

NIGHTFLYER

MT23-TT24



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EDITOR ' S NOTE

BY SOPHIA DE MEDEIROS

This issue of the Nightflyer has been a very long time in the making, and has grown into a true labour of love with every new submission it accrued over the last academic year. The immense range of OURPGSoc's creative output has always been one of the most important things about this society to me, and during my stint as president and Nightflyer editor, I really wanted to do what I could to celebrate and promote the arts within the society in all its forms. From encouraging new members to physrep in Terminus, to inviting old members to submit their designs to be printed on society merch, and supporting the sharing of ideas, craft projects, and fanfic over Discord, I have tried my best to celebrate all the artists, crafters, and creative thinkers within this society, of which there is an ever expanding and always astonishing range.

I am immensely proud of all the work that the contributors of this issue have put into their submissions, and excited to see all those that will no doubt be included in Liana's next issue, as I've seen so many incredible things shared within the society already since I closed down submissions for this issue. While I have tried my best to gather a range of different artistic mediums in these submissions, I would also like to take a moment to acknowledge the creativity inherent in running, playing, and thinking about roleplaying games in more general terms. This issue includes three articles on running different formats of roleplaying games, something which I myself have greatly enjoyed experimenting with and thinking about with regards to Society Games, freeform oneshots, and hybrid games in particular, which I am delighted to see represented in these articles. I actually suggested Conor write the article he did, but ended up disagreeing with her approach, which I think is a great testament to the variety of angles from which any roleplaying question can be addressed, and to the value of the Nightflyer as a space for expressing those potentially contrasting ideas.

Overall, I hope that you will enjoy this little piece of OURPGSoc, and that a part of our wonderfully collaborative and creative society can stay with you through it wherever you may go.

– LOVE, SOPHIA



Pebbles
by Dahrria Kuyser

Stitch Stitch Stitch

A Terminus fic by Kaiya Collins

Stitch Stitch Stitch.

Sophia fixed the last flower to her dress. Decades of living in the underground meant all the clothes went out of style soon after the world ended. And Sophia was determined to dress differently from everyone else so they would know she was someone special, better than this dark and dreary place they all were confined to. Still better stuck in the dark with dated clothing, than dead up above. Anyways, she knew her classmates would love what she created for herself.

Stitch Stitch Stitch.

It's Sophia's first day of work and she's repairing an old pair of pants. It's different from making clothes for herself, but also not really different at all. It's still mostly sewing and doing other crafts. It is, however, incredibly standardized. She'll have to find a way to let people make things more personal, though it will probably mean more work for her. Maybe she can do it for some kind of trade.

Either way, something to think about later. Today Sophia needs to focus on learning the ins and outs of her new job, and tonight she'll go celebrate with Adela. She may have disappointed her mom with her choice of job, but Sophia knows she's chosen something she'll be happy to do for the rest of her life, or at least won't drive her crazy like logistics would have, and that's something to celebrate.

Stitch Stitch Stitch.

Sophia is getting married in an hour and somehow her veil has a rip. But it's fine, she knows how to fix it and the act of sewing is calming.

Sophia doesn't think anyone in her life expected her to ever get married, let alone to a kind and easy-going farmer. Why someone like that would want someone as sharp and unpredictable as Sophia confused everyone, even Sophia herself. She's happy though in knowing she loves him and he loves her too. She can't wait to spend her life with him. A stable anchor for her chaos to return to.

Stitch Stitch Stitch.

Sophia is finishing a baby blanket for her yet to be born son, Elias. It's made of scraps she's saved from work and pieces of her own most special garments, because what could be more special than the birth of her child. She places love into every seam and cries a little as she makes it.

She's not sure she has it in her to be a good mom. She never mellowed out as she got older, unlike Adela and the other friends their age. Sophia feels so much fear to be in charge of the life of another, but at the same time she's so excited to usher another person into this world. She always loved creating things and what greater act of creation is there compared to creating new life. She can only hope Elias will turn out ok.

Stitch Stitch Stitch.

It's hard to sew with a toddler on her lap, but Sophia can no longer rotinate watching Elias with his dad, because his dad is gone. Not that she can think about it much right now or else she will cry, and she doesn't want to cry in front of Elias. She has to stay strong for him.

Sophia can't help but notice everyone else in the workshop looking at her. They think she did it, because of course they do. Not that it's any of their business. They can all believe what they like, won't change the fact that Sophia didn't murder her husband.

Their fear, however, could be useful. Another way for Sophia to protect her son now that she is alone. She's not stupid and is fully aware of the deceit and corruption that is so common in the underground. It's a dangerous place and fear is a useful tool.

Stitch Stitch Stitch.

Sophia is sewing together a rose trinket for Old Archie. They've been together for some time now, so she wants to give him something special.

It's been so long since Sophia last felt these kinds of emotions. Not that she or Archie are willing to put a name to what they have. They both know what it's like to be abandoned.



Not that Archie knows that Sophia's husband abandoned her, and it's not like Archie has elaborated any further on what happened to him and his daughter beyond the fact that she doesn't talk to him anymore.

Either way, abandonment like that makes it hard to want to claim relationships, out of fear of being abandoned again. Better to not let this relationship become anything serious. Still, it is nice to have someone to spend time with and feel these sorts of feelings for.

Stitch Stitch Stitch.

Sophia accidentally pricks her finger on her needle. It's hard to focus on what she is doing while she is seething with rage, but she needs to make more trinkets. Trinkets are how she can get more information from others and information is how she can destroy Old Archie.

Sophia grabs a tissue to wipe the blood from her finger and the tears from her eyes. Better to not stain any of the new trinkets.

Archibald will pay for the pain he has caused Sophia and for underestimating her.

Stitch Stitch Stitch.

Sophia completes a second purple butterfly trinket, or rather a moth, nearly identical to the first one she gave Alexis. This one is for Constance. A reminder of their time working together to take down Archie and a reminder of what Sophia is capable of.



Sophia is getting ready to leave Principality. It's the first time she has ever left Elias, and making this trinket is one of the last things she needs to do before she goes. The new secretaries will have a lot of power to shape the lives of everyone in Principality, including the lives of Sophia's children and new grandchildren, so it's good to make sure Constance has a reminder that Sophia will be back and if anything happens to her loved ones; well, better to not let that happen.

Sophia is terrified. It's hard to trust that everyone will be alright without her there to make sure, but Sophia is old, and she wants to see the world she heard so much about from her grandparents. Plus, she knows she needs the time alone with Archie. They need a chance to figure out what their future together will be like after everything that has happened. She is terrified but excited. The future is not what she ever thought it would be, but it looks like a good future.

Stitch Stitch Stitch.

Sophia is starting the last blanket she needs to make. One for each of her many grandchildren, pieced together with fabric she has acquired from all over the world. That way her grandchildren can have a taste of what's waiting out there when they grow up and can travel for themselves.

They are presents for the yearly celebration of the day everyone saw the sun. A day Sophia never misses, because no matter where her travels take her, she will always come back home, and she will always celebrate that wonderful day.

Of course, it didn't start out so wonderful. Sophia was feeling conflicted about Archie, about loving a man who would never say that he loved her too, and then the bombs started. And Archibald finally told Sophia he loves her but ran away to die. But then it turned out the threat wasn't real and so Archie had to live with the fact that he had told Sophia how he felt. So, it became one of the happiest days of Sophia's life, after Elias's birth of course. The day she and her loved ones were freed from the confines of the underground, and the day Archie told her he loved her.

Since then, things have been wonderful for Sophia. Her life is filled with adventure, no longer trapped underground, and she gets to spend it with the people she loves. Plus, her family is even bigger now since Elias adopted so many children. Sophia loves her grandchildren so much.

A life of excitement and love. It is all Sophia could ever want for herself.

Stitch Stitch Stitch.

Sophia is finishing bidding the book she promised Elias and Luna all those years ago. The story of her life. A special edition just for her children, different from the one she wrote for the archives.

Sophia knows her time is coming soon and so she wants to leave this final present for the most precious people in her life. She feels content knowing that she lived a full life, and that her children grew up to be amazing, successful people surrounded by those who love them. Sophia trusts that John, Promethea, and Achlys all know that her threats extend beyond death, and she will come back to haunt them if anything happens to her children.

But the time is fast approaching. Sophia already had to stop traveling many years ago because she simply was too old to do so any longer, and Archie died a few years back, so she's been a bit lonely. She'll miss everyone in whatever comes next, and she hopes it reunites her with Archibald. Maybe she can even punch Elias's dad in the face for abandoning them.

Either way, Sophia has had a good life, and she can die with no regrets.

How to run a freeform oneshot

A step-by-step guide by Oli Jones

Freeform oneshots (or just “oneshots”, as they are often known within OURPGSOC) are parlour LARP style games in a single evening: like an uptime of a society game, but with none of the wikis or turnsheets or anything else attached. They can be light, low consequence fun; they can be absurd in the way only something done in one night can be; and they can enable amazing and experimental roleplaying.

You do not need any experience to run a freeform oneshot. If you’ve ever played a oneshot, or a session of a society game, you’re ready to be a GM. People often tell me they don’t feel ready, they don’t have good ideas, they don’t know how to plan their oneshot. My hope is that this step by step guide will demystify the process and talk you through the steps of planning.

Usually, planning a three hour oneshot takes me one to three meetings with my co-GM, with the upper end only being hit if we’re pre-writing a lot of player characters or something like that. I like to work on a Google document, with a bullet point for each item in the list below.

1) The Hook

Once you want to run a oneshot, you need something to get you started. Don’t worry about a whole pitch at this stage. You just need a core idea. For me, the hook is usually at most a sentence. I feel like hooks come in two flavours: setting and mechanical.

A setting hook usually tells us who the characters are and where the oneshot will take place. Such hooks are immediately vivid and will bring character to mind right away. I think such hooks are good for getting ideas flowing on both the GM and the player side. For an example we’ll come back to, “You are all aliens trading earth junk to sell to extra-terrestrial tourists”.

Some people run oneshots with a specific mechanic in mind. This could be trialling a system for a future society game, or making use of the one-off nature of oneshots to try a mechanic too complicated to sustain over a full game. Mechanical oneshots often take on a more experimental flavour.

Whatever your hook, it's a starting point for generating ideas - and something to come back to if you need to cut your ideas back. Oneshots need to be focussed, always be ready to axe things that aren't contributing to the core vision!

2) A Co-GM

Especially if you're new to GMing this kind of game, I highly recommend finding a co-GM to run the oneshot with you! Two GMs means twice as many ideas, which is a good enough reason on its own. I also find GMing in a team forces us to get our ideas organised, because we need to write them down to be on the same page. That's not to mention that designing a oneshot is a fun way to get to know and spend time with people in the society.

3) What do the players do?

The most important thing to decide is what the players will be doing, minute to minute, for the three hours they'll be playing your game. Think about this question early, and don't start designing the oneshot in depth until you know the answer.

The answer might be a short list of things rather than just one, but usually a few good ideas are easier to design around than many small ones. If your oneshot is going to work for more than 6 or 7 people, it should be something the players can do without direct GM involvement, because in larger oneshots players can't expect direct GM attention most of the time. Ideally, what the players are doing should necessitate them talking to each other, because discussion will be the core mode of expression during the game.

Once you have an answer to this question, build everything else in the oneshot in service of it. The story, NPCs and mechanics should all be there to make the core activity as engaging as possible. At this early stage the answer

can feel barebones and I often worry “can this idea really sustain 15 people for three hours?”. That’s normal – from here your job is to design the oneshot so that the answer is “yes”.

Going back to our alien tourist-tat seller idea, I think the main thing the characters are doing is “trying to upsell human junk, that they don’t understand, to each other”. My first thought was they were selling to tourists, but that won’t work because the tourists would be NPCs rather than other players.

4) Mechanics and Plot

Mechanics and plot may feel like starkly different parts of planning, but in view of the previous section they’re both doing the same job – facilitating the core activity. They’re also linked closely: how the story is told is a mechanic, and a oneshot where NPCs give updates to people who speak to them will have a different feel to one with time freezes and GM description.

Plot should be designed to add stakes and develop the situation so the oneshot doesn’t become monotonous. When plotting for a three hour oneshot, I think of a three act structure, with plot beats at 8pm, 9pm and 10pm, if your oneshot is running from 7-10pm (of course, like most things in this article, this is a guideline, and can vary!).

The first hour should give the players time to find their feet, and get to know the characters, including their own character! Then, usually around 8pm, I like to have an unexpected twist, to give the players something to react to and talk about. At 9pm, I want to raise the stakes, and set up for the ending. At this point I want it to be clear to the players what the ending will be, or maybe that it will be one of two or three clear options. This gives them something to strive for, and allows them to wrap up their personal plot in a satisfying way.

The key thing is to tie the plot back into whatever the players are doing. For our clueless aliens, I can imagine the first development simply being the arrival of more items: once they’ve got to know each other’s (and their own!) tastes, the negotiations for the new salvage will be more fierce. I worry after two hours the original pitch could be running thin, so to add stakes maybe I’d

have a time freeze and announce the hull of the space station has been breached, and they need to evacuate – but there’s only room to bring 10 items in the escape pod! Now we can really see how invested players are in how they argue for their favourite trinket.

Mechanics should serve the activity even more so. A oneshot doesn’t need much in the way of mechanics to function, and it’s easy to overcomplicate things. Simple systems can be useful, however, to give the players something tangible to do beyond just talking. For example, a vote is one of the simplest mechanics I can think of, but it creates a focal point for discussion and allows everyone to be involved.

In the running example, I think having something physical to trade and brandish would help people get into the central activity of flogging junk. Maybe we could invite each player to bring three mundane items with them, and slowly distribute them as “new finds” during the evening. I think we need something to drive players towards having different tastes in items, as well – perhaps each player gets a card with a secret goal like “your stall needs the height of earth fashion,” or “find an item for your lover”.

5) Characters

Oneshot character design can be a tricky balance. I think it’s best for either you or the players to prepare something in advance: it can be hard to conjure up a character on the spot and you want players to be spending the oneshot engaging with the core, not worrying about their character. It’s also nice if there’s some way each character is unique.

One good way to get players started, if it makes sense for your oneshot, could be to have different roles. Not only will this allow players to find a home in the identity of their role, but maybe give them direction on how to engage. Pre-established secrets and relationships are another staple, if you want immediate relationships to get characters to bounce off each other. You can also ask players more freeform questions about their character or their backstory. If you do this, ask one good question and make sure the answer is (at least thematically) relevant during play. Like the rest of your mechanics, character creation should be in service to what the players are doing during

uptime; players will be frustrated if they can't express the concept you gave them, or got them to think of.

You need to decide which parts of the characters will be prewritten – you could leave it all up to the players, you could prewrite some secrets or have them choose from prewritten roles, or you could prewrite the entire characters. Prewritten aspects of characters can be set up to interact in sophisticated ways (sometimes without the players knowing ahead of time) and be made tonally consistent. You also get to ensure they'll be relevant during the game. On the other hand, prewriting is a lot of work, and some oneshots will have players bursting with character ideas – prewriting can be stifling. If you're unsure, I'd suggest prewriting one aspect of the characters that you know will be relevant, but leaving it mostly up to the players.

6) A CAT Policy

The Content and Themes (CAT) policy is on the OURPGSoc website. After you've done most of your planning, you should read through it point by point with your co-GM. Make sure you aren't including any forbidden Appendix A themes. Think carefully about the Appendix B themes; often people stray close to them without realising. You should flag any you plan to include in your pitch. Appendix C themes can come up spontaneously, but it can still be worth declaring any which will be a theme.

Appendix B themes being involved in your oneshot is not a problem, and you shouldn't feel bad including them. They can be interesting to explore, so long as it's done sensitively, and that's why they're not on the forbidden list. It's crucial that everyone playing with them knows what they're getting into and consents, however, which is why this step is important. Don't include them as an afterthought though: if you included an appendix B theme without thinking about it and it's not important to your vision, maybe it's better to cut it.

7) Logistics

There are a few more things to you do so your oneshot can run.

Set a date, with the ONESO (oneshot organiser) and your co-GM. If you want to run the oneshot in person, you need to book a room – the ONESO can probably help with this, but make sure you give them some notice. Their email is listed on the OURPGSoc website.

If you're running online, you'll need to build a Discord server to hold the game. This is worth giving some thought, as the number of channels players have access to and how full they are will dramatically change how the oneshot feels. I recommend giving each player access to at least one channel intended for smaller conversations (with 3 to 5 people at most), as the main channels can become very hectic.

You should make a google form so people can express interest. At minimum, I recommend collecting names and email addresses so you can send updates, and giving players a space to express themes they'd rather avoid during the game. Beyond that, it's up to you. Do you need to know anything about the characters? If you're prewriting characters, do you want to collect preferences on what kind of characters the players would like?

At this stage you should also think about your maximum and minimum player count. If you're envisioning a tangled web of social connections, you might want at least 10 players. How many players can you handle? I think more than 30 players for two GMs is a struggle no matter what, but the more GM interaction you want, the lower this number should be.

Make sure the president knows about your oneshot so they can send your pitch and sign up form out over the mailing list, and you're good to go!

I think the oneshot format has huge potential. It's allowed me to run some of my favourite games I've GM'd. I hope the guidelines in this article inspire people to run more oneshots – the society has been short of them recently! I look forward to hearing what you come up with. Over time, new GMs will develop their own playbook subverting mine as presented here; the format is very flexible, and I still have a lot to learn. Oneshot GMing takes some work, but in my experience the scope is small enough that it's manageable, and seeing people enjoy your game is immensely rewarding. Good luck!

STRINGS LOGO CROSS-STITCH

BY LIANA WARREN



LOGO DESIGNED BY DOM SUNTRAPAK



MATT EMULSION
BY HARMANN
BANSAL

Let's write down how to run a Society Game

An essay by Conor Wild

The Society Game has existed in its current form since 2009, although its history stretches back to 1993. While the OURPGSoc website helpfully defines what a Society Game is, it is remarkably difficult to figure out how to design and run one. I will propose in this article the case for the formalization of this knowledge.

The design and running of roleplaying games is typically a craft learned by imitation and experience. Despite an increasing body of study and theory, not least demonstrated by other articles in this edition of the Nightflyer, it is nonetheless still typical that the most formal understanding a Society Game GM will have of their craft is the aphorisms and principles repeated within the community such as “player choice” or “yes and”.

If this is true of learning to run roleplaying games in general, it is doubly so for LARPs, and triply so for the Society Game. Quite outside the scope of broadly applicable best practices for LARP design, the format of the Society Game poses its own unique problems for game design and running. Like any roleplaying game, some insight into these can be gleaned from playing the game, but most knowledge of them is transmitted vocationally: CAMPOs will bring new

blood into their teams, who will learn by working with more experienced GMs, and who will then go on to share that knowledge with the next generation.

The consequence of this is that, for most Society Games, the team may be led by a GM with perhaps two or three games' worth of experience, and otherwise will typically have members with between zero and two games of experience. Many of these games will overlap, so the typical Society Game will be run on perhaps five or six games of experience. One must then ask the question: is there anything about running a Society Game that one cannot answer from the experience accumulated over the last five games?

The answer is most definitely yes. There are countless problems specific to the Society Game that have not occurred recently, but I will limit the demonstrative examples to a few:

1. Hard money economy: The last Society Game with a hard money economy was UMBA, and I am the last GM from that game still active in the society.
2. High fatality rate: The last Society Game with a high fatality rate was Princess, and no GMs from this game have been active in the Society for several years.

3. Public turnsheets: The last Society Game to have weekly, publicly accessible turnsheets was Work in Progress, and Andrew and I are the last GMs from that game still regularly active in the society.

Beyond these specific examples, there is an argument to be made that five games is not enough experience for Society Game GMs to understand the design space they are working within, and how best to realize their games with it. How does a Society Game change when you dramatically increase or decrease the GM team, for example, or the number of quirks available? Most GM teams will simply not have the experience to really say what these choices entail for their game and might not find it easy to contact alumni who may have experience with these designs.

It is an oft repeated maxim that those who do not know history are doomed to repeat it. I am confident that any Society Game GM can remember long debates over how best to handle design and game running choices. I am also confident that they can remember when such conversations were cut short by a few experienced words. To use a recent example, perhaps the Terminus GM team would have come to the conclusion after debate that a rumour quirk might introduce a higher workload than they were happy with, but such a conversation never needed to

happen because they were advised exactly this by the White Racoon GM team who had tried it. When considering the countless quirk designs that have been tried over the history of the Society Game, we have to ask ourselves if we are repeating the same conversations we have had for thirty years only to come to the same conclusions. Are we wasting time on old conversations rather than having new ones?

In summary then, under the current system of Society Game running pedagogy we find that:

1. The accumulated experience of which a Society Game is the product is limited to perhaps five or six games
2. This number is insufficient to inform GMs about the wide array of game design and running choices available to them

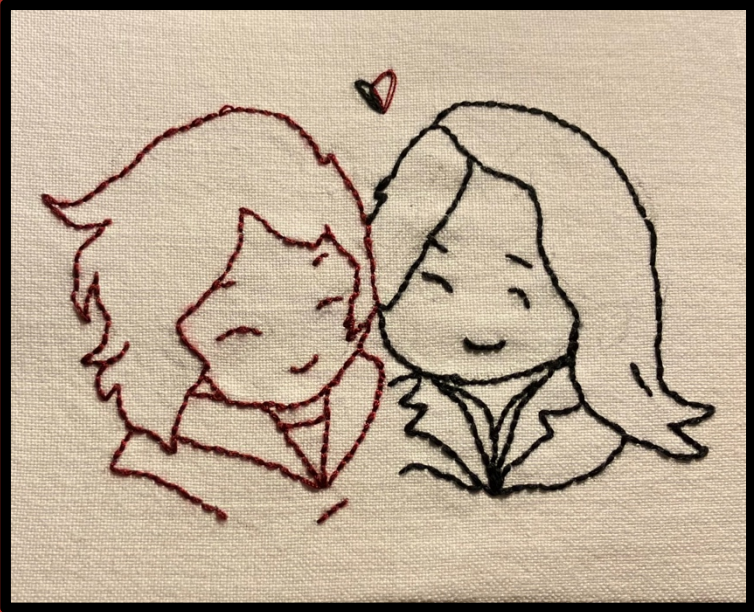
Therefore, we come to the case for the formalization of Society Game running knowledge: if we want to enable future Society Game GMs to make the games that they want to run, we should probably give them a guide. We should distil the vast body of game running wisdom in the society, especially its alumni, into the core problems, principles and design patterns, and then we should write it down.

I believe that many things would be accomplished by the production of such a document. Firstly, and principally, we would begin to address the constant

attrition in experience that the society faces from its constantly rotating membership. Secondly, I believe that much could be learned in the process of reaching a consensus that the society could endorse on what is important about running the Society Game. Thirdly, I believe that the consolidation of this game running experience will, rather than being at all prescriptive, lead to innovation by providing common language with which to discuss the game and encouraging people to make their design choices in the context of what has come before.

I do not propose that taking an inventory of the society's accumulated experience is an easy endeavour. Doubtless such a process would take countless hours, and any proposed best practice would be the subject of fierce debate, however we are fortunate that our society is full of people who can and do donate countless hours of their time to it, who are able to come to constructive consensus.

Ultimately, as someone who will soon be leaving the society and who holds great love for the craft of running Society Games, I believe there is more we can do to help the next generation run the games they want to and, when they leave the society as well, bring new innovations to the wider LARP community.



Amnity and Thrl embroidery by Liana Warren
lineart by Konstantine Borbély-Soproni

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Conviction Logo Embroidery by Liana Warren



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Theodore Thistlewaite

by Harmann Bansal

Konstantine Borbély-Soproni

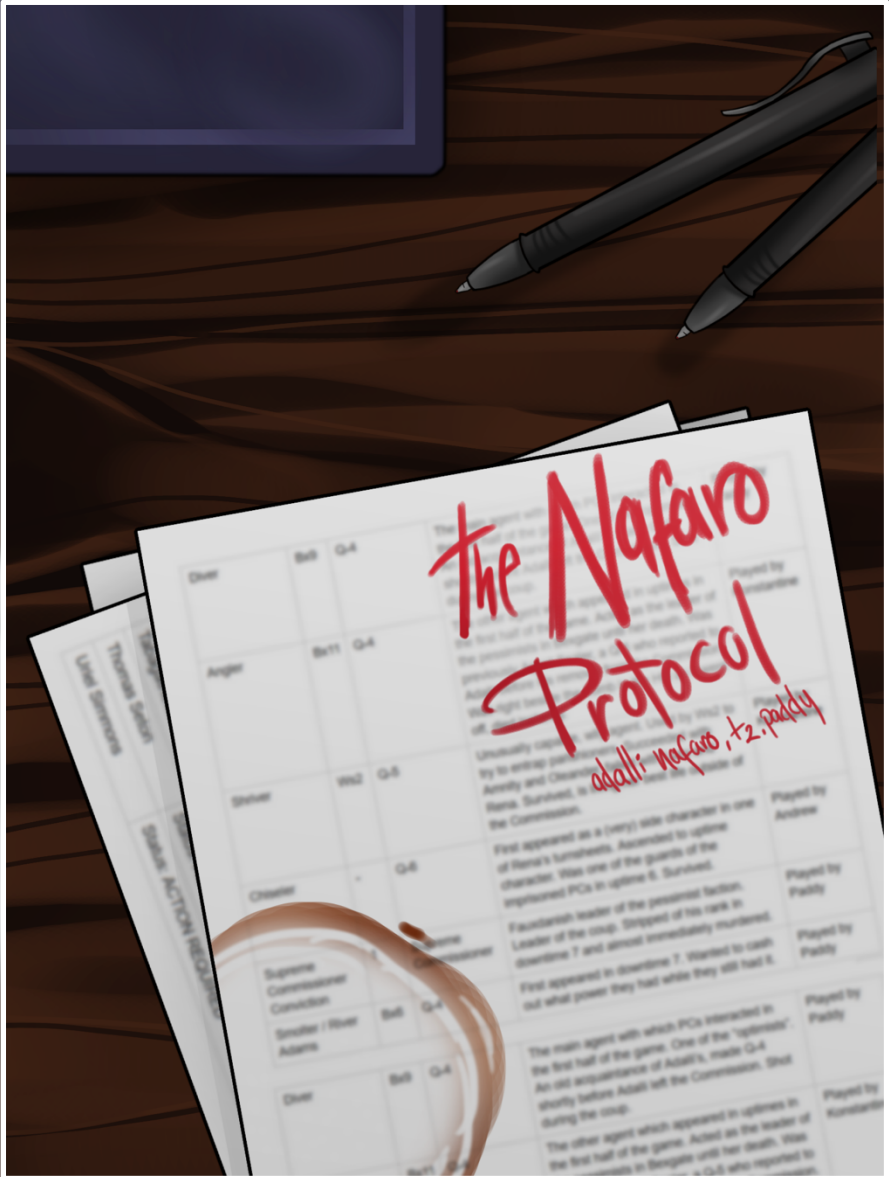
BUS ROUTE TO HELL



TRAVEL BY BUS TODAY!

COURTESY OF THEODORE THISTLETHWAITE. SON OF THEODORE THISTLETHWAITE. SON OF THORSTEN. SON OF THORIN

12 / ANDREW





HALF-LIGHT HALF-LIGHT

WREN KALEN - T3 - LUKE

KONSTANTINE BORBÉLY-SOPRONI



Konstantine Borbély-Soproni

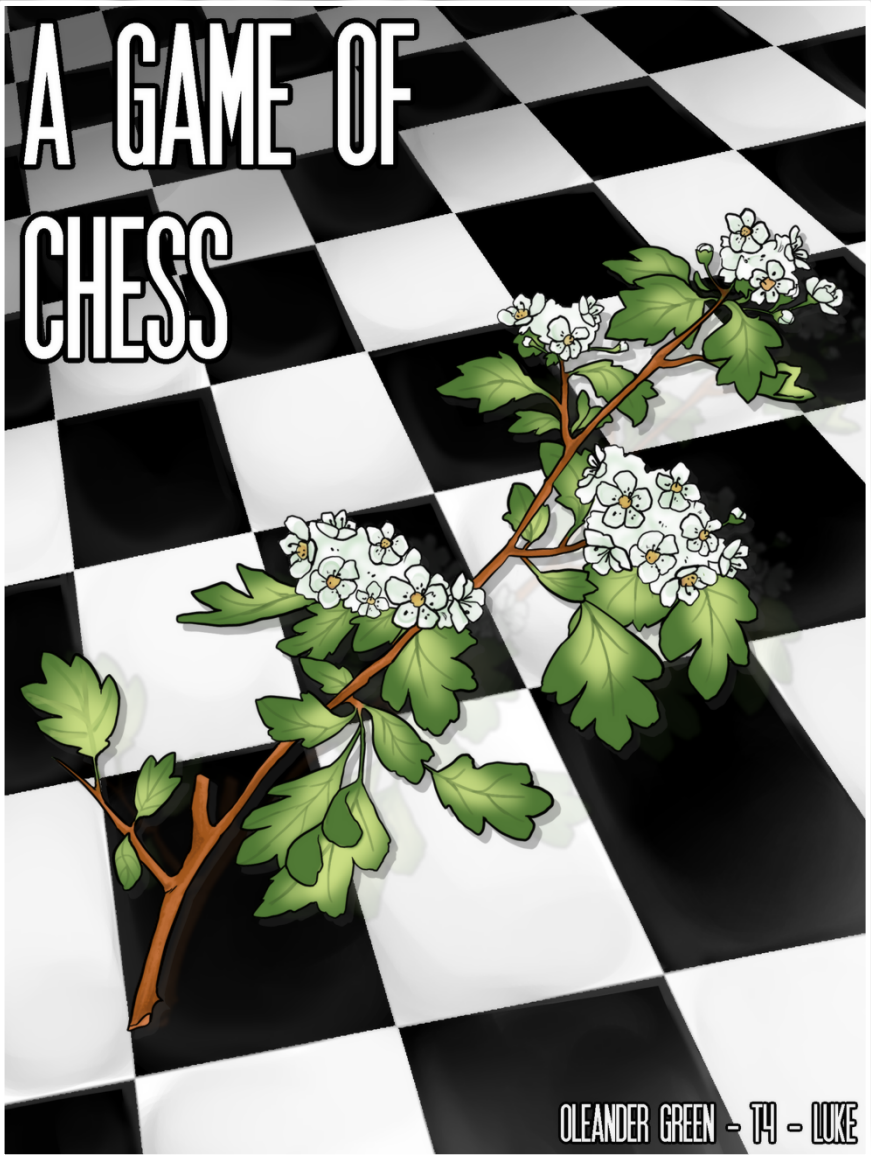
Konstantine Borbély-Soproni



a box of birds
teresa - T4 - konstantine

Konstantine Borbély-Soproni

A GAME OF CHESS



OLEANDER GREEN - T4 - LUKE

Konstantine Borbély-Soproni



Shrines

by Konstantine Borbély-Soproni



Shrines
Tabby Thackery
T4
Andrew



TELL-TALE HEART

SINCERITY WOODWARD - T4 - KONSTANTINE



KONSTANTINE BORBÉLY-SOPRONI

MEET YOUR MAKER

Seth MarLowe-T5-Andrew





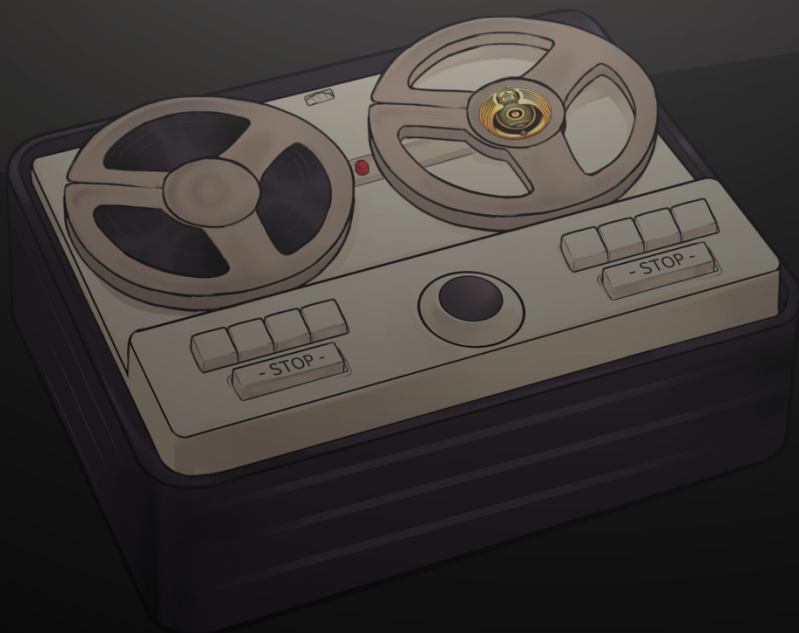
KONSTANTINE BORBÉLY-SOPRONI

justice

35

justice

abius marshal - t6 - konstantine



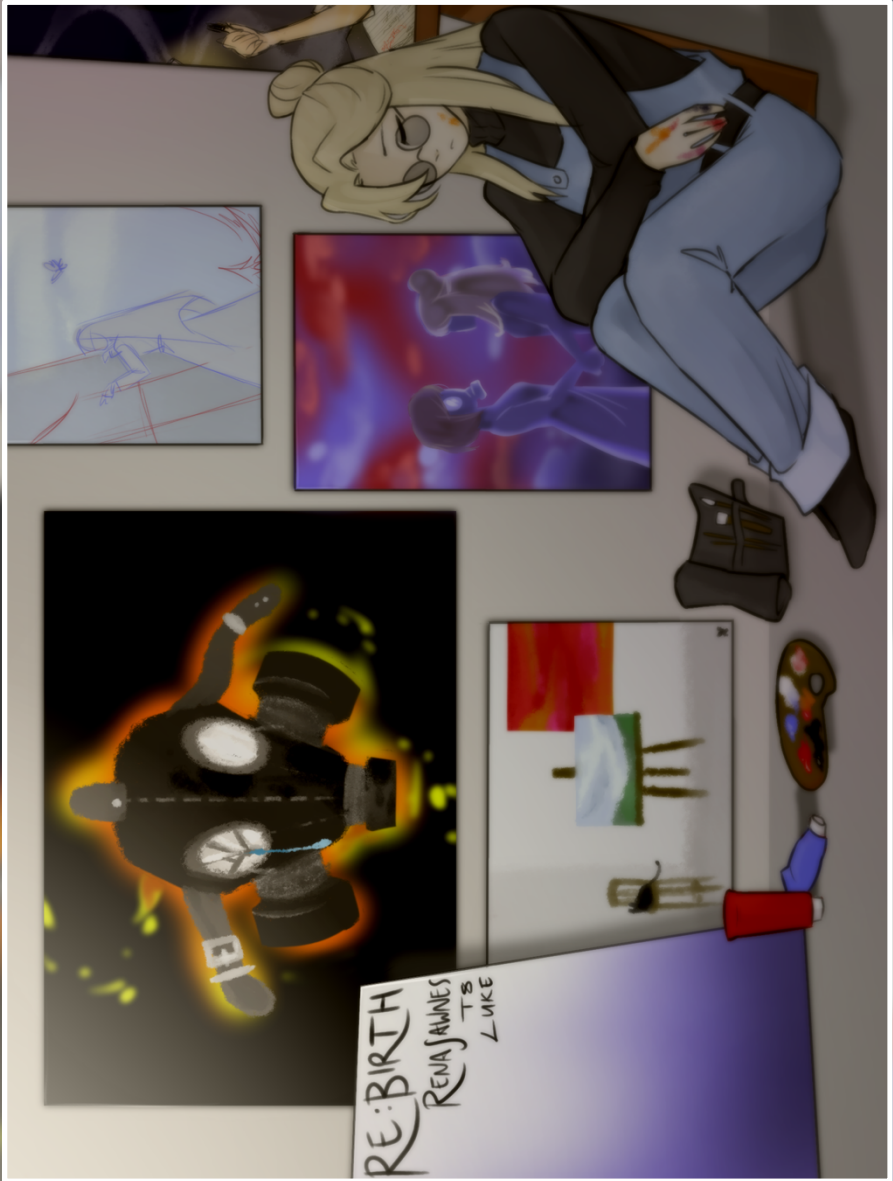
konstantine borbély-soproni

where the butterflies go
(full circle)

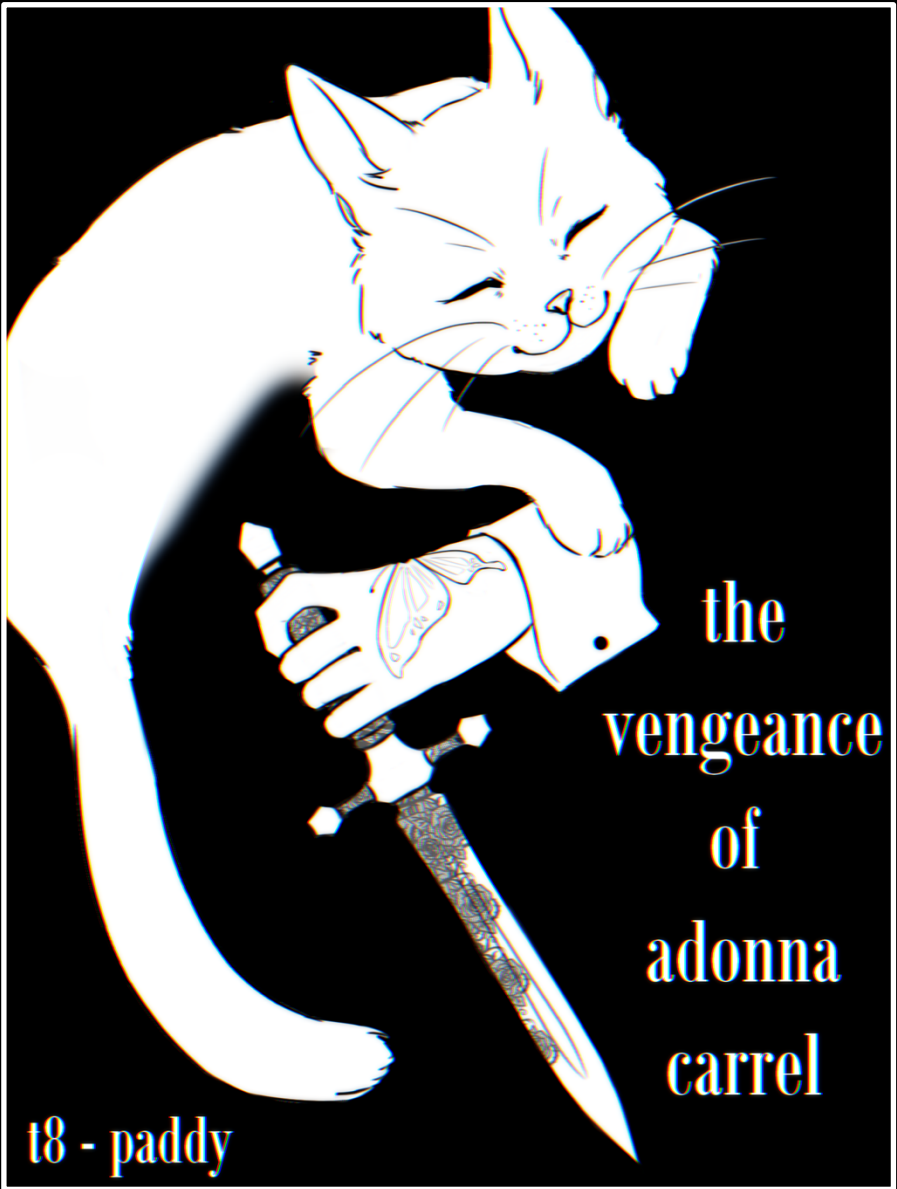


amnesty thorne - t7 - luke

konstantine borbély-soproni



konstantine borbély-soproni



the
vengeance
of
adonna
carrel

t8 - paddy

Pointing in the Right Direction: *Terminus*-Style Memes

An essay by Tenaya Fottrell¹

When asked just how deep the lore of *Terminus* goes, one of the easiest examples to provide is the flourishing meme culture that has evolved to surround the Society Game. The *Terminus*-style meme is a unique phenomenon, with roots both in and out of character that have allowed it to thrive and take on a high degree of sociocultural significance among *Terminus* players (henceforth ‘Termites’) in every sense. When one critically examines these memes through a linguistic anthropological lens,² it becomes clear that as the mode of humour has evolved and continues to do so, it is able to bridge uptime, downtime, and time out while maintaining minimal blurring of the IC/OC divide.

Set in the community of the Underground, the game of *Terminus* takes its name from the central station of the network of trains that once served as a simple transportation system for the people of Principality. In the century since its denizens first fled underground to escape devastation of the surface world, colloquially referred to as the Overground, the Underground has since become an enclosed space which provides for all the needs of its population.³ While *Terminus* takes place in an alternate world, explicitly lacking specific cultural figures, media, and historical events from the world of its players, the base principles of the world remain the same. The apparent collapse of civilization occurred IC in the year 2040, meaning that the technology and cultural landscape of the Underground bears a strong resemblance to that of the OC present-day.⁴ This combination of functionally equivalent pop cultural touchstones and roughly equivalent technology creates a digital ecosystem ripe

¹ Please note this essay has been edited down for publication. To read the full original, please contact the author.

² Please be advised that I, Author Tenaya Fottrell, have much love of but little formal experience in linguistic anthropology. This paper is a highly informal and aggressively semi-academic ethnography and should be read with this in mind. It is being written with the half-remembered knowledge from one (1) introductory cultural anthropology class, one (1) linguistic anthropology class, and zero (0) actual linguistics classes. While this essay contains footnoted citations, I am only citing player- and GM-generated content because it is doable to track down sources in the *Terminus* Wiki and Discord and less so to find the origins of every other linguistic anthropological principle I will refer to. I accept full responsibility for any resulting inaccuracies.

³ *Terminus* GM Team, 2023. “The People of *Terminus*,” *Terminus Wiki*.

<https://terminus.oxfordrpg.com/people>.

⁴ *Terminus* GM Team, “Underground Technology.” 8 November 2023. *Terminus* Discord server, #setting-q-and-a.

for exploration in one of the most beloved and under-researched areas of contemporary linguistic anthropology: meme culture.

Despite the fact that Underground residents lack personal electronic communication devices, access to shared computers for personal use is widespread, and thus memes thrive in the Underground. The earliest documented Terminus-style meme is Courier Tilly Obfusc's *Courier*.⁵



Figure 1 - Courier Tilly Obfusc "Courier"

Given that the Underground has experienced enough generational turnover that none of those living there during the time of the game had spent any time on the Overground, and that the community as a whole has no interaction with anyone beyond their own, it is reasonable to assume that internal forces have had time to cause semantic and cultural shift such that minimalist memes like *Courier* convey just as much information and humour more recognizable ones.

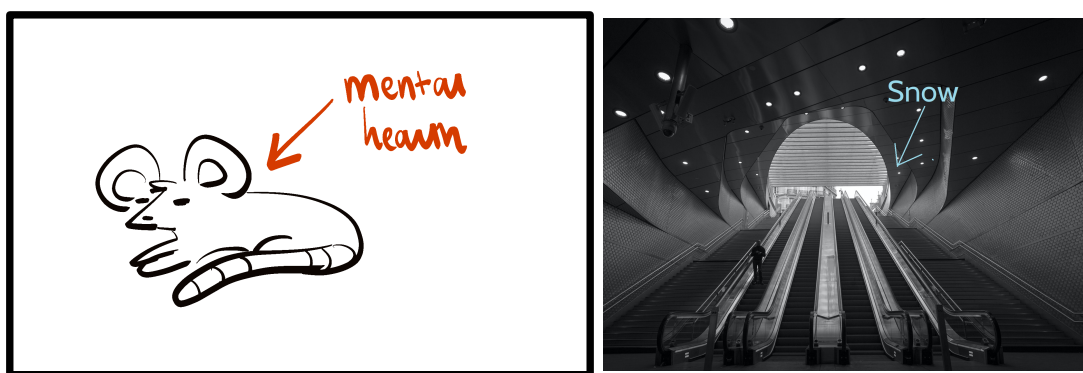
The importance of *Courier* as an example cannot be overstated—its profound simplicity clearly lays out the core components of Terminus-style memes and it is free of any influence of emergent trends in meme culture because it was the very first. *Courier* is spartan, but therein lies its genius. It is made up of three base units which form the basis of every other Terminus-style meme and the genre's variants. Assessed visually, the first unit of its composition is the image—a generic, unedited photograph of a rat. The second unit is text, here the word "COURIER" in a block capital font. The third and most critical unit is the arrow, pointing from the word to the image to lay the foundation for the relationship between the two and thus the meme's meaning and humorous effect. Because *Courier* is so compositionally simple, it acts as the perfect example upon which to build a vocabulary suited to more

⁵ Courier Tilly Obfusc, *Courier*. Digitally generated meme. *Terminus* Discord server, #setting-q-and-a. 9 November 2023.

complex variations on the Terminus-style meme format. In this instance, the image of the rat is the meme’s referent, the component to which the arrowhead points. The word “COURIER” is the meme’s designatum, indicated by its position as the arrow’s origin point. At its core, the meaning within *Courier* is as simple as its visual structure: the rat is a courier. Because the meme is so minimalist, a certain amount of precise understanding relies upon the viewer’s personal understanding of the world, allowing for several valid interpretations. Figuratively, *Courier* can be taken to mean that rats share similarities to the messengers of the Underground in that they are small, speedy, and everywhere. Literally, it can mean that rats—or perhaps this specific rat—are themselves couriers, delivering disease, crop shortages, or even salvation.⁶ These distinct yet interrelated interpretations can and do coexist, perfectly demonstrating that *Terminus* meme format as a whole is versatile enough to render the meme intelligible and palatable to the majority of people who see it. Even those with no context whatsoever can find joy and humour in the idea of a rat as a courier.

This near-universal appeal would not be possible without the arrow itself, minimalist and rich with meaning. Indeed, the arrow is what best defines Terminus-style memes, both setting them apart from other IC and OC formats as well as uniting the genre. Of all extant IC memes, there is no consistency in construction save the arrow. For example, *Mental Health* is entirely hand-drawn, with every unit (image-referent, arrow, and text-designatum) being digitally sketched.⁷ By contrast, *Snow* is more of a photo-manipulated collage, featuring a stock image-referent, tool-drawn arrow, and typeface text-designatum:⁸

Figure 2 - Doctor Promethea Delphinium “Mental Health” aside the contrasting meme Courier Tilly Obfusc “Snow”



⁶ The editor would like to note that this last point aged poorly. As you were.

⁷ Doctor Promethea Delphinium, *Mental Health*. Digitally generated meme. *Terminus* Discord server, #shitposting. 9 November 2023.

⁸ Courier Tilly Obfusc, *Snow*. Digitally generated meme. *Terminus* Discord server, #terminus-noticeboard. 10 November 2023.

With such variation in the form and technique used to generate Terminus-style memes, the arrow by default becomes the unifying feature. Much of what makes Terminus-style memes funny is the apparent lack of connection between referent and designatum, and the arrow holds humour because it indicates that there is in fact a link between the seemingly-unrelated elements. At times, this semantic abstraction can reach a truly absurdist degree, with some jokes intelligible only when the viewer has the necessary understanding of private IC interaction, OC player reactions, color theory, media tropes, and shipping discourse, as is the case in *Things I Hear at the Water Cooler*, a particularly complex meme:⁹



Figure 3 - Maisie Manning "Things I Hear at the Water Cooler"

Because of this, it is not unreasonable to assume that arrows hold an inherently funny denotation to Underground residents who most often interact with them in the context of memes. This phenomenon is not unprecedented—one need only look to the OC social perception of the Impact and Comic Sans fonts and see that when a formatting element is most frequently associated with meme culture, it loses professional credibility and cannot be taken seriously because of the dominant context in which it appears. Thus, it follows that a similar process can and possibly has occurred with the arrow in Underground culture.

⁹ Maisie Manning, *Things I Hear at the Water Cooler*. Digitally generated meme. *Terminus* Discord server, #terminus-noticeboard. 10 November 2023.

The picture becomes more complicated, however, when one considers the other primary use of arrows within Underground life: logistics. The existence of this alternate and often tonally opposite context makes it impossible to declare that arrows are entirely humorous, for within the logistical world, they are used as a shorthand to indicate move orders. That said, the realms of logistic and meme culture are not wholly discrete, and at times, humorous and functional arrows can literally intersect, with memes serving as a means of bringing together IC and OC in-jokes. While not an IC meme itself, *War* emerged as a response to a logistical coordination issue that arose during downtime 2.¹⁰ Although this meme does not use the typical Terminus-style format, its content is so inextricably linked to the mechanics of the game that it bears inclusion, especially as it inspired the creation of *Homicide*, a more traditionally formatted meme:¹¹



Figure 4 - Andrew Kenyon-Roberts “War” aside the responsive meme Harry Smith “Homicide”

The sticky notes featured in *War* and *Homicide* are representative of the text boxes used to leave notes on the OC digital logistics map and the memes’ origin stems from an accidental appropriation of one player’s designated color

¹⁰ Andrew Kenyon-Roberts, *War*. Digitally generated meme. *Terminus* Discord server, #terminus-noticeboard. 10 November 2023.

¹¹ Harry Smith, *Homicide*. Digitally generated meme. *Terminus* Discord server, #terminus-noticeboard. 11 November 2023.

by another.¹² While not every aspect of *Terminus*' digital mechanics has a direct IC analog, the connection between text box and sticky note is easy to make, thus lending itself well to a layer of abstraction that furthers the humour of the resulting memes. Using a screenshot of the text boxes as the meme's image-referent would be too grounded in reality to make the meme funny, whereas casting the image-referent through the lens of a more removed reference allows the meme to gesture towards the absurdity of equating war and homicide with logisticians' sticky notes.

With a meme culture so expansive and flexible, it is little wonder that variants and experimentation inevitably arise to reflect the Termites' rapidly-evolving understanding of arrow-based humour. In the case of *Original Meme by Old Archie*, format evolves in a particularly interesting way, caught between adapting to the rising prominence of Terminus-style memes and refusing to abandon more traditional communication structures:¹³

Now I know this is't how this 'meme format' is supposed t
but someone has to say it. The Underground is falling apa
while the Director's Office sits around all day and doesn't
not that anyone has time for an old man like me even the
like I don't even exist I'm telling you that back in my day
no way, and also everyone was richer and the food was be
how do i close textbox



AN ORIGINAL MEME BY OLD ARCHIE - DO NOT STEAL.

Figure 5 - Old Archie "Original Meme by Old Archie"

The meme is arguably self-aware as its creator Old Archie appears to recognize the viral potential of Terminus-style meme formats and thus inserts an arrow gesturing from an unconventionally long-winded text-designatum to a seemingly unrelated image-referent of a train. However, within the text-designatum there is a confession that the meme's creator does not know what

¹² The intentionality or lack thereof of this action remains disputed.

¹³ Old Archie, *Original Meme by Old Archie*. Digitally generated meme. *Terminus* Discord server, #shitposting. 9 November 2023.

he is doing, demonstrating the barrier that technological illiteracy interposes between IC generations. In all, *Original Meme* can only be described as both semi-earnest and semi-ironic, for like all communication acts it provides insight into the attitude of its creator—with memes as with many other things, Old Archie “knows he’s doing it wrong but doesn’t care to learn how to do it right.”¹⁴ The inclusion of the arrow is the only component which qualified this particular meme for inclusion in the exploration of Terminus-style memes in the same way that it makes the larger message of the piece accessible and interesting to the younger generations of Underground residents, the creator’s target audience.

Just as young people pioneer advancements in OC internet culture, the same holds true with Terminus-style memes. When memes first began to appear that inverted the direction of the all-important arrow, the immediate conclusion accepted by Terminators OC was that IC, such a disruption of format would be considered “surreal” and “deconstructive,” relegated to the world of “kids these days.”¹⁵ The easiest way to fully understand the significance of this seemingly-minor reversal of the arrow is to use *Approaching/Table* as a case study, for the pair of memes were created as a matched set and are almost entirely identical:¹⁶



Figure 6 - Tenaya Fottrell “Approaching” aside its partner meme “Table”

The first of these memes, *Approaching*, is entirely typical and has a standard core meaning: Director Avgust Kovač—for whom the image-referent of glasses stands synecdochally—is approaching. *Table*, however, throws

¹⁴ George Seager, “Canon Meme Citations.” 2 December 2023. Discord direct message.

¹⁵ H. M. Wright, “image -> word memes.” 19 November 2023. *Terminus* Discord server, #terminus-noticeboard.

¹⁶ Tenaya Fottrell, *Approaching/Table*. Digitally generated memes. *Terminus* Discord server, #terminus-noticeboard. 24 November 2023.

everything into disarray by making the word “table” into the meme’s referent and thus rendering the picture of the glasses the designatum, thus completely altering the core meaning. Instead of indicating an equivalence as would be expected of an image-referent/text-designatum meme, *Table* uses the reversed arrow to indicate a causal relationship; Director Avgust is not table but rather zie causes table. The absurdist humour of this statement comes, as with all Terminus-style memes, from the layers of abstraction and removal that separate the form of the meme and the actual substance of the joke it makes. In this particular instance, the picture of the glasses does not necessarily represent Director Avgust himself but instead the physrep used for zir character, meaning that the abstraction of the meme appears in the text-referent “table,” which refers metonymically to a response which the Director engenders IC, in which his approach causes one to hide under a table.¹⁷ In this way, *Table* demonstrates that semantic removal manifests itself most strongly in the referent of Terminus-style memes whereas the designata are generally straightforward so as to create some amount of grounded intelligibility in the midst of surreal humour.

However, not long after *Table* introduced the first experimentalist revolution of arrow-based formatting, *Exotic Format Variation* was created precisely to push the boundaries of what could be possible within the meme genre:¹⁸

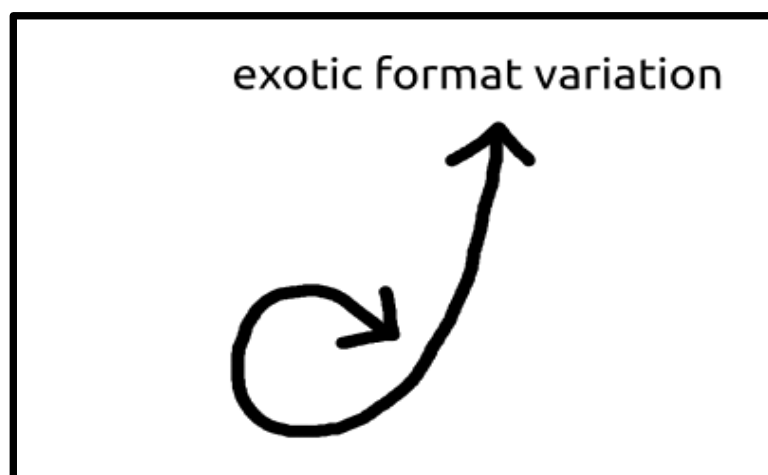


Figure 7 - Andrew Kenyon-Roberts “Exotic Format Variation”

¹⁷ It is worth noting that the eponymous “table” response arguably also occurs OC. The primary purpose of this paper, however, is not to dwell upon the subtleties of the IC/OC divide.

¹⁸ Andrew Kenyon-Roberts, *Exotic Format Variation*. Digitally generated meme. *Terminus* Discord server, #terminus-noticeboard. 26 November 2023.

Exotic Format Variation's use of a double-headed arrow completely removes the possibility of a designatum, and the fact that one of the arrow's heads points back at the body of the line further complicates its meaning, thus creating something that, through the intensity of its own self-referentiality, gestures to the OC question which inspired its creation. Shortly thereafter, a wave of memes with implied designata and referents emerged, all of which opted to actively leave out components of the classic Terminus-style format in order to actively break the fourth wall:

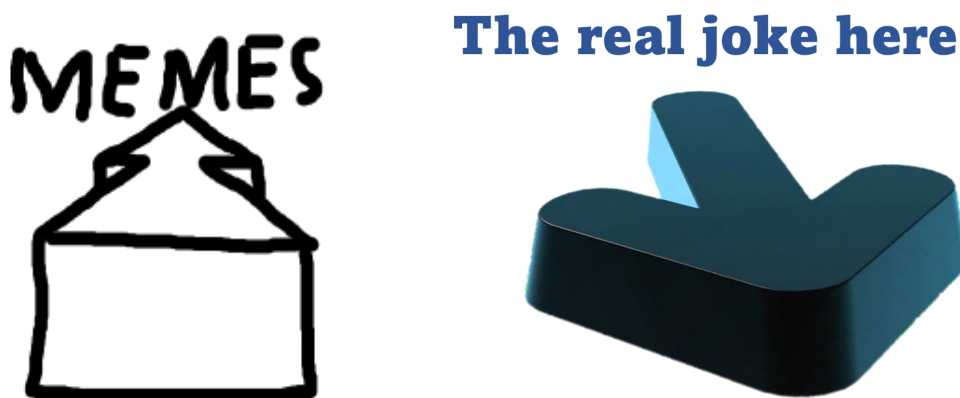


Figure 8 - Andrew Kenyon-Roberts “Memes” aside inverted meme Gareth McAuley “The Real Joke Here”

Memes,¹⁹ with its arrow drawn in perspective to point from the viewer into the meme itself, and *The Real Joke Here*,²⁰ featuring an arrow that points out at the viewer from within, actively translocate their viewers into the realm of memes, pulling down the unstated barriers that distance people from media. Because the referent, where semantic abstraction typically occurs in Terminus-style memes, is wholly implied, one can look to these viewer-centric memes as a near-pinnacle of humour within the format—or perhaps more appropriately, the lack thereof.

As much as memes like *Memes* and *The Real Joke Here* gesture towards the existence of the IC/OC divide and therein derive their humour, such examples are only the tip of the iceberg when it comes to actually crossing the line. Because of the Society Game's hybrid in person and online format, it is inevitable that the meme culture of *Terminus* would evolve to reflect this.

¹⁹ Andrew Kenyon-Roberts, *Memes*. Digitally generated meme. *Terminus* Discord server, #terminus-noticeboard. 26 November 2023.

²⁰ Gareth Daniel John McAuley, *The Real Joke Here*. Digitally generated meme. *Terminus* Discord server, #terminus-noticeboard. 26 November 2023.

One such evolution is the rise of multimedia memes, which are capable not only of moving fluidly between IC and OC spaces but also connect the physical world to the online. The first of these was created during Uptime 3 when a hand-drawn version of *Courier* appeared as part of *Centennial Celebration*:²¹



Figure 9 - Speaker Leah Dove “Centennial Celebration” with the reference to “Courier” second across on the bottom row

While *Courier* had existed as canon since its creation, its appearance in the IC physical world marked a new point in the integration of meme culture with the visible canon of *Terminus* as a whole, firmly establishing that Terminus-style memes hold a place within society that warrants their mention in visible, non-peripheral spaces. Thus far, other multimedia memes have been OC, drawing Terminus out into the broader world by means of the translational power of the arrow, used in *Escaping Containment* to move from the digital to physical



Figure 10 - Andrew Kenyon-Roberts “Escaping Containment”

²¹ Speaker Leah Dove et al., *Centennial Celebration*. Marker on paper pennant. *Terminus* Discord server, #art. 26 November 2023.

realm²² and in *Example Meme* to migrate from the confined online context of the *Terminus* Discord server onto the open web.²³

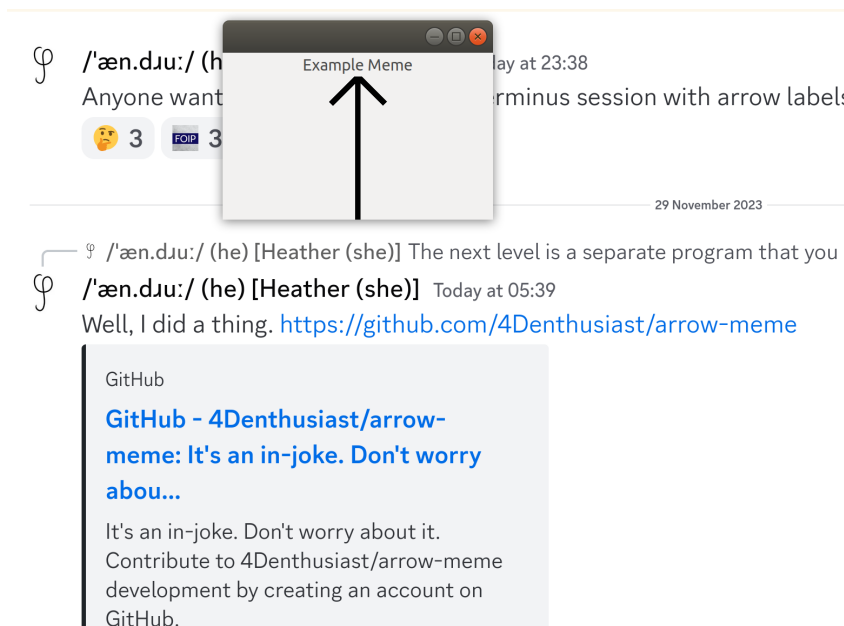


Figure 11 - Andrew Kenyon-Roberts “Example Meme”

Both *Escaping Containment* and *Example Meme* demonstrate the self-awareness of the more experimental OC Terminus-style memes, calling attention to their roots within IC digital space even as they actively cross over into new spaces.

In some cases, it is easy to point to memes and place them within the categories of canon and non-canon, but in others the distinction can be more difficult to discern; some memes sit in what may at first appear to be a grey area between IC and OC. It is at this point that it becomes critical to examine the creators of each meme, for ultimately a meme cannot be canon if the character played by its artist would not have been able to make the joke for any reason. Memes can be considered IC and canon if they make use of images not made specifically for or within the world of *Terminus*, but anything that makes too specific a cultural reference runs the risk disqualifying itself. *Least*

²² Andrew Kenyon-Roberts, *Escaping Containment*. Mixed-media ink on paper and digitally constructed meme. *Terminus* Discord server, #terminus-noticeboard. 28 November 2023.

²³ Andrew Kenyon-Roberts, *Example Meme*. Haskell Stack digitally generated meme. *Terminus* Discord server, #terminus-noticeboard. 28 November 2023.

Pyromaniac Rat Cultist could hypothetically be canon, but its image-referent is a piece of fanart from the OC Warhammer, and its creator makes clear that the joke it makes is amplified by specific knowledge of this non-canon piece of media:²⁴



*Figure 12 - Harry Smith
“Least Pyromaniac Rat Cultist”*

Because it would be impossible for a character in *Terminus* to have this information, the meme cannot be considered canonical. Still, there are a few memes for which even this test proves inconclusive—for example, *Mail* is a meme which could feasibly have been made by any resident of the Underground given its simplicity.²⁵



*Figure 13 -
Harry Wright
“Mail”*

²⁴ Harry Smith, *Least Pyromaniac Rat Cultist*. Digitally generated meme. *Terminus* Discord server, #terminus-noticeboard. 21 November 2023.

²⁵ Harry Wright, *Mail*. Digitally generated meme. *Terminus* Discord server, #shitposting. 10 November 2023.

Despite this, IC memes act in part to reveal information about the characters who made them, and as such if a meme—like *Mail*—was created as a nod to the personality of a character but not as a piece that said character would have personally found funny, it cannot be canon.

This is not to say that canon memes must be entirely free of OC influence, however. It is common that, once shared in the *Terminus* Discord server, memes are commented upon with either suggestions for alteration or direct edits made by other players. The resultant memes are wont to occupy a somewhat strange place in their status as IC-canon or non-canon and as a result must be analyzed on a case-by-case basis. *Nidus (1)* by Driver Alexis Knight contains no elements that would disqualify it from being an IC meme—its referent and designatum are both well within the character’s grasp and the joke it makes aligns with the its creator’s IC worldview and sense of humour.²⁶ Shortly after its public release, an edited version—*Nidus (2)*—arrived, sparked by an OC exchange in the Discord channel where the original was shared.²⁷

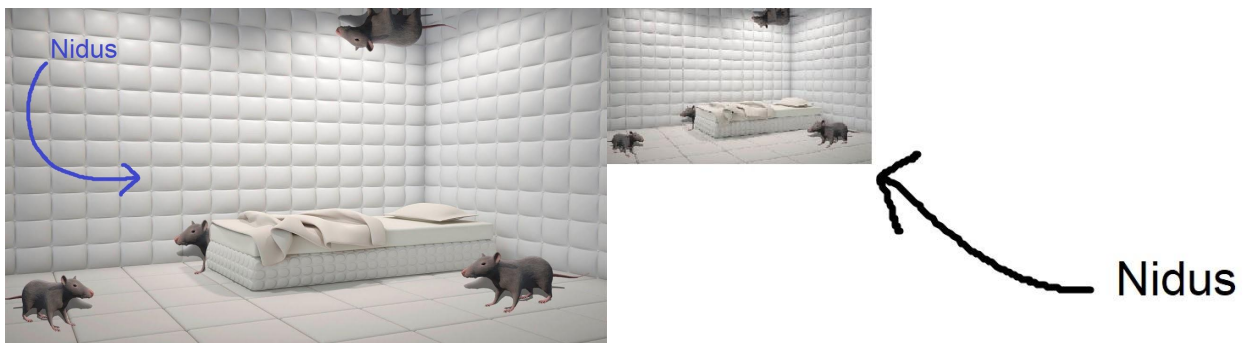


Figure 14 - Driver Alexis Knight “*Nidus (1)*” aside the responsive “*Nidus (2)*”

As the edited *Nidus* contains no change to its compositional units save size and placement, and the minimal discussion which prompted the edit would not at all be out of place as an exchange between Driver Alexis and Technician Heather—the characters of the players responsible for the OC messages—the resultant meme can maintain its place among *Terminus* canon.

Not every chain of meme alteration so neatly stabilizes itself within canon, however. More often than not, OC riffs upon memes pull them further and further from the realm of canon as more and more OC elements are

²⁶ Driver Alexis Knight, *Nidus (1)*. Digitally generated meme. *Terminus* Discord server, #terminus-noticeboard. 28 November 2023.

²⁷ Gareth Daniel John McAuley, *Nidus (2)*. Digitally generated meme. *Terminus* Discord server, #terminus-noticeboard. 28 November 2023.

introduced or clarified as their humour becomes more grounded in the concept of the meme and elaborations upon it:

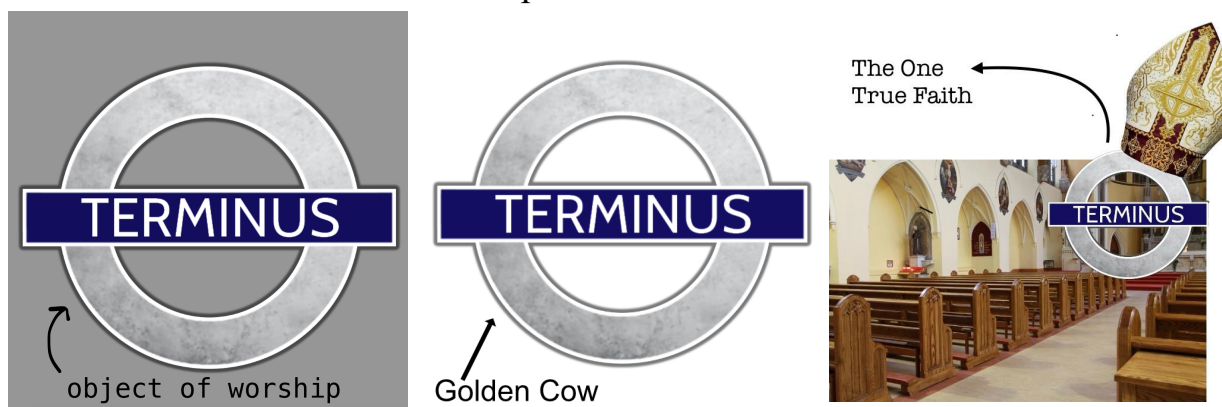


Figure 15 - A chain of memes with increasing non-canonical reference (in order) Tenaya Fottrell “Object of Worship”, H.M. Wright “Golden Cow” and Jasper Hopkins “The One True Faith

Despite the fact that it was created in partial reference to an OC conversation, *Object of Worship* technically meets all the requirements to be a canonical meme—its referent and designatum are accessible to the character of its creator and the joke it makes is one which also could have feasibly been made by Mycologist Amandine, though likely within a slightly different context.²⁸ In order to create further semantic abstraction and thus heighten the humorous effect of the meme, *Golden Cow* emerged in reference to OC discussion surrounding the original *Object of Worship*.²⁹ The *Terminus* canon-compliance of *Golden Cow* now enters a very nebulous territory—sparked by conversation surrounding *Terminus* itself as a false idol, the meme’s effectiveness relies in large part on viewer familiarity with the biblical story of the golden calf. Because *Terminus* takes place in an alternate universe that specifically does not feature Abrahamic religions,³⁰ *Golden Cow* can remain potentially canon only because its text-designatum uses the word “Cow” instead of “Calf,” as almost every translation or rendering of the OC sacred text makes clear that the false idol created in the book of Exodus was specifically made in the image of a young calf and not a mature cow. Thus, it

²⁸ Tenaya Fottrell, *Object of Worship*. Digitally generated meme. *Terminus* Discord server, #shitposting. 29 November 2023.

²⁹ H.M. Wright, *Golden Cow*. Digitally generated meme. *Terminus* Discord server, #shitposting. 29 November 2023.

³⁰ Konstantine Borbély-Soproni, “Terminus Raptor Jesus.” 19 November 2023. *Terminus* Discord server, #general-questions.

remains possible—if unlikely—that Manager Stanley was making reference to some other golden cow which exists at least in concept IC and that the joke does not make sense OC because *Golden Cow* was successful at creating semantic distance between referent and designatum in line with Terminus-style humour conventions. Despite this, the tertiary meme in the sequence, *The One True Faith*, completely removes its predecessors from the IC realm by making overt reference to Catholicism through the addition of images of the interior of a church and a mitre to its image-referent,³¹ thus disqualifying the meme from being canon. Because this is the third in a chain of memes based on one another, this disqualification reflects backwards and renders *Object of Worship* and *Golden Cow* non-canon as well by confirming that their jokes are predicated upon subject matter that is specifically circumscribed from the IC world of *Terminus*.

To say that Terminus-style memes are incomprehensible as a genre would be both correct by design and also patently false. Their breed of humour is certainly distinct, a product of the unique set of circumstances that led to the Underground's creation and present state and through it, the humble symbol of the arrow is elevated to take on enormous significance. Though deliberately unconventional and somewhat absurdist they may be, these memes are powerful not least because they have secured a special place in the hearts and senses of humour of the Termite community at large, demonstrating through their existence, popularity, and prominence that when it comes to memes, no matter what referent an arrow points towards, it is most assuredly pointing in the right direction.

³¹ Jasper Hopkins, *The One True Faith*. Digitally generated meme. *Terminus* Discord server , #shitposting. 29 November 2023.



SISTER MHYRR
BY HARMANN BANSAL



Flowers

An alternative to Constance's fifth turnsheet

You wake up in a vast open field. Lush green grasses stretch on as far as the eye can see in every direction, dotted with pink and white flowers. Wildflowers of some nameless variety, fathomless, beautiful, unlike anything you have ever seen or will ever see again. This is the stuff of dreams, but not your dreams. You never dream like this. Your nights are haunted by dark shapes in endless twisting tunnels, gaping chasms, dark voids. The treacherous fall that waits behind every step you take, hurtling you into a world not quite of the waking, nor of the sleeping, always caught somewhere in-between, unable to escape. This is not that world. It is filled with light and gentle warmth, and as you soak up the rays of sunshine on your back, you feel a newfound strength seeping through your clothes, dissipating all throughout your body, leaving you rejuvenated like you haven't been in... you couldn't possibly say how long.

A gentle breeze tousles your hair, and as your perfumed locks dance about your face, you notice a second scent intermingled with theirs. You take a deep breath, filling your lungs with fresh air, and that scent... It feels like home, but not the home you had as a child. Something new. Something safe. You turn to face its source, and are greeted by a sight more radiant than the sun still smiling down on you from above. Right beside you, hand in yours, is Alexis. *A/exis*. Your love - yours, truly, right beside you! She smiles when you catch her eye, and the sight of those perfect, beautiful lips, the lights dancing in those gorgeous, hopeful eyes fills you with such joy, such relief, such - sorrow? - that you begin to cry in spite of yourself. "Oh sweetie," her voice is like a playful brook, almost bemused, but caring, oh so caring, as she reaches out to wipe your tears away and plants a gentle kiss on your nose. You take off your glasses, smudged as they have become, and it is as though everything is suddenly in focus, vivid and real and right. This feels right. There is nowhere you would rather be than in this place, wherever and whenever it is, right by her side.

You turn over and realise that you have fallen asleep in Alexis' lap. Her scent hangs heavy around you, and for a good while you simply keep your eyes shut. You're not sure why, but you don't want to open them just yet. Nothing could be as good as this feeling, rested and quiet and at peace. How long were you asleep? You register a fleeting feeling of guilt; Alexis must have gotten un-comfortable staying still with your head in her lap all that time. The thought hasn't quite formed in your head yet, however, when it is gone on the breeze. All that remains is the thought of her, fuzzy, dreamlike, unfocused, but even so it fills you with warmth. "I love you," you whisper softly. You've already dozed off again before you can hear her say it back.

Sometime later, who knows how long, you find yourself blinking your eyes open to a faint green glow. The light is soft and reassuring, despite its strange unearthly glow. Are you still dreaming? Before you can answer that, you are fast asleep once more.

You don't remember your dreams when you wake up. It takes a good while to remember anything at all. You lie there for many hours, swaddled in the sleeping bag, staring dazedly at the mushroom lamp. You don't know why, but you feel safe here, and as long as you don't remember where you are, there isn't anything pressing on your mind. The pieces present themselves to you slowly, but you're not in a rush. The mushroom lamp. Amandine. Alexis. *A/lexis*. Your love, yours, truly, where is she? Not besides you, you gradually come to realise. Maybe she went out exploring. She's wonderful like that. Maybe she has gone to get you something to eat. That seems right. She's given you a place to sleep. You smile to yourself in the near darkness as you turn over all she has done for you in your mind. The lamp, this very station, her arms around you in the sleeping bag. You

remember tears flowing down your face, and Alexis comforting you. Whatever made you cry seems irrelevant now, out of focus, somewhere far, far away. How could anything be worth crying over when there is someone as wonderful as Alexis in this world, and she has gone out to get breakfast? The domesticity of it warms your heart, and you close your eyes again, dozing off a little longer.

Eventually, you are woken once more by a nagging sensation in your stomach. Worry? No, hunger. You look around, and register a fleeting sense of guilt at your own impatience. She'll be back soon. You try to settle back down, but that nagging sensation in your stomach keeps you awake. Hunger, yes, but gradually it begins to look a little more like worry. You can't quite keep the two apart, and they keep you up, until you eventually get up, unable to get comfortable any longer. You look around for your clothes, but don't find them. You reach for your phone but - it is out of battery. You frown. Look for your clothes again. All you find is your boots - not Constance's, the Moth's, which doesn't make sense. Why would -

Suddenly, you remember taking them off. Placing your clothes in a neat pile, right here, besides you, yours. The memory comes flooding back just like the tears you cried in Alexis' arms here last night. She said she was going into rat territory. She said -

A flash of hot white panic surges through your body, sending you wide awake in an instant. No. No, no, no, no, no! You weren't supposed to sleep. You weren't supposed to - you *can't* have let her do what you know she must have done. You need to find her, *now*.

Desert Blooms ->

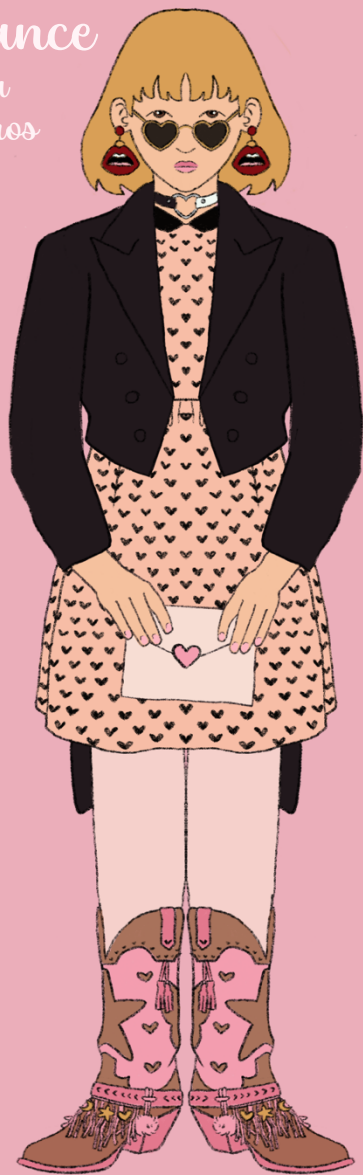
Fic and art by Sophia de Medeiros



All my love xx

Constance

by Sophia
de Medeiros





Baker Helios
by Harmann Bansal

An Old Man Walks into a Coffee Shop

A Terminus Coffee Shop AU Short Story by Kaiya Collins

Sophia's son had been working at the Undergrounds Café for a long time. Which means Sophia had been working from the café for a while. The coffee was decent and the pastries incredible, of course, since her son and his friend Luna made them, so it was a good place to do the computer work for her small business. She'd go there every day with all of her projects and her computer and sit drinking coffee, doing her work, and making sure her son was alright. And occasionally, when she struggled with math, she'd make one of the managers, Piper, help her with it.

It was a nice café. Sophia enjoyed chatting with the barista Stanley and bothering regulars, like Promethea, a med student who really should try sleeping for once. It was a good place for an old lady with empty nest syndrome to keep away her loneliness. And if she also promoted her business from time to time to other customers, that was just good business sense.

One day, a man Sophia had never seen in the café before walked in. He was an older man wearing a pink beanie and using an umbrella as a cane. Whether or not he needed it to walk was unclear, because he kept picking it up to swing in the air as some sort of word emphasis. Instead of ordering a coffee like a normal customer, he started ranting at Stanley. "Why are your prices so high? Are you trying to make poor old people like me go broke? And what in the world is almond milk? Almonds don't make milk. They aren't mammals. Are you stupid, son?"

Sophia looked up at the man and was smitten. She had hardly dated anyone since her divorce, too focused on being a mother and too busy running her own business. But here walks in an absolutely ridiculous man. Sure, he's clearly a bit of an asshole, but so is Sophia and she can appreciate that. Plus, he looked handsome enough.

As it became clearer that the man wasn't going to purchase anything and was just going to continue berating Stanley, Sophia decided to intervene. "Elias, please get this man one of the pastries Luna just pulled out of the oven." Sophia told her son. "Mum, how did you know something just finished baking?" Elias asked, looking a bit confused. "I just know things, Elias. Now get him a pastry and I'll pay for it." Sophia insisted.

"Well, hello there. I'm Sophia, and you are?" Sophia asked the man. "Sophia Trinketson? Is that you?" The man asked, seeming to have recognized her. Sophia took a good look at him and realized she recognized him as well. "Archie? It's been a while. You got old," Sophia replied. "Yes. That's why people call me Old Archie now. It seems you got older yourself. Did I hear that young man is your son?" said Archie. "Indeed he is. That's my Elias. He's the best baker in town. Possibly in the whole world. And Luna, the other baker, is his friend. Though she's spent enough time staying at my house when they both were in culinary school, she's practically mine as well. She's probably the second best baker," Sophia explained. "How about you? Did you end up having any kids?"

"Oh, just one daughter. She's very busy and very successful." Archie hesitantly replied. "I, uh, was planning to try and see her today. Um... but I stopped to get coffee first."

"You didn't get any coffee. You just yelled at Stanley," Sophia commented.

Right then, Elias brought out the pastry. "Here, sit down with me, have a pastry." Sophia said. "I'm afraid I can't right now." Archie said.

"Fine. That's unfortunate for you. Take it to go then. I still bought it for you," Sophia said. Then, thinking to herself, she reached into her bag for one of her business cards and a pen. She wrote her phone number on it and handed it to Archie. "Let me know if you want to try again another time. We can catch up on the many years since we last saw each other." Sophia smiled and winked at him. "Well thank you, Sophia. I'll have to do that," he said. "Goodbye, Archie" Sophia said. "Goodbye, Sophia" Archie said and then left the coffee shop.

"Mum, did you just give that man your number?" Elias laughed at his mom. "Hmm... maybe. He's just someone I knew a long time ago. No need to worry, Elias," Sophia told her son.

At that moment, Piper came out from the back room. "Did I hear someone yelling out here?" Piper asked.

"Just a weird old man," Sophia replied. "I handled it."

DON'T GET TO



Unfinished art by Sophia de Medeiros

MAKE THE RULES

Feverish Idolatry



Faith Cortis

Identity

A Terminus fic by George Seager

He runs his thumb over the rounded corner of the sleek plastic. It's still warm from the printer, still smells faintly of wet ink. His eyes are drawn to his own face, beaming back at him, long blond hair framing his clean-shaven cheeks. They had shown him the photo a couple weeks back, on the grainy camera display, but it looked different in print. This wasn't a teenage boy, wearing his father's old suit and soaked in so much hair gel he could barely keep his head upright. This was a proud citizen of the Underground, a man ready to continue the work of his parents. To maintain the world they had saved.

A line of numbers along the bottom. A barcode in the bottom-right corner. The faint lightning bolt in the top-right, the symbol of Bibere. He works his way around the edges, forcing himself to take in every detail before he finally allows himself to read the two words in the card's centre.

TECHNICIAN
ARCHIBALD

Thick black lettering, all caps. He glides his thumb over the words, as though they might rub right off. But no. This is no misprint. No mistake. He's finally here.

He remembers his first day in Bibere. The class tour. At first, he had refused to go. Why waste everyone's time? He had already set his sights on the Director's Office. An administrator didn't need to mingle with technicians. He should have been at home, learning how to keep the Underground running.

As usual, it was his father that made him do it. He was keen that his son took every opportunity to get to know the mechanics of the Underground. And when that man started talking about how things used to be, about everything he had done to get them here, about showing gratitude to the pioneers and so on and so forth, there was nothing to do but to sit and wait for the lecture to end. In the end, he had agreed to go to spare himself a follow-up talk.

So he was in Bibere, alongside half a dozen of the other kids from his class. As predicted, it bored him to tears. Pipes, corridors, more pipes. They had stopped by a huge engine, caked in rust and muck. State of the art, the tour guide had called it. It had taken that opportunity to sputter and cough up steam, and he couldn't shake the impression that the old machine had a mind of its own - alongside a fine sense of comedic timing.

It was when the group crossed over the metallic bridge to the processing plant that he took the chance to slip away. Nothing but sewage over there. Might as well see if there was anything fun hidden away past the restricted access signs. He could always say he had gotten lost.

But no. Sure enough, behind every door, it was the same. More corridors. And more bloody pipes. He reached his third dead end and turned

back with a grunt of frustration. But he didn't even have the chance to take the first step before he was hit with a burst of cold water to the face.

He staggered back, raising his arms uselessly against the pressure as his elbows found the floor. The spray rained down on him as he lay there, a puddle already forming as he hacked up the rancid water. The smell told him that this was sewage, diverted from the processing plant, no doubt.

"Goddamn," came a gruff voice in the distance, and he heard footsteps echo through the hall as a bulky figure ran over to his side. He was looking up at a middle-aged woman with a shaved head, the sleeves of her uniform pulled back to her shoulders to reveal an impressive array of tattoos. He took her hand and she pulled him to his feet.

"I didn't do that," he said, weakly.

She just shook her head. "Routine leak. Happens all the time. Grab a wrench and we'll put it right."

"N-no, no," he stuttered. "I don't work here."

"I know," she responded coolly. "One of ours'd know better than to stand so close to the mains. But your hands work, don't they?"

He didn't know what to say, and when he tried to speak, she cut him off.

"Wrench. Go."

He ended up being stuck there for half an hour, holding the pipe in place while the technician tightened the bolts and cut off the leak. He was cold and dripping wet, but he did his best to keep his hands from shaking. There were no words

exchanged, nothing to distract himself with. Just the weight of the pipe and the stench of the water.

She finished tightening the last bolt and then gave the pipe a sudden smack with the wrench. He flinched and hoped she didn't notice. She nodded to herself, and then finally spoke, without turning. "So you think you're hot shit, right?"

"W-what?"

She stuffed the wrench into her overalls and wiped her hands on the fabric. "Think you're hot shit. Sneak around wherever you like, do whatever you want."

He didn't know what to say. "I got lost," he ventured, weakly.

"Lying is bad," she said. "Lying badly is worse. Try again."

"No, I -" He paused for a moment, trying to find the words. "I wanted to get a better insight into the facility. It's important for me to know what I'm dealing with."

"You wanna be a technician?"

"No. I'm going to be an administrator."

"A goddamn administrator." She snorted. "No wonder you think you can just go wherever you like. Do whatever you want."

His offence momentarily overcame his fear. "That isn't what being an administrator is about! It's about keeping the Underground running. My job will be keeping places like this operational."

"Look, kid." She rested her palm on his scalp, and slowly but firmly turned his head to the left, and then to the right. "You see any administrators around here?"

“Well, they aren’t *physically* here. But they’re responsible for the equipment. The machinery.”

“Goddamn. You seen the machines around here? They were relics long before the disaster. Something breaks every day, and we’ve been dealing with a battery shortage as long as I can remember.” She shook her head and started off down the corridor. “Forget it. You can go, kid. I ain’t no snitch. But listen to me now. What we just did, *that* is what’s keeping the Underground running. Whatever papers those bean counters write ain’t got nothing to do with it.”

He watched her disappear around the corner, off to fix some other leak elsewhere. That’s where the memory ends. Less than two weeks later, he had withdrawn his application for the Director’s Office. A week after that, he submitted one for Bibere.

And now, a month on, here it is. His identification card, in all its rectangular glory. He slots it into the pocket of his jacket, and there’s something solemn about the act. This is its proper location. Every day, from now until he’s dead, he will take this card and place it in his pocket. And then he will go to work, and he will keep the goddamn Underground running.

He swipes the card and the metallic doors slide open. Six months had passed in the blink of an eye. Even the worst of the work is routine now, each disastrous implosion or facility-wide flood something to be laughed at over lunch. But he

still gets a little giddy every time he steps into the corridor at the start of the day. There's still something special about working here.

He sees her across the locker room and whistles. Technician Rose is always here early, like him.

She looks over and grins. "Archie!"

"Archibald," he corrects her, not for the first time.

"Listen Archie, you're in the processing plant today," she says, tossing him a wrench. "Ground pipes need maintenance."

He barely manages to catch it. "Can't we swap? I've been working on ground pipes all week. My back's been killing me."

"You're too young for that excuse. Besides, you're covering for me." He frowns. "You're skipping? Again?"

"Goddamn, kid. You gonna write me up?"

She's smiling, and now so is he. It's the third time this month he's covered for her. But he owes it to her. She had taken on his training personally, taught him everything on the job that he should have already known how to do before applying. Not to mention that when he made the mistake of sticking tinfoil in the microwave on his first week, she had helped him make the crime scene look like the result of a blown fuse.

So he just rolls his eyes. "What is it this time? New tattoo? A date?"

"Going up to get some fresh air."

"Ha ha. Oh, wait. That's not funny. At all." He watches her walk out, middle finger raised lazily over her shoulder.

"Don't quit your day job."

He stuffs the wrench into his pocket. The jacket comes off, the overalls come on, and he's off to work. It's not hard, but it's constant. Not enough batteries for the machines built to detect potential leaks, so it's up to the humans to keep their hearing sharp. He paces the corridors, listening out for the hiss of steam or the rhythmic sound of dripping water. The second he finishes working on a pipe, he hears something else break. Always something to do. Never a moment to rest, until IPM rolls around and he's relieved for lunch. He's already thinking about what to get from the cafeteria. The juice they offer is terrible. It tastes more like plastic than fruit, but if you mix the right flavours, you can get something halfway decent. He decides to try apple and banana today, with a dash of soda. If it's good, he'll pass the recipe onto Rose.

And then, as he crosses the bridge, he sees her down below, moving around the corner of the building, out by the waste disposal. He only sees the side of her face for a moment, but the corner of her lip is tightly wound into a frown. He thinks of calling down to her, but something makes him think better of it. Better to head out and meet her in private, see what's wrong.

By now, he knows the maze-like structure of Bibere like the back of his hand. A few turns and flights of stairs later, he reaches the door. It's meant to be kept locked, but as always, it's wedged open with a brick. He waves his hand in the gap and the door slides open. He steps out and sees Rose, carrying a small box in both hands.

He clears his throat. "Guess you got bored of the Overground."

"Goddamn!" She jolts violently and drops the box onto her foot with a loud clash. "Goddammit. Goddammit all. You freaked me the fuck out, kid."

He winces as she continues to swear in pain. “Sorry, sorry.” He runs to her side, but she shoves him back with a firm palm.

“I’m sorry. Just let me pick that up for you.” He glances down at the crate and - just for a moment - he gets a glimpse of the contents. Neatly laid out, still in their original packaging, it’s full to the brim with fresh batteries. He can see ‘BIBERE - URGENT DELIVERY’ written in marker on the cardboard flap.

He blinks in confusion. “Those are batteries. For the machines. The ones we’ve been asking about for weeks.”

“Yeah,” she says, with a hint of annoyance. “Bigwigs finally got round to bringing them over.”

“Why are they out here?”

“Delivery.”

He waits a moment for elaboration, but none comes. “Deliveries come round the other side. *You* taught me that.”

She closes the flaps of the crate and picks it up again. “You have a point?”

“You’re lying. And you’re lying badly.” He says the words slowly, testing them on his lips. And then his eyes widen. “You’re stealing the batteries. You’re the reason we never have enough batteries.”

“Goddamn, kid. Talk louder, why don’t you?”

He’s dry, and it’s not cold, but he’s shaking. “Rose, this is *theft*. You’re a thief.”

“C’mon, kid. You can’t be this naive. Ain’t you noticed there’s never enough wrenches to go round?”

“Y-you’ve been stealing those too? ”

“Goddammit, no. Kid, everyone pinches a little. Just how things work around here.”

Fragments of memories flood through his mind. A string of odd moments, easily dismissed. People slipping outside, supplies disappearing from counters, orders going unanswered. This had been going on all along, right under his nose. “But we’re responsible for keeping the Underground running. Those batteries keep this place running.”

“We keep this place running. And we don’t get shit for it. No recognition. No respect. This is how we get our own back. This is how we stick it to the folks in charge.”

“You’re just making excuses. This is wrong,” he says firmly. And as he says it, he realises he sounds just like his father. Self-assured. Justified.

Stuck in the past.

Rose crosses her arms, and his eyes are drawn to an intricate tattoo of a bottle, some whiskey brand which disappeared along with the rest of the world. She sighs. “Fine. I get it. Go on, kid. Go to the Director’s Office. Tell ‘em. Get our whole crew shut down. They might just give you a medal.”

“No,” he whispers. “I’ll keep my mouth shut.”

She smiles, nods. “You’re a good kid, Archie. Now c’mon. Help me with this goddamn crate. I’ll show you the drop-off point.”

Archie holds the card up to the light. The portrait has faded almost to nothing. Only his eyes are still visible, bright and blue and begging not to be washed away. He digs his thumb into the rounded corner of the card, and finds that the laminate is loose. Gently, he tugs at it, and watches as the shiny covering peels away. The hard plastic underneath is smooth, raised along the lettering.

TECHNICIAN
ARCHIBALD

Archie dips his fingertips into the jar of moonshine on the desk, and then rubs his thumb along the words. Bit by bit, the ink begins to smear beneath his touch. When the words can no longer be made out, he presses his thumb against the portrait, blotting out his eyes with black. And then, he takes a cloth, dips it in the jar, and wipes the card clean.

Even through the goggles, the Moth's disapproval is unmistakable as he walks in. "Is there a particular reason you're making a mess in our workplace?"

Archie holds the card, now a blank white slate, up to the light and then hands it over. "A working ID. Untraceable. Should get your associates into Bibere. Good folks there are expecting a shipment later this week."

The Moth whistles. "Not bad. Who'd you have to kill to get this?"

"I got it from a customer. Only thing they had left to pay me with."

They take it from him and slip it into their coat pocket. “I can never tell when you’re telling the truth.”

Old Archie smirks. “If I’m getting you what you need, does it matter?”

“I guess not.” The Moth hovers over Archie’s shoulder for a moment, as though debating whether or not to speak. Eventually, he does. “At the end of all of this, what do you want, Archie?”

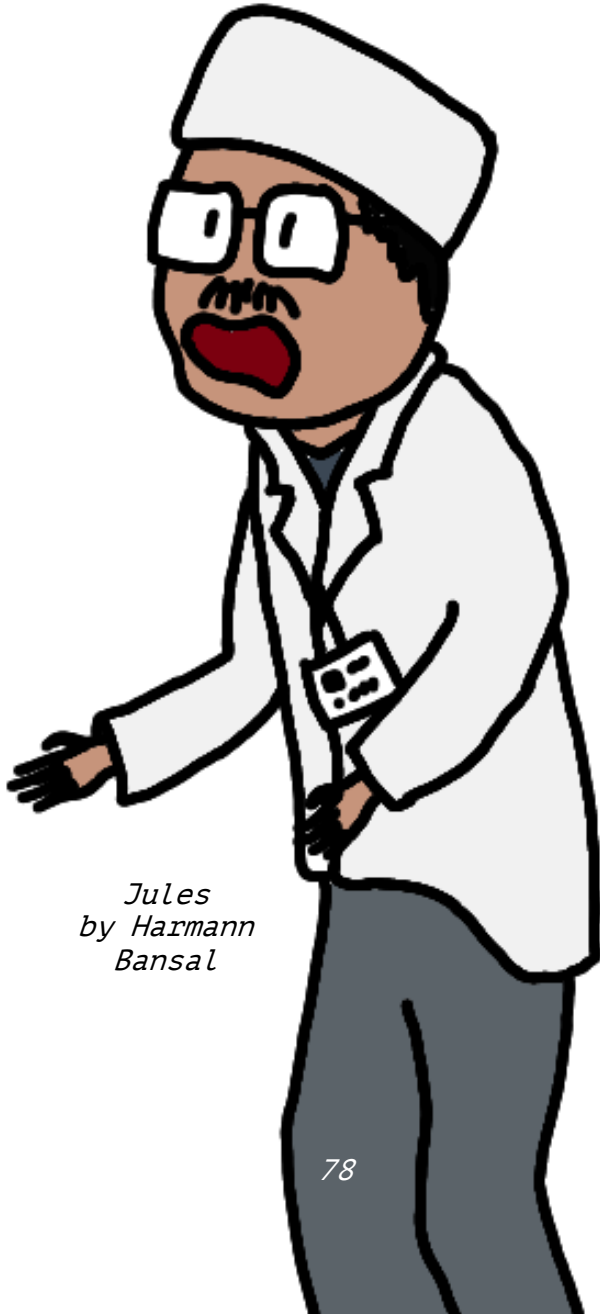
“Oh, Moth, I want the same thing I’ve always wanted.” Archie smiles wide, revealing his crooked yellow teeth. “To keep the goddamn Underground running.”



Moth Concept Art
by Sophia de Medeiros

Cruciver and Nina by Konstantine Borbély-Soproni





*Jules
by Harmann
Bansal*

THE MAN I MARRIED

A TERMINUS FIC BY KAIYA COLLINS

This takes place during turn 5. Sophia has decided to infiltrate the rat cult with Archie, even though she knows it is highly likely Old Archie will betray her. This is her internal monologue she is thinking towards her son, Elias Secan, because she is afraid she will never see him again.

I married a man who I thought would mellow me out. And for a time, he did. He was a farmer. We both understood what it was like to use one's hands to create. He was a simple man, all soft edges, but I didn't mind. I could be sharp for the both of us.

And one day we decided to create something together. Our own little family.

I looked at you, so precious and small, with the tiniest little fingers and toes, and everything else in the world faded out of existence. I knew right then and there that you were the greatest thing I had ever and would ever create. Nothing in the entire world would ever matter as much as you. I was ready to do anything to keep you safe with me, where I could protect you from anything.

He called you his little sprout. I thought he felt the same way.

Soon he started coming home from work increasingly frustrated. And the frustration seemed to distract him from being a father. He grew increasingly distanced. He was worried about the potential for food shortages in the future. He tried to warn his bosses, but they weren't listening.

I told him not to make waves and to stay quiet. We didn't know then it would get as bad as it is now, I mean who could predict what's happened now, and I knew that whatever happened I could make sure our family was always able to eat. He didn't listen to me, and he didn't like the implications of what I would be willing to do to make sure you were never hungry.

This is what led to him eventually joining the expansionists. At the time they really were a fringe group. Things simply were not as bad as they are now. I told him to stop. That he was going to get our family in trouble. He didn't listen. By that point he'd stopped listening to me.

One day, he told me he was going to leave and find new places for the underground to expand into. I thought he was joking. All that's out there is death. And how could he leave when the only thing that really matters is you.

He wasn't joking, and one night, while you were sleeping, he left.

I cried so much. I couldn't understand how he could abandon you. How he could abandon us.

My heart broke.

The thing I've never told you is that I loved him, and in some ways I still do. I cried for weeks and weeks, but never in front of you. You didn't deserve to deal with a sad mom. You had enough sorrow of your own and it was my job to be there for you.

For the first few weeks, I had hope he would come back. Eventually it became clear that never would happen. Gone forever. Dead, alone in some tunnel somewhere. I kept my sadness hidden. I didn't want your future impacted by a man who'd risk everyone else's safety to go places too dangerous for people. I let them believe I'd killed him. No one believed I could love such a soft man in the first place anyways.

I will never regret marrying him, because otherwise I wouldn't have you, my entire world. Still, you deserved better than a parent who would abandon you.

I'm sorry for abandoning you. I promise it's to protect you. I promise I will try my best to come back and hold you in my arms once again.



A Cold, Dead Embrace

by Faith Cortis



Achlys

by Nourreen Islam



Promethea
by Nourdeen Islam

Plagued Houses



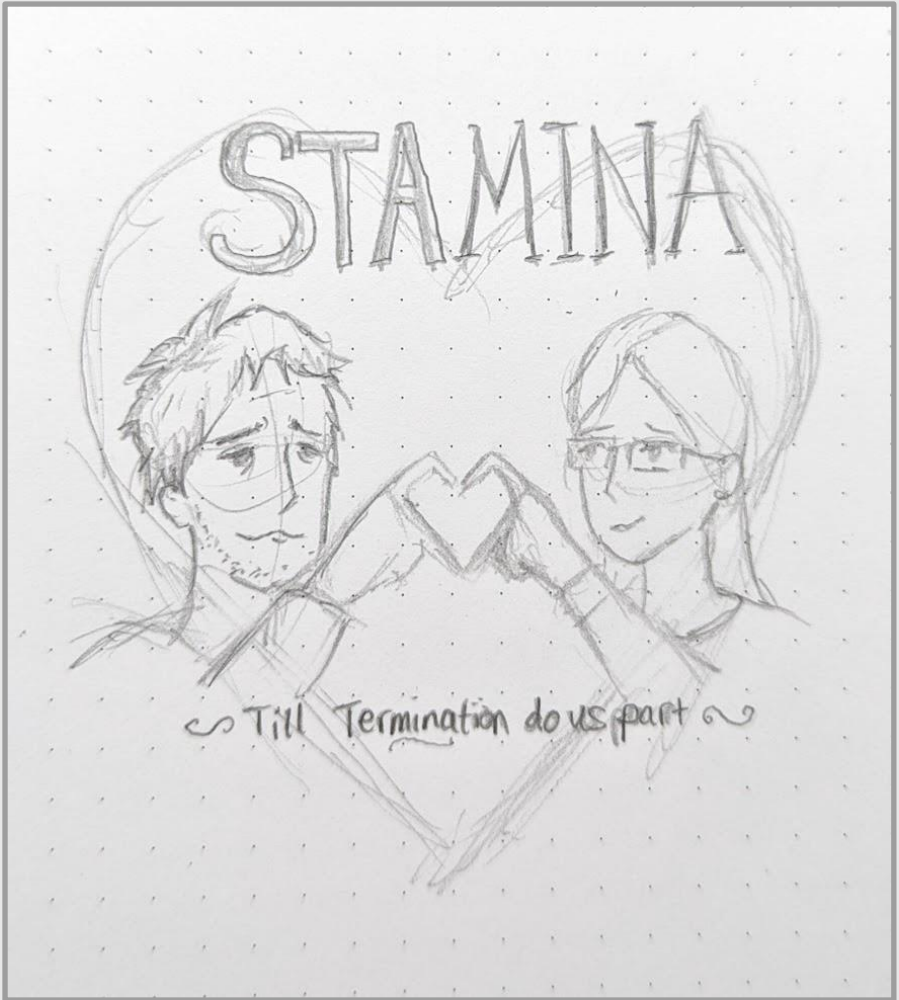
by Faith Cortis



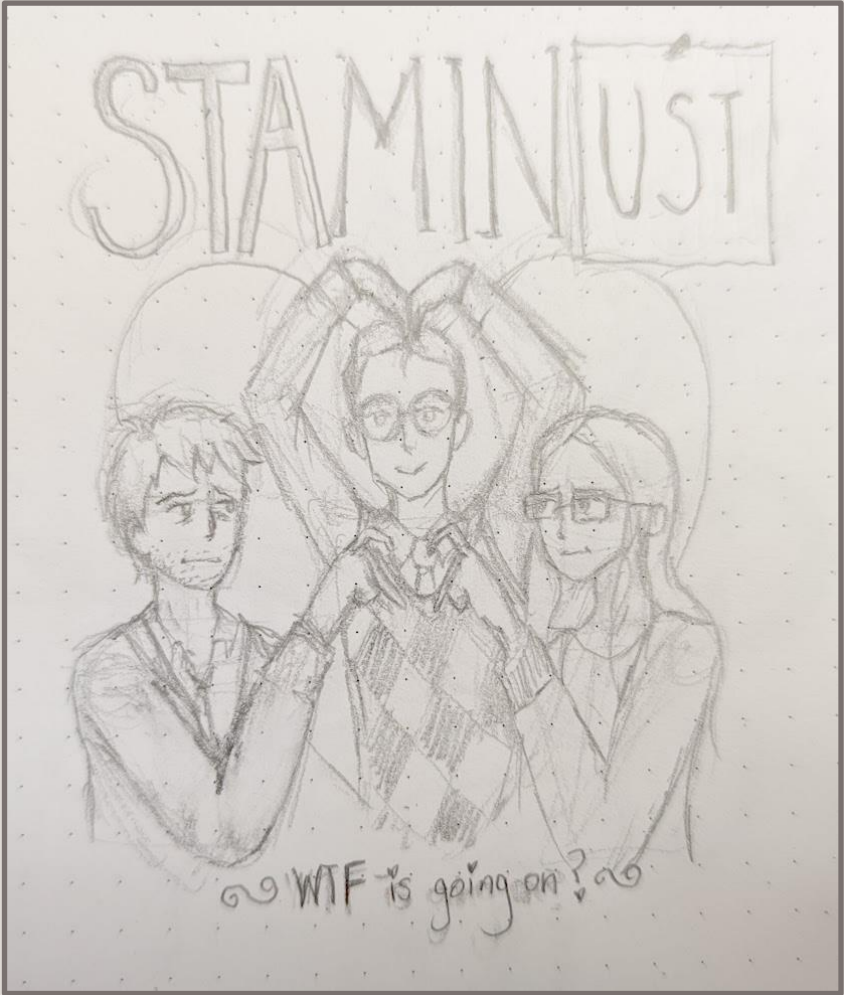
Luna
by Noreen
Islam



August
by Sophia
de Medeiros



by Esther Leung



by Esther Leung

The Misadventures of Sophia Trinketson and Adela Sterling

A Terminus fic by Kaiya Collins

As Sophia Trinketson sits, head leaning against Adela, she thinks back to simpler times. A time when the greatest threat to the underground wasn't a rat cult and Molotov cocktails, but her and Adela's annoying, but mostly harmless, antics.

It's yet another boring day in the underground. After finishing up her schooling, Sophia Trinketson got a job mending broken items so they can be reused by the other denizens of the underground. There is only so much stuff in the underground and reuse is incredibly important. Unfortunately, not everything is able to be kept in pristine condition, and items often need fixing.

Sophia learned she had a knack for fixing that which is broken and breathing life into old things when she was young. She never liked blending in with her peers, and one day, when a hole formed in one of her shirts, she decided to repair it herself, but not just repair it, transform it so that her outfit would let everyone know she was someone unique. Not drab like everyone else in the underground.

As Sophia sits at her desk, ripping apart seams so she can reuse the fabric to make new clothes, she plans for tomorrow, her long-awaited day off work. It's not like she dislikes her job, in fact she loves it, it's just that it's boring at times. It's too tame. There is no drama, no secrets to uncover, no adventure in making and repairing people's clothes. It's all a bit repetitive. But on her day off, Sophia can find the drama and adventure she so desperately craves. And she can spend the day with Adela, which is even better.

Early in the morning, Sophia heads to the Sterling residence in Cubile. She's greeted by Chef Sterling. A tall, brusque man. Many would find him intimidating without knowing about his penchant for helping all the lost and needy people in the underground.

"Good morning Chef Sterling. Is Adela around?", greets Sophia.

"Morning Sophia. Yes, my daughter is just inside. I'll let her know you are here." Chef Sterling responds.

As Adela steps out of the residence, Sophia quickly scoops her into embrace and gives her a quick kiss.

"What plans do you have today?" Sophia asks her girlfriend.

"Helping my dad cook." Adela answers.

"How about you come with me instead? I finally have a day off and I have ideas for some fun." Sophia says.

Adela giggles and nods her head, so Sophia grabs her hand and runs into the tunnels off on the adventures that make life memorable.

The first stop is Fundus. Sophia quickly picks the lock to the equipment closet and rearranges everything inside. Putting shovels where hoes go, moving fertilizer to new places, and hanging irrigation hoses around the room like they are decorations. She leaves a little note that says,

"Thought this room could use some redecorating. Enjoy!"

All the while, Adela distracts the farmers asking them about food for her new stall in the marketplace. They are legitimate business questions, they just also serve as an excellent distraction for their little prank.

Other tricks for the day include changing the posted train schedules to new, and incredibly irritating, times. The 10 o'clock train now says it's coming at 9:59, the 11:30 at 11:23, the 12:15 at 12:11, and other such horrible times.

This time, Sophia distracts while Adela causes the chaos. Sophia does so by logging a complaint with the head train engineer. Rambling on and on about how the noise from the

train causes her to lose concentration when sewing and that those trains should really be quieter unless everyone wants to end up with clothing that doesn't fit and looks bad. And really, why doesn't the engineer know how to do their job better so these sorts of problems don't happen.

The last trick of the day takes them to Caput, under the guise of visiting Sophia's father, Archivist Trinketson.

The plan: move everything in the office of whoever goes to deal with the train problem two inches to the left. Enough of a change to be distressing, but not enough to be noticeable. They sit in the archives while they wait for someone to leave, looking at books Sophia's father shares with them. Eventually they hear the secretary leave, so they say goodbye to Mr. Trinketson and head to the secretary's office.

Together, they push furniture slightly over in the room and even move a few stationary items on the desk just a little bit. As they are moving the very last lamp, they hear the sound of the door handle turn. Sophia and Adela both panic, looking for a place to hide, but see none.

The secretary walks in and immediately starts yelling at them. "How dare you enter my office when I'm not in here!", the secretary yelled, "and why are you touching my stuff – are you the ones who ruined the train schedules today? Do you know how much of a mess you've made of the underground? The two of you are in so much trouble."

Adela and Sophia cower.

"Adela Sterling, what will your mother think? She does nothing but help the community, and you are out here causing disturbances and wrecking the peace of the underground." The secretary yells.

"Actually, secretary, this was all my idea", Sophia interrupts. "Please leave Adela alone and punish me instead."

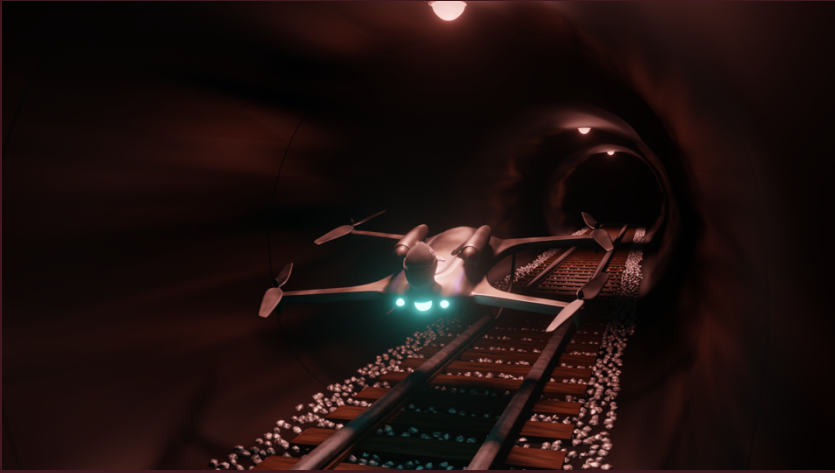
"Fine. Adela, you can leave. Sophia you will have hours of community service to make up for this, and I will be telling both your parents about this. You and I both know your mother will be very disappointed in you," the secretary says.

Sophia trudges out and makes her way home. At least she succeeded in having an adventure.

Perpetual Stew

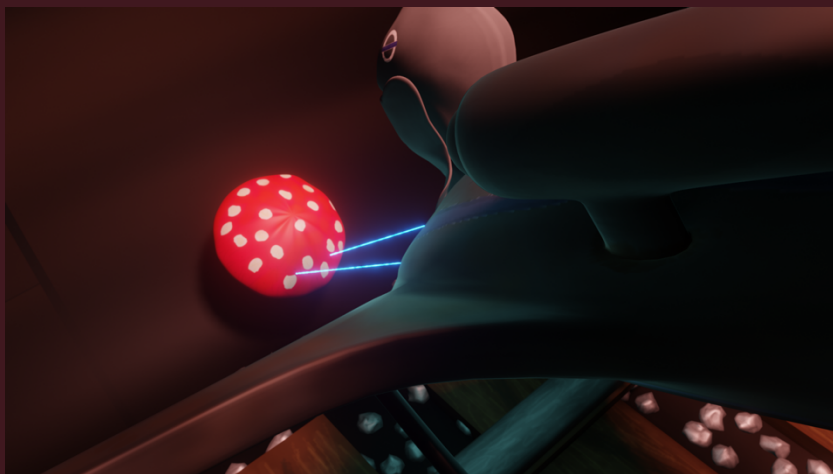
By Konstantine
Borbély-Soproni



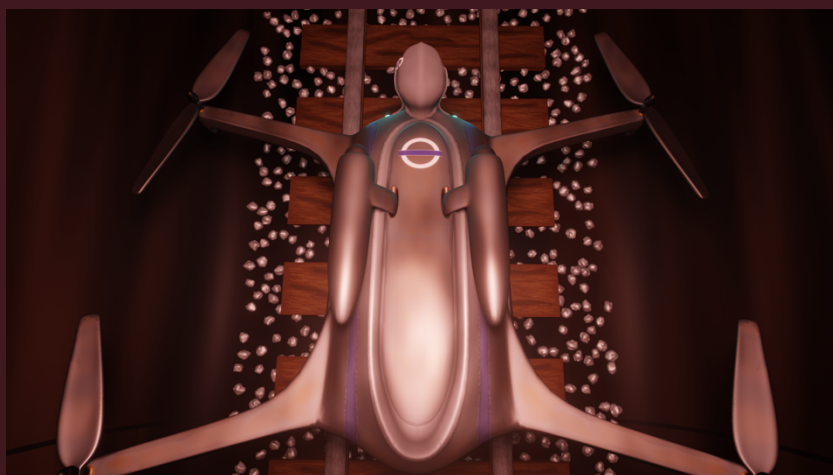


The Good Sir Knight

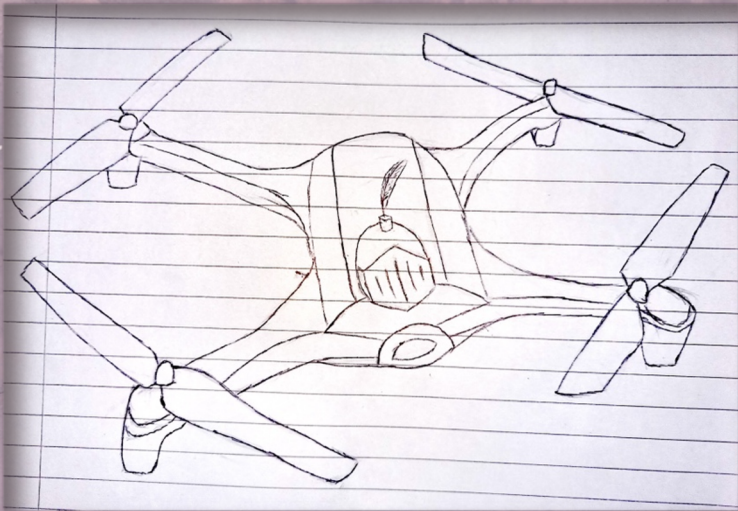




by Harry Wright

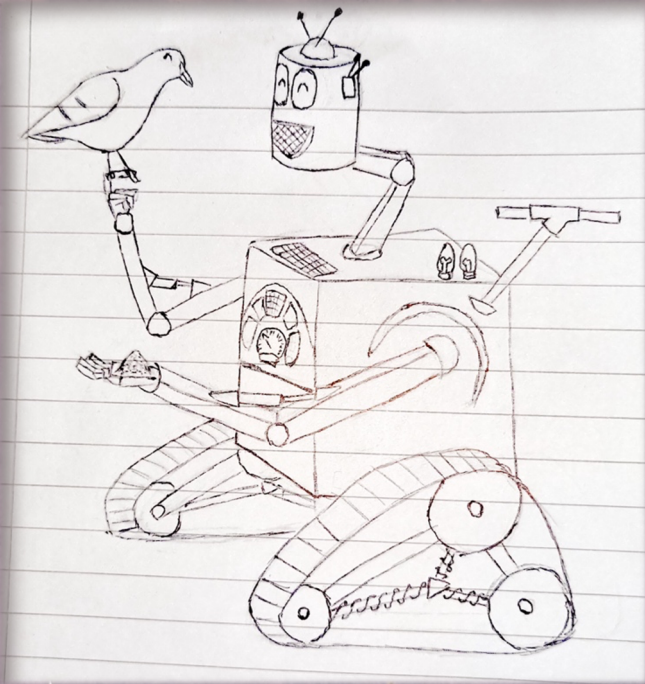


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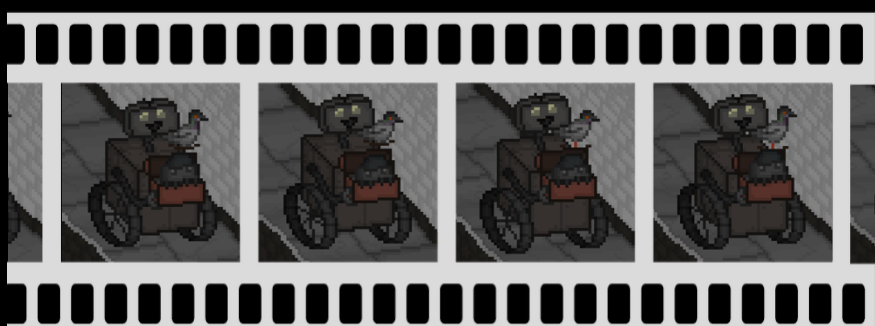


GOOD SIR KNIGHT BY HARRY SMITH

BLENNY AND ELENOR BY HARRY SMITH



Blenny and Elenor by Harmann Bansal



On Hybrid GMed/Computer Games

An Essay by Andrew Kenyon-Roberts

I am writing (and have been for a while) a hybrid roleplaying game/computer game, *Dissection*, which has got me wondering why there aren't more games like this. What I mean by this is games which have one or more human players playing, a human GM directing the game as it goes, and a computer that both are interacting with that has a model of the game world and uses it to apply the game mechanics. As far as I'm aware there are no existing games of this sort, although I admit I haven't looked very hard and I'd be interested to hear of them if you know of any.

Existing Games, And Why I'm Not Counting Them

The entire RPG genre of computer games

This is admittedly roleplaying games which are also computer games, but they lack the element of being directed by a human GM. The plot, if it exists, is written ahead of time by the game's designers, possibly with some branching or modular elements but

basically static and not permitting a whole lot of re-writing to account for player input.

Virtual tabletops

Programs like Roll20 are quite similar to a hybrid game, with computer support for game mechanics while still having a human GM in control. It tends to be direct adaptations of games designed as tabletop games though. You can run mechanics-heavy games more easily and quickly if the mechanics are well-supported, but the game design is still limited to what would have been practical to run without the computer, because that's the intended way to run the game. There's an enormous gap in mechanical complexity between what's possible in a computer game and what's possible in a tabletop game. Imagine *Baba Is You* as a board game, for example. It would technically be possible, but nobody (at least nobody sane enough to design a good game) would do something like that.

Roleplaying in sandbox games

People use sandbox games like *Minecraft* and *Garry's Mod* as venues for roleplaying, and this can involve implicitly including the game's mechanics as part of the fiction. Once again though, this approach fails to fully take advantage of the medium because the

game mechanics were not designed to support this approach, though in this case it's from the opposite direction: they were designed as computer games only, with the freeform roleplaying grafted on. I think the main difference to be expected between these and what I'm envisioning is the way the game mechanics would deliberately leave room for GM input.

AI Dungeon (honourable mention)

This is a bit further from a hybrid game than the others, but there are still some similarities. A hybrid game would combine the flexibility of a human GM with the precision of a computer. *AI Dungeon* uses a Large Language Model as the entire basis for the program. These are a style of program that is pretty good at flexibly adapting, but bad at precision, so it ends up being mostly just an inferior version of a purely human-led game. I don't intend to be too harsh to *AI Dungeon*, it's an interesting experiment, but it's not what I'm looking for. I assume there have been plenty of experiments in using AI to make computer games that are more flexible without just making the AI the entire thing in the past few years (e.g. by having an LLM controlling NPCs), because it's such an obvious idea and I've seen it in fiction, but I don't think I've actually seen any examples. If that was implemented well, it would be quite similar

to a hybrid game, but for all the reasons people still prefer art in general from human creators, I expect that wouldn't completely remove the niche for hybrid games. Also, the technology to do this has only existed for a few years, whereas the technology to do hybrid games has existed for decades.

Why Would You Want To Do This?

Mechanics-heavy play in tabletop RPGs is clearly something that people often enjoy, but it can feel like an awkward approximation to a computer game, played with way more effort and less speed. LARP combat is similar, played in real-time because physically acting everything out makes communicating what's going on to everyone easier, but still potentially requiring quite a lot of mental effort to keep track of everything.

Roleplaying games involve making decisions for your character and telling a story in the process, and what incentives you face affect what sort of story this can be. This doesn't just mean that by incentivising certain sorts of play, a game directs the story towards paths where those incentives are followed. It also means that it matters not just what choices a character makes, but also the context in which they make them. What other options were

available? What motivated the character to make the choice they did? By providing a detailed model of the context the characters find themselves in, the game mechanics support the roleplaying. Compare a wizard in Dungeons and Dragons taking a major risk to acquire some new spell they need versus the same thing happening in a totally freeform roleplaying game. The motivation is much clearer in the D&D case because you know exactly what the spell is for, leaving the freeform version potentially feeling a bit more bland in comparison.

Sanderson's first and second Laws of Magic are similar to this.

1. An author's ability to solve conflict with magic is directly proportional to how well the reader understands said magic.
2. Weaknesses, limits and costs are more interesting than powers.

The detailed description of what's possible makes the story richer.

All of this has basically been an argument for game mechanics in RPGs, not hybrid games in particular, but I think the point about hybrid games sort of follows. Computer games are pure mechanics, and they

do it better than people can, so if you're writing mechanics for a roleplaying game, why not make those mechanics a computer game? Obviously not every tabletop RPG would be better as a hybrid game, but it opens up possibilities of game mechanics that would be impractical and boringly slow without that approach.

There's another more minor advantage in the way the game world is presented to the players. Generally in an RPG, if there's some subtle detail about the scene that you as the GM know is important but the players don't, you can either choose to mention it (which gives the players a clue that it's significant just because you mentioned it) or not (which completely prevents the players from realising its significance). In a hybrid game, it makes it much easier for the game (possibly aided by some amount of procedural generation, even if that's just simply the GM telling the computer "This room contains 60 assorted knick-knacks" and the computer picking them from a list) to provide the players with a higher level of background detail so they can't instantly tell what's plot-relevant without knowing what to look for. It would be cool if this could be a fully rendered graphical interface for the players, but

that's not really necessary. A text-based interface would still do fine for this purpose.

Why Am I Doing This In Particular?

[CN for self-harm in this section, since it's a theme in my game.]

The example of my upcoming game *Dissection* illustrates the point. The main theme of the game is modifying and sacrificing your body and mind. The computer-gamey side is inspired by the crafting mechanics of games like *Minecraft*, *Terraria* and *Factorio*. I think it's better as a hybrid game than a normal RPG because of the way the crafting mechanics and detailed inventory management make resources feel actually significant. The previous RPGSoc one-shot *Water?*, which is one of the major inspirations for *Dissection*, also had similar resource-tracking mechanics, but having a computer deal with all of that allows me to take it much further than *Water?* did. For example, if your character in the game desperately needs a little bit more meat, and they are made of meat, that provides you with a choice. The need is what the computer game side represents, and it also tracks part of the consequences. That part of your character that you used up is gone, and that will affect their options for the rest of the

game. A big part of the consequences is psychological though, and this bit is something a roleplaying game does better than a computer game, because it's so much easier in a computer game to just not think of your character as a person. Violence and death in computer games tend to be quite trivialised, so I think the aspect of *Dissection* with roleplaying and talking as these characters also does a lot to support the main theme of the game. Traditional computer RPGs to some extent support this thinking of your character as an actual person, but the restrictiveness of your options to what the game designer anticipated works against this goal.

Dissection is designed as a one-shot game, which is very much not the optimum format for a game like this. The effort spent in developing a computer game is generally justified only because many people can play the game with only a fixed amount of input from the developers. I suppose all art is like this, but technical arts like computer games and architecture especially so because of how much of the effort is hidden from the user, just required in the background to keep everything running rather than actively enjoyed.

Why This Might Be A Bad Idea

Although I think hybrid games have a lot of potential, there are some potential problems too. Most obviously, maybe having the GM control the computer's model of the game world rather than just keeping it in their head and telling the players only the results is just too much effort. In order to gain the full advantages of the hybrid game format, the GM needs to be able to adjust things on the fly, which means that the input they give to the computer can't be too detailed and time-consuming. This doesn't seem like it should be prohibitive though. Consider a game like D&D. The main mechanics-heavy part is the combat. Setting up encounters could be a matter simply of drawing the map (which many GMs already do) and adding enemies from a standard library provided by the game designers, the equivalent of the monster manual. The combat could then either be turn-based or real-time, with the GM controlling the NPCs or them being controlled by the computer. There are already computer games which work like both of these options, so they're clearly possible. It could even take inspiration from LARP, with the NPCs being played in real-time by the GM's assistants, but that seems probably unnecessary. Of course, what the GM needs to do depends on what sort of mechanics the game has.

Apart from real-time interaction, the GM might also find it time-consuming to set up the game world in advance, again with how much effort this is depending on the type of game. If there is meant to be a lot of exploration (like in *Dissection*), this could be quite a lot of effort. Using re-usable published modules or some degree of procedural generation could help alleviate this, at the cost of the GM giving up some creative control. People do play published modules for tabletop RPGs though.

All this seems like it should be basically solvable with some balance of GM effort and developer effort. The one issue I'm less certain has a good solution is that the GM interface would probably just be very complicated and difficult to learn. In order for a game to make sense as a hybrid game rather than a pure RPG, it has to have reasonably complex mechanics, and the way the GM interacts with these will almost certainly be more complicated than the ways a player typically interacts with a computer game, being part way between that and the sorts of things a game developer does when designing levels, but with the additional complication of real-time interaction, and having to be able to edit scenes while the player characters are already in them (which implies you kind of have to get it right first

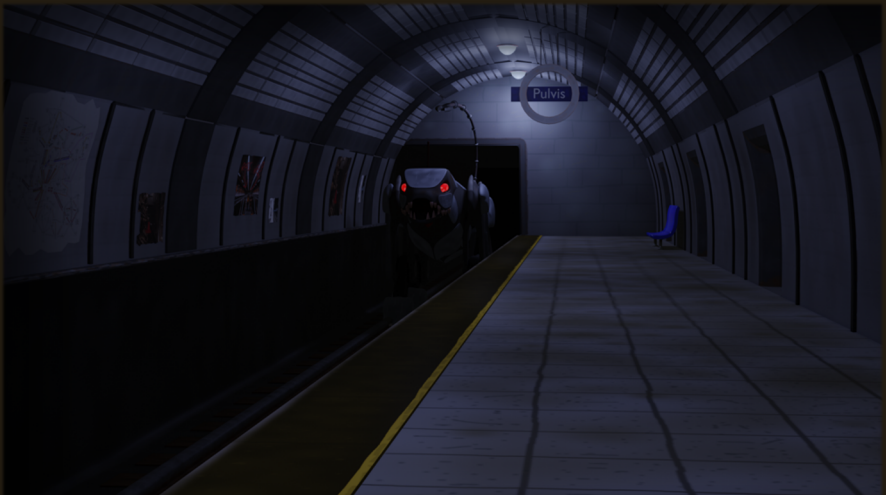
time). Computer games with steep learning curves do exist, and some of them are pretty popular, but combining that issue with the difficulty coordinating a group for an RPG could make a hybrid game a pretty hard thing to get into. I have this issue a bit less with *Dissection* because I'm both the GM and the developer, but I'm still uncertain about how it's going to go, and ideally these roles should be separable so that the high effort of one developer (or team of developers) could be combined with the lower efforts of many GMs in many instances of a game.

Conclusion

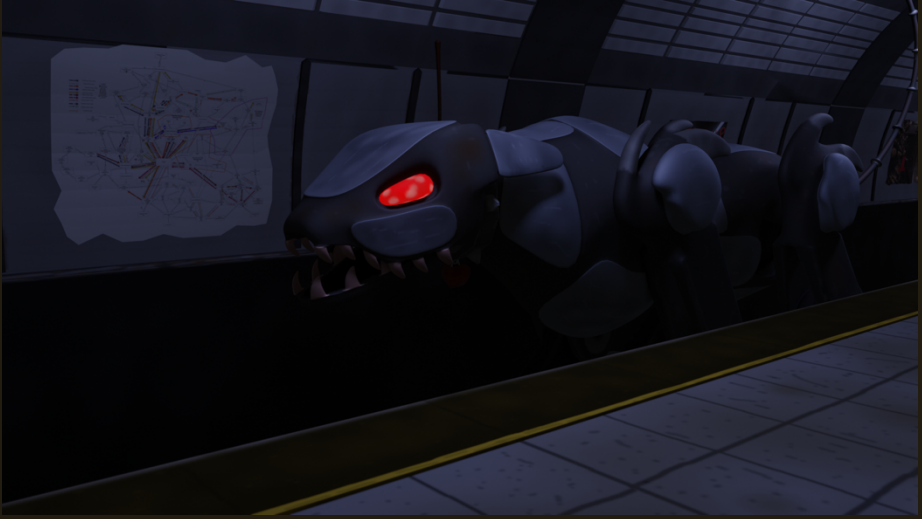
There are certainly some issues with the idea of a hybrid game, but it still seems like something that should exist. I expect I'll learn a lot once I actually run *Dissection*, so maybe there will be a follow-up article then, but for now I didn't feel like waiting that long to publish this. I will be running *Dissection* with OURPGSoc, but don't expect it any time too soon, as it's taking a long time to write.



The Chasm (above)
by Jack Garland



The Dogs of War
by Harry Wright



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The Spider and the Moth

A Terminus Eternity AU fic by Sophia de Medeiros

Deep in the bowels of the underground, there lies an office, hidden away in an abandoned station. It is not on the logistics map. Few know its name. But you are one among the select few. You are The Moth. Flitting like a shadow through the dark tunnels, you alight once more on the platform of Nocturne Station, by now a familiar sight, its hollowed out façade a ghost of flickering pink neons that stand out against the pitch black of its surroundings. Once darkness filled the Underground in its entirety, but for centuries now it has been driven back to this farthest corner by the Lady of Light. They say She was the first of the Moths, a humble servant of the Underground like yourself, offered the position of “secretary” by one Mirax Caspian. Grand names of a forgotten age, strange titles from even stranger times. It sends a shiver down your spine. If the people of the Underground only knew what their Lady had done for them, what She had been through, what She had sacrificed. Constance was a woman of darkness, of silence, of understated power and of unspoken achievement. If the people of the Underground were able to take so much for granted, it was only because she granted them so much. You can’t even imagine what it must have been like living down here before the Emergence. A fool might think that Constance preferred the quiet darkness she had enjoyed before she brought her people the light

of the sun, but you know that she isolates herself by necessity. To keep things running smoothly. To keep the lights in the Underground on. One for all and all for one.

You smile under your mask as you knock on the door to her office, and hear that silky voice bid you enter. Constance is sat at her desk, as she always is, pouring over a map of the Underground. In a digital age, she nevertheless preferred pen and paper; it seemed to help her think. The visual when you enter her office is still as striking to you as it was on that first day, the black threads on her pin board behind the desk mapping logistics routes like one vast web, connecting a myriad stations and facilities you had never even heard of working in the Department for Transport and Logistics. And at the centre of it all, Constance, sat at her desk, looking slightly weary as she always did, though the sight of you brings a smile to her face. It is a Moth's job to keep the Underground running, to deliver messages, gather intel, fix what is broken, find what is errant. To be a face of the people, and always to be their keeper in more ways than they know. All the same, deep down you know that you don't do it for them. You do it for Her. For the one person who has dedicated her life to taking responsibility, but never credit. To keeping the lights on, but living in darkness. The woman who gave us the Overground, but never forgot her roots below ground. Her hair is silver, but her face is smooth, belying her centuries of experience like a porcelain mask. As ever when you are face to face with Constance, you are

struck by a sense of immense grief and sadness that seems to pervade the entire office. It inspires a certain reverence, and yet it also makes you more upbeat, smilier, keen to bring her some of the light of the world that she helped to build. You give her your report and she listens attentively. To have her attention is an honour surpassed only by carrying out Her will.

Her office contains a collection of curios set in glass cases. She mentioned once that they were mementos from her past life. To your left is a grey woven cloak with silver embroidery and an antique fur ruff. Next to it is a binder, yellowed with age, a faded heart scribbled on it in red ink. Besides this is a mobile phone so old you have never even seen any technology like it before, and besides this is a hip flask, a bullet and a gun. On the other side of the office is another cabinet. This one holds a pair of ancient cowboy boots, the leather a faded peach set against brown in motifs of stars and hearts and moths. On her desk, at all times, is a train driver's cap, the velvet moth eaten but never dusty. She runs a finger absent mindedly against the grain and back again as she listens to you, the only hint of a movement that is ever anything less than voluntary, the only action that is ever anything other than calculated. The sight of these objects raises so many questions about her past. About your past, the past of the Underground. They carry a profound sense of tragedy, and yet she keeps them close, as what, reminders of love lost? Reminders of the purpose of her enterprise? You hope, with time, to earn her

trust enough to learn the answers, but you know, as with all truths, their story is one that will be revealed at the proper time, no sooner, nor later.

After all, that is her gift.

Bleeding Heart Moth

by Konstantine Barbély-Soproni





White Raccoon GMs
By Konstantine Borbély-Soproni

Mr Sir
by Harmann
Bansal



Loving an Idiot

A Terminus Eternity fic by Kaiya Collins

CN: attempted suicide

Sophia Trinketson has never been stupid. Love may make one a fool, but the foolish thing was simply loving Old Archie. That was the stupidest thing Sophia has ever done. Unfortunately, one has little control over the ones they love and Sophia loves Archibald with reckless abandon. Very few people could match Sophia's desire for adventure in her old age, or her love of trickery. Plus, Sophia knew he felt his love and emotions almost as deeply as she did, even if he was still learning how to face and acknowledge those feelings. They simply worked well together, when they worked together.

But again, Sophia wasn't stupid and Old Archie still needed to earn back her trust. And if there is one thing Sophia Trinketson was good at, it was secretly following around Old Archie. So, when Archie decided to go off on his own to the beach closest to Principality one day, Sophia followed him. You'd think after everything they'd been through, he'd learn to pay more attention to realize if anyone was following him, but the idiot never once realized Sophia was there.

It seemed Archie was doing what he told Sophia, and in fact did head straight to the beach. Once there he stood, staring out for a while. Then, however, the idiot slowly went into the water and started drowning himself.

Sophia sighed and started tying up her skirt to rescue him.

The asshole really thought he could get off for his crimes that easily. Didn't he know he's not allowed to leave Sophia? No one truly lifted his "punishment" of being with her. Sophia was not about to let that stupid man abandon her again.

Anyways, Sophia was still of the mind that besides time, she was the only one who could end Old Archie after everything he made her go through. Hopefully it wouldn't come to that. Things were getting better for them, as long as Archie didn't drown right now.

Right as Sophia was about to go and drag Archibald out of the ocean, the idiot stood up on his own, coughing up all the water he swallowed. Sophia rolled her eyes and decided to walk home, knowing that after whatever the hell that was Archie was likely about to head right back.

...

Sophia got home long before Archie, as expected. Archie may exaggerate his back problems, but it was still something that bothered him. Sophia's joints may hurt as well, but years of trying to quickly and quietly follow people through the underground kept her moving fast.

She sat down and got back to her knitting, making sure to position her chair to face the door so she could judge Archie for his choices as soon as he walked in. And in he came, dripping puddles in his wake.

"Archibald dearie, why are you sopping wet? Did you not manage to go to the ocean without falling in? You look like an idiot and I can't let an idiot win at cards tonight like I usually let you do. Go upstairs and get changed. I hope whatever revelation you had at the ocean is one that reminded you that you are stuck with me," Sophia told him sarcastically and lovingly.



CONTRIBUTORS

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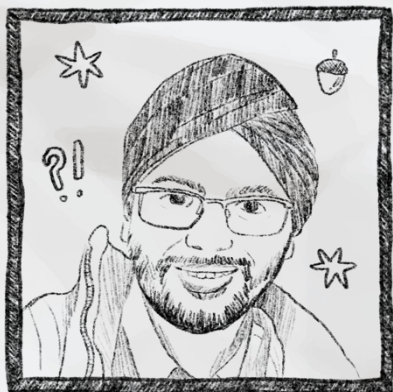
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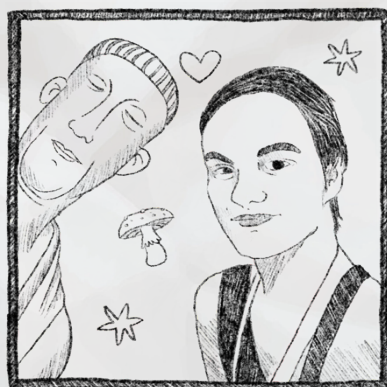


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... AND THAT ' S ALL !

– LOVE, SOPHIA



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