

5. What's one book, which you read as a child or a young adult, that has had a lasting influence on your writing?

All of Arthur Conan Doyle's Sherlock Holmes stories were a huge influence on me. I started reading the novels and shorts when I was around nine, which might seem a tad young, but my parents didn't mind. I was really taken in by the time period, the interplay between Holmes and Watson, and of course, the puzzle aspect of it all. I wanted to figure out the solution before I got to the end, and when I didn't (which was often), I would reread the stories to see what I missed. That reverse engineering is something that I still do to this day, in the stories that I craft. My debut and upcoming novel are both mysteries, and I probably wouldn't have written them if it wasn't for Sherlock.

6. And speaking of that, what's your latest book, and why is it awesome?

The Sleepless is a near-future sci-fi noir mystery/thriller and I think it's awesome because it is such a multi-hypenate. It's a what-if thought experiment about a world where some part of the population does not require any sleep without experiencing any physical or mental drawbacks, and it is also a locked-room murder mystery, and also an exploration of grief, memory, and time. It straddles the line between genres and styles, and weaves many of the literary elements that I find thoroughly fun to read and even more fun to write.

Thank you, Victor!

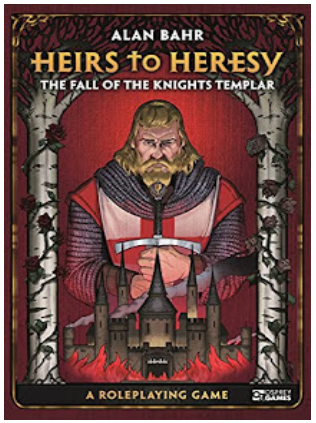
SECTION.04

Commentary

Section IV: Commentary

Roll Perception Plus Awareness: Heirs to Heresy

Paul Weimer



In this edition of Roll Perception Plus Awareness, I reintroduce the column in a new space, and take a look at Heirs to Heresy from Alan Bahr and Osprey Games.

Once upon a time when the Internet was young, there was a place where I built up my skills and techniques as a reviewer, interviewer, Mind Melder, and critic. That place was SF Signal. Among the many things I did there was something I haven't continued on in other venues such as the Hugo Award Winning Nerds of a Feather here, and that Roll Perception Plus Awareness[1].

Roll Perception Plus Awareness is a column that I did at SF Signal that focused on my passion and love for roleplaying games. I've been playing RPGs of various sorts for nearly as long as I've been reading science fiction and fantasy, from First Edition Dungeons and Dragons, to, most recently, games like Root the Roleplaying Game. I've played and play RPGs in person, in Tabletop Simulator with friends, streaming to viewers, and currently GM two play by email games. So I am going to bring this experience to you, the reader, with games I buy and read, and games I play at the table.

So let me switch into the game for today, and that is Heirs to Heresy: The Fall of the Knights Templar, written by Alan Bahr and published by Osprey Games. It is a hardback book of approximately 190 pages.

The Concept of the game is one that is familiar to conspiracy theorists and the History Channel, as well as a number of movies of varying quality: The Knights Templar. Bahr spends a chapter, after the "What is a roleplaying game and what you need to run this one" giving a potted history of the Knights Templar from their origin in 1099 to the "present day" of the game in 1307. The game generally starts on a fateful Friday the 13th, October 1307. The King of France declares the Templars heretics and traitors to France. Many are captured, others killed. Thirty of them escape the initial attack, surrounded by enemies, unsure of who or what to trust.

As players, you play one of the thirty survivors of this attack. You are entrusted with the fabled (especially on the History channel) Templar treasure, and are to take it to safety. But where is safety in a world where the King of France has turned against you?

In the RPG Sorcerer, designer Ron Edwards came up with the idea of a "Bang", an event in an roleplaying game that sets off the action for the character(s). It is an event in the game, often but not always the inciting incident in a campaign or scenario, that the player and character simply cannot ignore. Heirs to Heresy uses the events of October 13, 1307 as the "Bang" for the characters and their players to face. They are deep within hostile territory, with enemies all about, many of their friends, companions, leaders are dead or captured.

There are three basic questions the GM and players must consider, which provides a variety of axes to play and set up the game and customize to to suit a particular RPG table's needs and wants. Bahr goes into detail into these choices, so that a gaming group cane come with one of a variety of scenarios and campaigns of varying lengths to suit their taste.

What kind of treasure do the players carry? Is it simply gold, jewels and material wealth, or is it a holy relic, or is it something with actual magical power? (You can customize your game to have as much magic as you and the players want. You can play it straight and gritty, or mystical and esoteric, or take a middle ground)

What are the truths of the Templar Order? This is a question more for the GM to come up with and to think about, and for the PCs to discover, uncover, use, or rebel against. Just what was the Templars plan? To form a polity of their own? To continue to amass wealth and power and affect the course of Christian Europe? To crusade against literal demons and the forces of darkness? Or, are they actually corrupted from within already?

Where are the players going? They've been given a treasure, they need to escape the French assault, but what is their final destination? What is their goal? Like Michael Moorcock's Tanelorn, Bahr uses a neologism for the ultimate goal and destination of the PCs: "Avallonis". Depending on the style and nature of the campaign, Avallonis can represent any number of places: England, Portugal, Malta, the remnant of Outremer in the Holy Land, or a city in faerie that the knights must battle to reach the portal to access. Avallonis is, as the book puts it, whatever and wherever the PCs need it to be, a destination informed by the journey. Depending on the game, Avallonis may be just an aspirational goal, one never actually reached in game, a shining beacon of hope, all alone in the night, but never quite in reach.

The Mechanics:

Heirs to Heresy uses the full range of standard polyhedral dice, plus uses a "token in a bag" system to handle initiative. The basic test of a skill is rolling 2d10, adding attributes and skills (which generally range from 0 to 4 or 5) versus a difficulty. Trivial tests require a 12, difficult ones require a 20 or higher. A critical success (which provides advancement points) occurs when both dice have the same number, AND the test is successful. Critical successes also allow for additional damage in combat, or a flourish in a non combat situation. Both players and GMs alike can call for skill tests.

Other PCs can aid tests, if they have enough skill to do so, and if another party is actively trying to stop you, the test instead of being against a set difficulty is against the GM rolling the opposition. Or, if two PCs are in active disagreement with each other, the other player rolls just as the first one does to determine the outcome.

There are no fumbles in the game, only success, failure, and critical success. Bahr's philosophy is that failure should always lead to an interesting and compelling narrative, not stop the flow of the game.

There are no non-combat stats for opponents in the game. Combat is a different story. Rolls for the opposition are based on the initiative system of tokens,and are dangerous according to whether they are Mobs (Mooks in the Feng Shui parlance), or Fearsome Foes. Both kinds of enemies can have specific qualities as well, such as "Brutal" (do more damage on critical rolls). Keeping the enemies from having out of combat stats means that there aren't huge stat blocks dominating the book.

Overall, the combat is relatively straightforward and narratively based. It uses a Fate-like "zones" system to determine placement of PCs and opponents and add some mental narrative crunch to combat. One does not need to use miniatures and a terrain map to run combat in this game, given enough narrative information and imagination on the part of a GM and players, although a running fight by the PCs through a castle could certainly be one where pushing minis on a map might be quite fun indeed.

The Execution:

For a 190 page book, the book is succinct and comprehensive in offering up things to the players and GM alike. Rules for travel, opponents, the "Pursuit Point system" (which is sort of like a doomclock in how much "heat" there is on the PCs at a particular moment).

The book and rules are as inclusive as a story about the Templars can be. There are some limitations made by history--Templars need to be Catholic knights, for example, but it does not insist that Templars need to be white men of deep Catholic faith. If you want a converted Berber woman who is Catholic but mostly secular in her outlook as your Templar Knight...you can do that. The RPG is historically informed and infused, but it is not hidebound to it.

The rules for esoterica (magic) are a bit firewalled from the rest of the book, because, as mentioned above, you could play a straight gritty game without a hint of Baphomet in it. There are three types of Esoterica, and a campaign run by the GM might have none, or any or all of them in it. Magicks are straight up spells, learned by studying relics. This ranges from a healing spell all the way up to binding angels and demons. It's made clear that even in a high magic game, magick is dangerous and is a great way to get the Inquisition to want to hunt you even more. Blessings, the second type of magic, holy gifts from saints. The short list of saints, it is pointed out, can be supplemented because of the sheer number of saints in the Catholic Church, even as of 1307 AD. The third kind of esoterica is martial focused, and ranges from striking quickly to Wuxia-adjacent running up of walls.

That last thought brings up the toolkit aspect of the book. In addition to all of the Templar hooks a GM and players could want to devise, this system could be used for parallel situations, both real and imaginary, to tell stories of a small band under threat, trying to survive or reach a distant, dangerous goal while beset by enemies on all sides. With just a few tweaks, for example, one could do a riff on Xenophon's The Ten Thousand. There are rules for mass combat in the books, so having a band of Greek Mercenaries try to fight their way out of the Persian Empire, pursued and hunted--Heirs to Heresy could be used as a system for that. Or, say, moving forward in time, a group of Byzantines trying to escape the fall of Constantinople with some holy relics, trying to reach safety in the West, or perhaps a more mystical location. Or, say, a group of Buddhist Monks trying to escape the persecutions of Emperor Taiwu of Northern Wei.

The Verdict on Heirs to Heresy at this time is incomplete as, inevitably in this day and age, I have not yet actually given it a try as GM or as a player. Based on the writing and presentation in the book, and the mechanics as mentioned above, this is a game I definitely way to give a try and see how it runs in practice. My fecund imagination in thinking about this game tells me this is a game I'd love to run or play. The strong presentation of theme, the excellent nods and moves toward inclusivity and welcoming players of all stripes, and the overall tone of the book are extremely positive for me. In addition there is much that Bahr could do with further books given this foundation. I imagine an expansion for, say, a Quest for Prester John, easily. There is a solid foundation and chassis here for GMs and players to tell stories.

[1]For those wondering how I came up with the column name: In the World of Darkness games, rolling a stat and a skill is the usual way to do something. In the Roleplaying game Exalted, which I have GMed a lot of, in order to "spot something", you roll a dice poll of your stat Perception and your ability Awareness.

Thursday Morning Superhero

Mikey N

Way back in 2002 Vertigo launched Fables, a series from Bill Willingham that was built on the premise that the famous characters from our favorite fairy tales were living in the human world after having to escape their homelands. It was an interesting premise, had numerous spin off series, spanned 150 issues, and won fourteen Eisner awards. After a seven year hiatus, Fables returned last month and picked up where the long running series ended.

Fables is a series that helped bring me back into comics when I was in my anti-superhero phase and the main series holds a place near and dear to me. Having the good fortune of living in Austin at the time, the creators frequented Austin Books and Comics and I was able to attend a small Fables convention, meet the creators, and really immerse myself in the community that embraced this series. While not all of the spin-offs were as good as the original, I quite enjoyed Peter and Max which was set in the Fables universe.

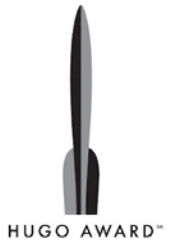
Fables has graduated from Vertigo to the DC Black label and is a 12 issue story called "The Black Forest". After seven years, I needed a refresher as this series really does pick up right after issue 150. The new series centers around Bigby (the big bad wolf who is a human in this world as are all Fables), Snow White, and their cubs along with the introduction of a new villain.

It oddly felt extremely familiar and easy to find myself back in the Fables universe and it is clear that Willingham and Mark Buckingham would not have returned to this series if they didn't feel like it would be up to the same standards. The new issue has me excited about this series for the first time after my failed attempt to get my son on board with it. We can save that story for another time. Without spoiling anything, I should add that Fables immortality is built on the strength and popularity of their story. Something to keep in mind when you reach the first twist at the end of this issue.

While I don't think I would be up for another 150 issues, because in all honestly there were some arcs that didn't capture my interest, if the other eleven issues are as good as this one I would not be sad to see another story outside of the Black Forest.

On the Proposed Changes to the Best Series Hugo Award

Joe Sherry



I think about the Hugo Awards far more than is probably healthy. Typically, what I'm considering are the finalists for the current year's awards or reading through all of the previous winners in a given category (I'm at least halfway done with all of the Best Novella winners) or what I would have nominated for Best Video Game if that was a category this year (Metroid Dread and Tales of Arise) or I'll be thinking about what could be nominated the next year and how to narrow down my predictions for the Best Novel ballot so Adri Joy can owe me another beer that I'm unlikely to actually collect on, or I'll consider the health of the "downballot" categories and how they can be protected. That's what I think about during a "normal" year, for whatever that means.

What I'm also thinking about this year is the Best Series category and the two proposals that will be going before the Business Meeting as potential amendments for the WSFS Constitution (World Science Fiction Society) that will change how particular awards are administered and what the eligibility criteria are.

I believe that the two amendment proposals regarding Best Series are well meaning, but very misguided. Because Worldcon members (of which I am a perennial Supporting Member and only occasionally an Attending Member) seem to like quippy titles for their proposals, the two that I want to talk about today are titled "A Work, By Any Other Name…" and "One Rocket Per Customer, Please!"

This is going to get a bit in the weeds for the Hugo Awards, but I think we need to in order to talk about this. The two proposals are related. The less sweeping proposal is "A Work, by Any Other Name…" so let's touch on that first.

"A Work, by Any Other Name…" does two things. First - it eliminates the section of the WSFS Constitution which states **"No work shall appear in more than one category of the final Award ballot" (3.2.9)** - which means exactly what it says. The category definitions are generally strict enough that a work *can't* be on the ballot twice. A work is either a novel or a novella based on word count, and though there is wiggle room if it is within 20% of the word count - it can only be placed on the ballot one time. This is also why the Lodestar Award for YA Novel is specifically NOT a Hugo Award - because if it was a Hugo, the Lodestar finalists would be ineligible for Best Novel. Thus far no Lodestar finalist has been a Novel finalist, but they can - much as an animated film, documentary, or international film can also be on the ballot for Best Picture at the Oscars.

In eliminating that text in 3.2.9, the proposed amendment would replace it with a broader exclusion **"Unless otherwise expressly provided for, no content shall be placed on the ballot more than once in a given year in whole or in part, except that (1) a periodical publication shall not be rendered ineligible by virtue of a story published within that does not constitute the majority of its content that year; and (2) written works and audio or audio-visual adaptations of those works shall be considered inherently distinct."**

What this says is that, say, Network Effect cannot be on the Best Novel ballot at the same time as Murderbot in Best Series, as happened last year in 2021. The exclusion is written in such a way that a story can make the ballot in Short Story AND the magazine in which it appeared can still be a finalist in Semiprozine or Fanzine. Or, hypothetically, a prose story can be on the ballot in its category at the same time as a filmed or audio adaptation is on the ballot in Dramatic Presentation (Long or Short).

"A Work, By Any Other Name…" is attempting to solve a problem that doesn't exist.

Including the upcoming Hugo Awards given out in just a few weeks, a Hugo for Best Series will have been presented 6 times. There have been 36 total nominees, though three series have been repeat finalists in subsequent years.

In two of these six years has there been direct overlap with the Best Novel ballot. First, in 2019 with Wayfarers and The Machineries of Empire each having nominated novels (Wayfarers won Best Series), and again in 2021 with Murderbot and Lady Astronaut (Martha Wells won both Series for Murderbot and Novel for Network Effect). This year there is one Series overlap with Novella for Seanan McGuire's Wayward Children novella Across the Green Grass Fields and the series as a whole.

So - out of 36 finalists for the Best Series only 5 times has a corresponding work from Novel or Novella been on the ballot at the same time - and since we're looking at two different categories there are twice as many works to draw on to get that overlap. In 2 out of 6 years the Novel and Series ballot has had overlap. 1 year out of 6 there has been an overlap between Novella and Series. 5 total works out of 36 series nominations have had overlap.

I should note that N.K. Jemisin declined a Best Series nomination in 2018 for The Broken Earth, which would have made 6 total works out of 36 series nominations having overlapped since The Stone Sky was a finalist (and eventual winner) in Best Novel.

This is not a problem in want of a solution.

With such little overlap between Novel, Novella, and Series "A Work, By Any Other Name…" fails to recognize the distinct difference between a Series and a component work of that series - which is especially interesting because the nominating Worldcon members do recognize that difference. Seldom does a series have a novel or story on the ballot in the same year, even though it is that novel or story providing the Series category eligibility.

With that being the case, why is there a proposal to penalize those series works that are exceptional enough to reach the Hugo ballot both as the individual work AND the wider series?

This is the less offensive proposal. The significantly more punitive proposed amendment is "One Rocket Per Customer,

Please!" which sounds cute and pithy, but is rather far shittier to the writers, if I may be blunt.

The current category description for Best Series is as follows

3.3.5: Best Series. A multi-installment science fiction or fantasy story, unified by elements such as plot, characters, setting, and presentation, appearing in at least three (3) installments consisting in total of at least 240,000 words by the close of the previous calendar year, at least one (1) installment of which was published in the previous calendar year, and which has not previously won under 3.3.5.

What "One Rocket Per Customer, Please!" changes is the limitation that a series that has previously won Best Series is no longer eligible to be a finalist for Best Series in the future (which is fair, and I think, the right way to do this) and broadly expands it as follows.

and which has not previously won under 3.3.5. No series may be nominated that has previously won under Section 3.3.5 nor may any series containing an individual installment which has won a Hugo Award of any type in its nominated format. No series may appear on the ballot in the same year as any of its installments.

Previous *Series* winners are still ineligible, but this is expanded to say that if a Series has had a work that previously won in a different category, the series is ineligible.

Lois McMaster Bujold's Vorkosigan series has won multiple Hugo Awards in Best Novel and Best Novella. If this amendment was part of the category rules at the time, Vorkosigan would have been ineligible to even be on the ballot. Likewise the following year with Bujold's World of Five Gods. Murderbot would have been ineligible due to All Systems Red's Novella win as would Mary Robinette Kowal's Lady Astronaut series following The Calculating Stars winning Best Novel. This year Seanan McGuire's Wayward Children series would be ineligible because her novella Every Heart a Doorway has previously won Best Novella.

For this amendment, three Best Series winners would have been ineligible (and two other finalists).

According to the Commentary that was included with the proposal to the Business Meeting

The main argument for such a change is that the intent of the Best Series award should be to reward works that are primarily notable for their impact as a series. If a work in a series has already won a Hugo Award, then clearly that work has impact on its own. There are many fine series which could not, perhaps even should not, be nominated in their individual parts, but which are clearly Hugo-worthy as a whole. Not having this rule means that we have several series that have won multiple awards, while excellent series that are not going to win on their own have either not made the ballot or (prior to the existence of Best Series) have a late work in the series nominated as a clear attempt to award the series as a whole. (There have been several recent examples of this. . .)

While this amendment seems like a major restriction, what it actually accomplishes is to allow even more works to be recognized on the Hugo Award ballot, and to recognize that the work of writing a Hugo-worthy series is a different endeavor than writing Hugoworthy installments, even multiple times.*

My argument against this proposal is that while I recognize that the original intent of the Best Series category was to celebrate those series that do not get recognition in other Hugo categories (urban fantasy, epic fantasy,etc) it does not allow for the fact that a *Series* can have impact as a series at the same time that a component work of that series could also have significant impact. To suggest that the Vorkosigan Saga is not significant as a series across more than a dozen novels and as many shorter stories because several of those novels and stories have also been recognized for individual achievement is madness.

Yes, I want to see a wider range of Series on the ballot and *more* long running urban fantasy but as a whole the Best Series category *is* recognizing a range of series. There are more tight trilogies and finite series and less open-ended series, but there is a range in what makes the ballot. I'm baffled by why The Dresden Files wasn't a finalist for Series last year (it was 12th in nominations, so that's obviously why) - but the works that did make the ballot were also incredibly worthy.

The proposal also includes the intended result of "A Work, By Any Other Name…" so that not only can a writer not win an award in a previous category and be eligible here, they cannot be on the ballot twice if one is Best Series.

This is a privileged problem to have, I completely understand (and certainly not one I will ever have) - but again, a series is not a novel. They do different things and should be celebrated for different things. Vorkosigan, to continue to use the same example, would have been penalized in 2017 because Mirror Dance won Best Novel in 1995.

Just as with "A Work, By Any Other Name…" was attempting to solve a problem that didn't exist, "One Rocket Per Customer, Please!" has the same nomination tally. Out of 36 finalists for Best Series, 6 of them would have been rendered ineligible. It just happens that three of them were the ultimate winners of that category.

I could go through and list off what series would have made the ballot in each case where a finalists would have been ineligible, but what we can't predict is how that ineligibility would have changed nominating practices. It doesn't automatically follow that you can just slot up the first work off the ballot. Having an extra nominating slot could distribute those votes in any number of ways. For example, we don't yet know what would have made the ballot this year if Wayward Children was ineligible, but even without the voting totals, may I just suggest that it would have been Seanan McGuire's Incrytid series? Even though it probably won't be 7th because, McGuire asked fans considering her work to nominate Wayward Children this year, I think in the case of ineligibility nominating patterns would have been different.

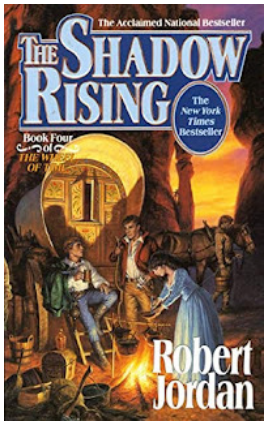
What bothers me about all of this, though, is that it just feels shitty. I know the intent is to recognize and reward *more* works and that's a worthy goal, but if the Hugo Awards are also for celebrating the best work of a given year as determined by Worldcon members and those Worldcon members think that a really fantastic series deserves to be recognized even though it contains a novel that won a Hugo the year prior or twenty years prior, or even have that novel and series on the ballot in the same year - well, that's what the Hugo

Awards should recognize. Doing otherwise tells writers that "oh, you won two (or twenty) years ago for something different so you don't get to feel good about this other thing because it's just more of the old thing" even though they are different things.

I would say that I don't have a solution, but if you're a Worldcon member and you're planning to go to the Business Meeting this year - maybe vote against ratifying both "A Work, By Any Other Name…" and "One Rocket Per Customer, Please!". The amendment names sound cute, but their consequences aren't.

The Wheel of Time Reread: The Shadow Rising

Joe Sherry



Welcome back, dear readers, to The Wheel of Time Reread. Today we're going to talk about The Shadow Rising, the novel I've long considered to be my favorite in the series. The Wheel of Time is what could be affectionately (or derisively) called Big Fat Fantasy.

I first discovered The Wheel of Time somewhen between the publications of The Shadow Rising and the next book, The Fires of Heaven. I have strong memories of the Rush City Public Library, browsing the shelves, finding new epic fantasies to read, the comfort of Darrel K. Sweet's cover art, going through a really primitive semi-online catalog to find and request new books that I was so excited to read.

They say that the Golden Age of Science Fiction is twelve, and that feels right because even now when science fiction and fantasy has permeated the "culture", it's the age of discovery for kids who start to have more agency in choosing exactly what they want to read and diving into all the things on their own. That would be a much larger conversation to refine that idea and it's one that many other people have had - so we should go back to The Wheel of Time.

The larger point here is that I was thirteen when The Shadow Rising was published and was either thirteen or fourteen when I started mainlining this series. The fact that The Shadow Rising is the longest book in The Wheel of Time was just gravy for me at the time. But, how does it hold up?

Well, let's take a look at the map and the spot marked Here Be Spoilers, and find out.

If you reduce The Shadow Rising to the biggest and most significant moments it's easy to gloss over just how long the opening of the novel feels. This seems to be a trend with the series, that after "The Wheel of Time turns and Ages come and pass" and after the wind blows and it isn't the beginning but "a beginning" Robert Jordan eases us back into the novel at a very leisurely pace.

It just so happens that I *like* spending time in this world - as much as the waiting periods can be a couple hundred pages of frustrating, though it's interesting that the characters are also equally (if not moreso) frustrated about being stuck in Tear because Rand won't say what he's going to do. Narratively, it (mostly) works because it builds the particular concerns that Moiraine needs Rand to be moving towards the Last Battle and fulfilling what he needs to (and specifically, what *she* thinks he needs to) as well as the Black Ajah hunting that Egwene / Nynaeve / Elayne need to do and Mat's need to be *somewhere* else and Perrin's desire for the stability of not following Rand. Once there is a further Trolloc attack inside Tear, Jordan begins to move the pieces on the board and once the group splits - the story really kicks into the gear it needs to.

I considered ending this essay with my favorite part of the novel, but why bury that lede? Possibly one of my favorite aspects of the entire series, which I clearly love otherwise I wouldn't spend so many words on it, is the time Rand spends at Rhuidean. There are these magical rings that Rand has to walk through, the same rings that the Wise Ones and the Clan Chiefs of the Aiel must walk through to be given glimpses of the past, of the truth of who the Aiel were and how they became who they are now. It is those glimpses that show us the Age of Legends and moments leading up to the Breaking of the World and the aftermath, of how the Aiel were tasked to save so much knowledge and so many artifacts but how much of that was lost in the generations upon generations upon generations. And how the fierce warrior culture of the Aiel we know is so far from the sworn to peace Aiel that served the Aes Sedai.

The Shadow Rising is packed with a lot more than I remember, even in the thirteen years since I've last read this book. I didn't remember that THIS is the book where Nynaeve fights and defeats Moghedien, one of the Forsaken. That's a Crowning Moment of Awesomeness. This is also the book where Rand meets / fights Asmodean, which is going to work out for him because the only person who can help Rand learn to control his power is another man and those are few and far between, so Rand gets his pet-Forsaken. Perrin becomes a "Lord" of the Two Rivers. Not really, but kind of really and truly. It's a weird sub-plot but it sort of makes sense in a hand-wavy Ta'veren sort of way. A lot of these books can get waved away with a mutter of "ta'veren" and just accept it.

The battle for / rebellion of The White Tower is in The Shadow Rising and that's really something I thought was in the next book. I both can't wait for that scene in the show and dread it because the stilling of Siuan Sanche and Leane is just brutal and wrongheaded (though that it eventually leads to the quiet rebellion of Egwene in the Tower, which is another of my favorite bits is an ultimate mark in its favor) - but having The White Tower ineffectively led at best and under the control of the Black Ajah at best is just really a damn shame for the world. I just didn't realize that was *this* book.

Which is a long way to say that despite the several hundred pages of inaction, when Robert Jordan pushes the story he really gives it a strong shove and if you're inclined to like this sort of thing you're inclined to love this book.

Here are some random final notes I took while I was reading. :

*The visit to Rhuidean is still absolutely thrilling. I love learning the history of the Aiel. I want more of this even if I don't think I want an actual prequel novel or even novella. I just want more glimpses of the Age of Legends and how the Aiel became the Aiel. How the Tinkers were an early splinter off the Aiel, still following the Way of the Leaf but following a path trying to find the song (or songs) they were known for as Aiel serving the Aes Sedai. Then the warrior Aiel we know were a later splinter off to protect themselves while the Jenn Aiel continued to follow the Way of the Leaf AND who stayed true to their original mission of protecting the artifacts from the Aes Sedai and to find a home where they could be safe. How hard it is for Aiel to accept this (which is why only those chosen to lead are allowed to learn of this, to see and live that history through the ter'angreal rings at Rhuidean).

*I think I just appreciate the time spent in the Waste, in the Three-Fold Land, with Egwene learning.

*Mat and his spear and his trips through the ter'angreal doorways. Snakes and Foxes.

*Nynaeve and Elayne on a Sea Folk ship - the customs and learning that the Windfinders can channel.

*Ordeith means to scour the Two Rivers (as he did with Perrin's family farm and all his family) - obvious reference to the Scouring of the Shire.

*I don't remember being a big fan of the Perrin / Faile / Two Rivers plotline, but it is a nice anchor and reminder that all of this war (waves hands) has an impact on regular people and not just lords and prophesied heroes and magicians and dragons reborn. RJ is, overall, very good at that even when those common dead are unnamed and just burned out villages.

*At the Two Rivers there is a proper introduction to Alanna - she who will hold Lan's Warder Bond when Moiraine disappears.

*A little bit of background on the Tower of Ghenji and a glimpse of Birgitte and Gadal Cain, though neither are named. More on this MUCH later.

*I also don't remember how much Verin is acting against the Light up until she is discovered much later.

*Part of the game Faile plays with Perrin is super annoying - but remember Perrin and Faile are all of 20 years old and it's more of a kids game of relationships, but it's a pain to read.

*Verin recoginizing that Perrin's growing authority is very quickly going to change the nature of the Two Rivers - and also that he is ta'verening all over the place.

*The raw hate of Couladin and the Shaido Aiel

*Twice and twice he shall be marked.

*The idea that the ancestors of Cairhain let the Aiel have water three thousand years ago, which led to the friendship between the Aiel and Cairhain later, which led to the Avendesora cutting as a pledge of friendship, Laman cutting it down, the Aiel War and all of that leading to Rand being born during that war and carried off to the Two Rivers. Each step that needed to be taken to bring to where he would be,.

*Rand's insistence that he has to carry the load. Duty is heavier than a mountain.

*A quote:

"You knew my mother," he said. Egwene leaned forward as intent as he, and Mat shook his head.

Amys's hand paused on his face. "I knew her"

"Tell me about her. Please"

*Confirmation that Bors is Jaichim Carridan - High Inquisitor as he is threatened by Liandrin.

*Jain Nateal - a gleeman in the Waste (later revealed to be Asmodean) notes "Aiel? Not what I would have expected. I can still hardly credit it" which reads at first as a man who had never met the Aiel before but when you know that he is Asmodean you realize that he knows what the Aiel were during the Age of Legends and before the breaking. What Rand got glimpses of, Asmodean lived.

*Male A'dam - given to Bayle Domon to dump in the deepest part of the sea. Probably not going to end up well.

*Major showdowns in the Two Rivers - probably partial ta'veren stuff where Perrin ends up as the functional Lord of the Two Rivers - fights off waves of trollocs and sends the Whitecloaks running - this would have been a very different novel if the Whitecloaks actually helped to defend the Two Rivers and Perrin would have turned himself in (and likely been executed).

*There's this whole thing with a Slayer in the world of dreams where the person looks like he could be a relative of Lan - but it's Lord Luc in the real world, and that person looks like he could be related to Rand. Connections and only moderately important spoilers for the rest of the series.

Luc is the brother of Tigraine - the Daughter-Heir of Andor who disappeared to become Far Dareis Mai and eventually Rand's birth mother. Luc eventually disappeared into The Blight.

Isam, which is also the word the trollocs were chanting, is cousin of Lan and is of the Malkieri royal family. They are some sort of an amalgamation where both exist in the same body and can change forms? I don't fully understand and I don't think we get a lot of answers until late in the series. But collectively, they are Slayer.

Alright. That's it.

Next up, The Fires of Heaven, in which things happen (probably). Plus: the power of balefire, more battles with the Forsaken, Rand takes over another city, and Robert Jordan's adaptation of Gandalf and the Balrog.

Previous Re-reads:

The Eye of the World

The Great Hunt

The Dragon Reborn

The Long Look Back: Star Wars and Superheroes

Vance K

It has been ten years since Disney acquired the Star Wars galaxy and our writers here weighed in on what we thought this might mean for fans, and ten years since I wrote what remains one of my favorite essays for Nerds of a Feather, Flock Together, From Spurs to Spandex: Why Westerns Died and Superheroes Fly. I've been thinking a lot about those two things recently, because literally everywhere I go, I am confronted by a non-stop barrage of Star Wars and superheroes.

Every time I turn on the television, every time I pass a bus stop, or a bus passes me, or I pass a billboard, or I pick my kids up from school. It has become part of the noise of every day.

There was a time – ten years ago, as it happens – when this wasn't the case. Back then, I and other NoaF writers offered some theories of what might be coming down the pike and speculated about some of the whys and wherefores. I thought it might be interesting to look back at those perspectives and predictions from today's vantage point.

Let us go then, you and I...

The Rise of Streaming

Right off the bat, two statements I made in the Star Wars and Superheroes posts collide because of the ways in which streaming services have totally redefined the media landscape. The transformation has been seismic, and not one I saw coming or I think any of us really could have predicted.

First, regarding the Disney acquisition of Lucasfilm, I worried about the impact it would have on limiting voices and stories, because for many years the number of films being released to theaters had been (and continues) shrinking. In November of 2012, I wrote:

"What we're looking at is a two-year cycle of 12 films where 2 Marvels, 2 Pixars, 1 Disney Animation, 1-2 Tim Burtons, and now a STAR WARS are already taking up over half of the slate and about a billion dollars in budgeted production costs. What this move means overall is that fewer films will be made, there will be fewer surprises, and fewer chances for anyone to ever again blow up the cinematic landscape like Lucas did with the original STAR WARS."

Second, in the Westerns post, I argued that superhero films would move beyond the simple "household name hero origin story+sequel+sequel" pattern, to include different kinds of stories at difference scales. I wrote:

"I do not believe it [the theatrical film market] can become saturated [with superhero content] in any real sense, but expectations have to be adjusted. Not every movie with a cape or a costume will make $100 million."

I wrote that in early 2013, surveying a media landscape in which movie studios were consolidating, so there were fewer and fewer buyers for and producers of feature films. Netflix existed, but to put it in context, the first episodes of House of Cards had just premiered. The success or failure of Netflix's move into original programming was still an open question. Orange is the New Black hadn't premiered yet, and Breaking Bad had yet to air the second half of its final season. Produced by AMC but licensed to Netflix, the show's audience swelled through 2013 in anticipation of the final episodes thanks to people being able to binge the previous seasons on Netflix. But this was, crucially, still a broadcast show.

I argued then that Breaking Bad was the show of our time, and I think that holds up because I believe it was the transformative show that paved the way for the rise of streaming services producing original content. Contemporary reporting suggested as much, but even so, the sheer volume of original streaming programming is a whole other thing entirely. From the vantage point of 2012/2013, there was simply no way to anticipate that within the decade Disney+ a) would exist and b) would be cranking out more hours of Star Wars content per month than the total runtime of all the films in the franchise up to that point.

I believe it is fair to say that, thanks to the rise of streaming services and the continuing trends in theatrical distribution, the media landscape has now, in fact, become saturated with superheroes. But this speaks to the central thesis of my Westerns vs. Superheroes piece – in the 1950s, Westerns saturated the (far smaller) media landscape. Myriad TV shows geared toward kids, families, and adult audiences dominated the airwaves, and the list of Western films produced in the 1950s is so extensive that Wikipedia breaks it up into 1950-1954 and 1955-1959 . The Western occupied a massive domain in the American zeitgeist, which now has been replaced by superhero narratives.

An Ever-Expanding Palette, New Kinds of Stories

As I argued in 2013, both genres are concerned, at their core, with the intersection of violence and power. At that time, superhero franchises such as X-Men, Batman, Spider-Man, and the early Marvel films were considered reliable safe bets. I had a little skin in the game in the late-2000s, working as a writer developing a couple of original superhero projects. I and the producers I was working with heard consistently that nothing that wasn't from existing IP would fly, and even the track-record of films from established characters with name recognition was spotty (Green Hornet, Green Lantern, Ghost Rider, etc). But I believed that the types of stories we were seeing would have to broaden and evolve. I wrote:

"We can look at the incredible breadth of stories Westerns provided as a possible indicator of things to come. Tables were turned, where we began to see antiheroes and were asked to invest in the story from the "bad guy's" perspective, we saw stories of smaller lives touched by much larger struggles playing out around them, allegories for cultural and religious struggles, broken people forced into the hero mold and asked to do something beyond themselves, fringe voices

telling familiar stories in entirely different ways, comedies, etc."

But I didn't anticipate that, when we saw that evolution in the superhero realm, we'd be seeing it through the eyes of established characters. I believed that film and TV creators would gain the freedom to invent their own characters to tell stories of different sizes and with different perspectives. But with a few exceptions, particularly in kids' programming, IP remains king of the mountain in this regard. That said, hats off to the creators who have been able to make it work, and tell a huge variety of stories while playing in somebody else's sandbox.

Marvel's early Netflix run with Jessica Jones and Luke Cage used superhero characters to weave a neo-noir about the impact of sexual violence and a neo-blaxploitation series about local corruption, respectively – a far cry from the "saving the world" framing of many of the big-screen offerings even from the same universe. More recent series such as WandaVision and Hawkeye continued to get more personal, more emotionally complex, and less spectacle-centric. Meanwhile, the MCU theatrical offerings, especially in the Thor series, have become broader, funnier, and more intergalactic in scope. And films like The New Mutants, Doctor Strange and the Multiverse of Madness, and Werewolf by Night have branched out into horror territory.

And that's just Marvel. Amazon brought us The Boys, Netflix The Umbrella Academy, HBO Max continues to roll out content ranging from the blockbuster (Zack Snyder's Justice League) to adult animation (Harley Quinn), and whatever DC is doing in theaters (a supervillain in a return to the 70s paranoid thriller? Ok, I guess.) continues to not interest me. Teen Titans Go! To the Movies remains DC's best theatrical film, and you can fight me I don't even care. So at this point, we have essentially seen the superhero genre iterate into every other genre we're familiar with. Just like the Westerns did so many decades ago.

It's important to make the same distinction I made ten years ago, which is that I'm specifically talking about superheroes, not the more nebulous "comic book adaptation." Heartstoppers is a comic book adaptation. The Walking Dead is a comic book adaptation. That's not what we're talking about here. But you don't need me to tell you that superheroes have become ubiquitous.

The question that lingers is why? Why now? Why with this intensity? And, I suppose, will it be with us forever?

Magical Thinking

In 2013, I argued that superhero stories supplanted Westerns because of a shift in perception among Americans about what the "American Dream" meant, and how it operated. I stand by this, and I think the titanic events of the last ten years bear this out. I wrote then:

"Hard work doesn't pay off like it used to. Many of the hardest working people in this country can barely keep a roof over their heads, and people who have played by the rules and "done everything right" can find themselves out of work for years and unable to repay medical or student loan debts."

Superheroes tend to have a couple of things in common: they exist in a primarily urban landscape, and they believe in magic. Just like their audiences. As a culture, we are far more likely to believe in magic today than in hard work, and not without reason.

The former president of the United States played a successful businessman on TV, and then got elected to run the country. No experience necessary...just the irrational belief that it would all work out. Magical thinking. 1 in 5 Americans believes a secret cabal of Satan-worshipping pedophiles runs the government. One in five! Even though their guy was in charge of the government! Observation tells me that over the last decade, there has been a marked rise in out-in-the-open magical thinking and a shift by millions of Americans away from evidence-based evaluation of just…facts. Of basic, discernible truths.

It's hard to avoid seeing the overlap between, say, Hydra's role in the MCU and the ways in which an increasing number of Americans think the real world actually operates. It's also interesting to think about the soul-searching at the heart of the Steve Rogers-Tony Stark dispute over the Sokovia Accords attempting to rein in the impact of superheroes and limit their destructive impacts as an allegory for corporate responsibility in an age of unparalleled corporate consolidation, reach, and impact. And The Boys seems increasingly transparent about its critique of the role of actual law enforcement in this country.

Like many of us, I feel helpless and insufficient to address so much of what is going on in the world. And the more I read, the more I realize that there are vast, interconnected systems undergirding every aspect of our daily life – systems that seem overwhelmingly formidable. There is something resonant in seeing fictionalized versions of those frameworks and something comforting in the idea that there could be superfolks who could just punch it all into oblivion. And there is something in it for the mega-corporations producing all of this content to keep us from looking behind the actual curtain. And it is at least in the realm of possibility that this inundation encourages us to believe in fantastic, impossible scenarios and frameworks, rather than examining the banal, actual, uncomfortable forces that are resulting in widening inequalities, loss of opportunities, and a general decay in the social fabric, writ large. I'm veering into the territory of whether or not violent media desensitizes individuals to actual violence, I know.

But the point is that the types of narratives we see in contemporary superhero stories, even in their increasing breadth, speak to us in our current complexity. Harley Quinn being an animated show for adults that deals with LGBTQ+ themes and situations is a great example. Can you fathom DC and Warner Media signing off on such a thing in 2013?!? The ubiquity and familiarity of these superhero characters create opportunities for storytellers and for audiences, and I don't believe we'll see anything but further proliferation of superhero stories, TV shows, and films for…a long, long while.

What's Next?

Now is where I get to prognosticate a little more freely. This is just wild speculation, but if you were to ask me what comes next, as the popularity of superheroes inevitably wanes, somewhere far down the road? Again, wild speculation, but…

I'm kidding. I have no idea.

But I will say that I think one thing we are standing on the cusp of in this moment is an explosion of Star Wars content on a scale that is hard to fathom. Is it possible that someday the already-everywhere Star Wars might become even more ubiquitous? I'd say it's a certainty. I'd like to shout out some of the predictions fellow NoaF writers made in 2012 when Disney acquired Lucasfilm.

The G opined:

"Disney might be able to do some good here: they've done a decent job with Marvel (so far), and given that the STAR WARS franchise is riding a decade-and-a-half long waterslide to the gutter, it won't take much at this point to right the ship. Mixed-metaphors aside, all it will take is putting the right people on the project. What's Lawrence Kasdan up to these days?"

As it happens, Lawrence Kasdan was about to be up to writing The Force Awakens. Along those lines, Molly wrote:

"[T]his is all about who will lead up the project, both directing (my votes go to J.J. Abrams, Jon Favreau, or Christopher Nolan) – but more importantly, the writing. "

Two out of three directors isn't bad! J.J. was also Disney's first choice, and Favreau wound up bringing us The Mandalorian. But Brad worried about certain possibilities, including one that definitely came to pass:

"I say we all just get down on our knees and pray to God Almighty that they don't stick Harrison Ford in the role of Han Solo for #7! After Indy 4 you know he'll do it if asked."

But Mike really took the crown, with this quite prescient take:

"My take is that Disney will take the brilliant world that Lucas created and treat it with care. Under the watchful eye of Disney I could see more of a Star Wars presence in its theme parks and could see it expanding the successful Cartoon Network's Clone Wars. Anyone who has been watching the Clone Wars knows that the Star Wars franchise has a lot of quality stories to be told. I feel that removing Lucas from the picture may really open the creative envelope on a world ripe with opportunity. "

Here we are ten years on, and I believe the ball that Mike predicted Disney would start rolling is finally getting up to speed. Many years ago, I remember Craig Mazin saying on the Scriptnotes podcast that when you factor in the Expanded Universe, Star Wars was the closest thing to a religion human beings had created in the last thousand years. The movies were just a sliver of the entire, immense Star Wars canon, but those novels and comics and other media never had the same blanket mass-market exposure the films did. Now Disney has essentially all the money in the world to put behind creating a brand new Star Wars universe, and they're going to use Disney+ to bring all of it directly into our homes.

What about the metaverse, you may ask? Facebook and Microsoft are dumping billions of dollars into it. Might that revolutionize the entertainment landscape again in the coming years?

Nah. People don't like to put shit on their faces. You heard it here first, folks!

Check back in 2032 for the latest.