FOLLOW THE SEA

#7 SIDE QUEST

CRAFTING THE LINKS BETWEEN POETRY & VIDEO GAMES

FEATURING:
RAE WHITE, LUKA ROSE,
& HARPER O'CONNOR

A LETTER FROM YR EDITOR

thx for picking up a copy of Follow the Sea we've been gone for a few years but are stoked to be back with this issue on video game poetics & another special prose poetry issue with my friend Janie Le vaguely about alternative southeast asian american living (ie, dissapointing our parents).

Here we have a delightful essay by Harper O'Connor on the premiere wizard of 2023, a gritty but tender musing on Ocarina of Time-era Link by Luka Rose, & a striking meditation on gender through an OG Animal Crossing NPC. I also threw in one of my own essays & a comic for funsies.

in the spirit of this issue, all I have to say is this:

MAKE ART OF THE ART YOU LOVE BECAUSE NO ONE CAN TAKE THAT AWAY FROM YOU

love,
~J.C. Rodriguez

NOW FOR SOME THOUGHTS FROM LUKA ROSE ON OCARINA OF TIME

You game differently when the N64 doesn't belong to you. The most treasured feature at the local daycare was a sturdy, patient N64 with a stack of the sort of games you'd expect: Mario 64. Super Smash Bros. Mario Party 2, which spun the preteen kids into a rage. Yoshi's Story, with its perfect soundtrack.

The Legend of Zelda: Ocarina of Time. Because so many other kids had gotten to the console before me, all three savefiles were already full, and it was unthinkable to erase one. It didn't stop me from playing, but it shaped my experience into a spare and restrictive exploration, playing the game completely "wrong."

I don't think I ever entered any of the temples. The Forest Temple scared me off with those Moblins; I had no idea where the Water Temple was, or that it existed at all, because deep water in video games terrified me as a child. Forget going to the desert—it felt too spooky to attempt. The only one I explored was the Fire Temple, and that was sparingly. There wasn't any point to going to these completed dungeons; an unknown hero had swept through long before my Link.

My Link is an apocalpyptic survivor, not a hero. He composes little bullshit songs on his ocarina and falls into deep holes and runs away from peahats in absolute panic. (Of course, I didn't know it was called a peahat. We thought of them as nightmare pineapple-things.) I turned on the n64 to run across Hyrule Field without a goal or a destination, spamming the Sun Song to hold the Stalchildren at bay. I visited the Temple of Time often, careening between ages, but never with a goal in mind; I just liked the cutscene.

I must have logged hours of this aimless exploration. I played in similar ways through Super Mario 64 and Donkey Kong 64, but Ocarina of Time had a special, apocalyptic air to it. The entire world seemed abandoned, and Link along with it. I was having fun in a wasteland as adult Link, or meandering as some doomed prophet as child Link, talking to NPCs with the quiet unease of knowing what would happen to them.

This Link could hardly swing a sword, and the bow was a lost cause. He flailed to survive in this world he had inherited from some bolder, stronger Link. The way to Ganondorf was open, the only thing left to complete on the save file, but this Link tiptoed up to the castle, peeked at the entrance,

and ran away in fear. Whoever had come before him must have died at the final threshold, but there was no way he could take up the mantle. There were pots to break instead.

I played a lot of Ocarina of Time. I played almost none of Ocarina of Time. I was so timid that I completely inverted the game's genre into a horror-tinged slice of life, big on chicken-bothering and horse-riding. If I had known about the fishing minigame, I would've been all over that too.

Is that a real nostalgia? Do I have a claim to this game? I don't know anyone else who played in this way. Maybe it offers me the opportunity to play it properly someday, but I almost want my Link to carry on, surviving in his awkward little way forever.

Everyone in town might have turned into zombies, but someone still has to cut the grass.

A WELL ROUNDED WIZARD

AN ESSAY BY HARPER O'CONNOR

Baldur's Gate 3. Award-winning, Dungeons & Dragons-based, the RPG of the year without a doubt.

Attractive traumatized Vampires aside, one of the most popular characters (to both play and romance) is Gale Dekarios of Waterdeep, a wizard of some renown and even more self-worth. If the player romances him, we get a peek into the room of his home that means the most to him, and it is filled with books.

The man loves books. And for some of us, that's reason enough to like the guy. As players of the series know, the characters have random things they say while you travel around with your entourage. You might be stunned the first time you hear Gale pipe up with "What fools these mortals be."

What? Did we just hear... FAERUN HAS SHAKESPEARE? We know that the Sword Coast has always had its very own worldly (if a bit inept and gradiose) bard, Volothamp Geddarm. (Just Volo in this game) But where Volo loves to write about his travels and everything and everyone he encounters, Gale's quote canonically places Shakespeare, or his equivalent, sometime in the history of this world. And the implications are that anyone who is well-off and educated enough has likely read his works.

In fact, Gale makes more than one quote/quote mash-up from The Ultimate Poet. There's his little nod to A Midsummer Night's Dream above as well as these delights:

"A rough tempest will I raise." This is a combination of two quotes from The Tempest. In Act V, Scene 1, Prospero uses the phrasing"when first I raised the Tempest". He then has a soliloquy about the great works of magic he has accomplished, before finally renouncing magic altogether: "But this rough magic I here abjure ..." The Tempest begins with a shipwreck, so the reference is doubly apropos to the game.

"All the world's my stage and you're just a player in it." A slightly altered version of the famous like from As You Like It. Many people take this as evidence of Gale's incredible ego. Given how he's been isolated in many ways by his Goddess and by his own current choice, it can also be interpreted as how disconnected he feels from everyone else and how fate seems to be sweeping him along the story without the chance to direct the tide or break free of his script.

We must recall that Gale, as Mystra's Chosen and apparently gifted prodigy with magic, is close to Elminster Aumar. Elminster has been known to travel to Earth. It's entirely possible that a 1300-year old wizard read or even knew Shakespeare and might have gifted some writings to a younger wizard because he knew Gale could appreciate them. And let us be honest, anyone who loves books and reading that much is going to have several favorite quotes.

Lastly, we have another reference to excellent poetry and literature, albeit not that of the Bard. Gale, as a wizard, can cast Find Familiar. If the player chooses a raven, it will be named Quothe.

This is a direct reference to one of the most
famous of poems, Edgar Allen Poe's "The Raven".
One could also infer that most wizards who
learn the spell and choose that familiar will
have been well-read enough in poetry to
understand the reference.

All this minor character analysis to show that
a fan favorite is not only intelligent, but
reads more than his spellbooks and magical
research texts.

With Gale's verbosity and eloquence, it's not
hard to imagine the "happily ever after"
romance of his good ending to include
snuggling with a loved one on those nights
with a book, a glass of wine, and a crackling
fireplace, or reciting poetry until you blush.

COPYCAT

☞ by Rae White, for Blanca

Blanca for feminine, for white.
Blank for face, all blanch
and soft alabaster, bar
the stubble of my voice.
Blank for my braininess,
branded foolish and suspicious
like all Blancas before me.

In dim lit hallway of fruit tree
grove, you confuse me for family,
for villager, for friend. When turned
clockwise to face you, I'm nothing
but the shocking white and haunt
of canvas, of misplaced clouds,
of nobody

special. So please
create my newest face
by solid moonlight: fashion
my mouth with pencils, my eyes
mascara, cheeks crayon, eyebrows
and teeth with mud and bad
words. If you don't draw
my face, how can I look
just like you? If you don't
face me, how can you
see me? So

cover my features with yours
as moon peaks and midnight
drones loud in the vacant sky.
Cover my face
with your face.
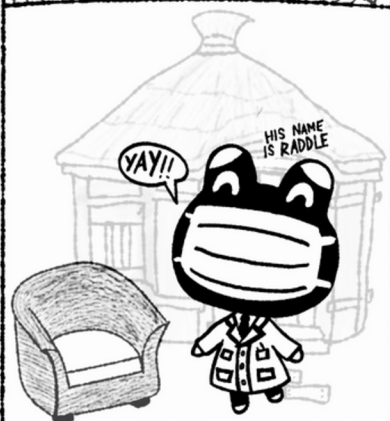Conjure my gender
into the light.
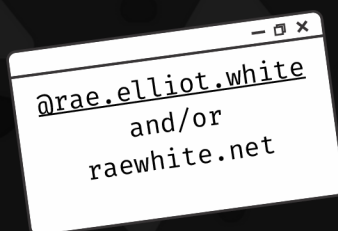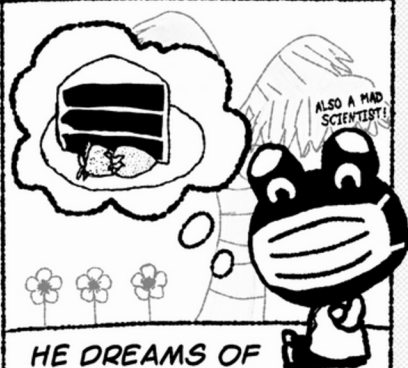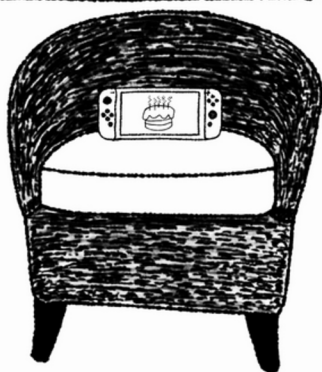
@rae.elliot.white
and/or
raewhite.net

a screenshot from
Jim Andrew's
poetry/game hybrid:
arteroids

Arteroids is like Astroids, but instead of shooting rocks, you shoot lines of poetry. I choose to do this, not as a hater of poetry, but a lover of it. I love teaching it. I love encouraging people to write it, but I hate nitpicking poems, & academia's method of doing so seems to be steeped in formal hindrance.

& so, I lovingly blow it all up. In this game, I give the poetic line an honorable & loving farewell via outer-space funeral pyre, rather than make it suffer the indignities of being raked over the coals of things like "logic" & "reality".

Arteroids, despite being a video game of mathmatical design, never forgets that a poem, at its core, is an emotional body. You play as one of 2 ship-words (which are red, also called the id entity in-game): "poetry" or "desire." The shootable & hazardous lines will correlates to the theme of one of these ship words. Sequentially, these lines can be read as complete poetry & are printed as such in Andrews' Arteroids book. In a way, the ship words act as sort of titles for each suite of poetry.

I use the word suite because both the "poetry" & "desire" campaigns seem to host (at least) two poems. The opposing poetic lines can present as either green or blue text. Green text is an obstacle to avoid, but Blue text is actively trying to kill you. They also wind up as very different poems despite being tied together by a core theme. The green poems are longer, heavy with their sound & internal logic, like a public address. While the blue poems are shorter, gentler, & more abstract. A fun slight thematic contrast between the meaning of the words' poetic composition vs. the function they serve in-game.

When you pilot "poetry," sifting through an astral sea of green hazardous materials like "conformity," "bullshit," & "arrogance" -- & while all that's going on, you have a 3/10 chance of being attacked by the villainous blue "poetry." Everything moves fast, but the lines are small, one-word, & easy enough to dodge.

But when you pilot, "desire" the language is vivid & conversational, almost pleading with its reader. The lines are longer, requiring more time to sit with & absorb the text., but they move slower. It's less about the challenge of staying alive & more about the experimentation of play. You might shoot the blue "make me what you will" while dodging the green "explode me."

Speaking of explosions, each line of hazardous blue & green poetry explodes when shot (similar to how the asteroids in uh... Asteroids shatter into smaller rocks). Each line will explode into larger letters & symbols that will spell out a new word or phrase, resulting in a secondary poetic line that acts like a ghost or a shadow.

Some of these shrapnel texts make obvious sense as secondary poetic lines, some of them require a little bit more thought to be satisfying, & some of them are downright puzzling or silly.

`for example....`

one of the <u>green</u> <u>text</u> obstacle for "Desire" reads as:

"of language"

when shot it will explode into these giant letters:

"G" "O" "D" "T" "O" "N" "G" "U" "E"

one of its blue text enemies reads as: "into another"

which explodes into:

"6" "9" "6" "9" "6"
"9" "6" "9" "6" "9"

Other than the <u>Arteroids</u> book (which is good & has also has cool reflective essays on the design & writing process), these complete texts can be in poetic form in the <u>Word for Weirdos</u> menu in the game. In said menu, the player can also become a player-poet & write their own texts to be programmed into playable suites of poems. Radio artist Helen Thorington (RIP) & visual media artist Christina McPhee also have guest entries.

Overall, I just love this game. I think it's a brilliant design. I think it's really neat that the player controls a spaceship that can act as a poem title, going to war with its own lines. Andrews invented a whole-ass poetic form with this & programmed a mode into the game where the player can write their own playable poems.

We could teach this Arteroid form like a haibun or a ghazal or a sonnet, like....

"The arteroid, first written by Jim Andrews, is a poem that uses a single word id entity title. You start by writing two stanzas, one long & declarative, the other, short & abstract. Then write a line-for-line response to each of your original two stanzas. These lines should resemble something akin to a corpse or the remains of your originals, either figuratively or literally."

Which on paper sounds like a fun poem to try to write, but on paper it's only half of the experience. The joy of this form is that it IS playable, that it IS a video game. Like, a ghost line isn't often pleasing to read in standard text poetry, rather it's the inspiring image or thought we make unseen in a final draft. Yet in Arteroids, its incredibly satisfying to see that unsaid association blow up in front of you.

These poems are enhanced by the fact that they give the reader a sense of kineticism, competition, and play. The game (which again, is mostly just a parody of Asteroids) is enhanced by having poetics to read & think about. Arteroids itself is proof enough that video games & poetry are compatible because it itself is a 20-year-old piece of art that exists as both.

The Paradox of Poetic Gaming

3. DIGITAL GAMES AS POETRY

Despite these parallels drawn between poetry and games, not all critiques were optimistic towards the combination of games and poetry in digital form. In his book *Prehistoric Digital Poetry*, Chris Funkhouser wrote that

> poetry in its traditional form may never take the shape of a video game because video games as we know them in popular form (i.e., lots of rapid fire action, to which the player physically responds) are antithetical to the purposes of a certain style of poem.
>
> (Funkhouser, 2007, p. 251)

The particular combination of deep-attentive close reading and hyper-attentive gaming afforded or, indeed, required by poetry games creates a phenomenological paradox—a receptive and interactive clash that game designers deliberately build into their designs to make players reflect on their own expectations and habits of gameplay. Aesthetically, this results in unique reading/gaming strategies, which in turn prioritize ludic-kinetic and cognitive-ergodic interaction. To arrive at a profound understanding of any literary game text, then, players have to find ways of focusing on both efficient gameplay, resulting in progress and ultimately completion, and thoughtful, analytical readings of written language in combination with other semiotic modes. It is, of course, possible that multitasking Generation N gamers can efficiently employ both strategies at the same time (a hypothesis to be corroborated by further empirical research). Nevertheless,

THIS IS WHY I DID ALL THIS

about

Follow the Sea first ran from 2011-2015. i originally started this zine as a way to document my weird mall punk/mall employee life while messing around with art & writing. with the help of some friends, i got to print a few issues of that stuff & a few about selling out & getting a job to make your hard-working immigrant parents proud.

then, during quarantine, i had the privilege of editing a poetry anthology zine for a virtual support group

now, years later, i'm a part-time social worker & a full-time grad student. so yeah, i guess i really did sell out. but i wanna make stuff just for fun again & share some weird ideas with people.

& so, Follow the Sea was reborn. more issues to follow (haha) about all sorts of things related to games, poetry, fandom, & subculture. we will always be free online & cheap on paper. thank you to all the wonderful writers who contributed to this issue & you for reading <33333333

Follow The Sea
(2011-2015, 2020, 2023-)
est. by J.C. Rodriguez

did you like this?
read more @
followthesea.net &
brownmoon.rip